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IEDAs*

A Journal of Transdisciplinary Practices in Art & Design

**Intersectionality:
Creative Inquiries**

02

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Creative Inquiries**

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Foreword

The second volume of *IEDAs* emerges at a moment when disciplinary certainties continue to dissolve, and creative practices increasingly function as a critical mode of inquiry into the entangled realities of our contemporary world. Under the theme *Intersectionality: Creative Inquiries*, this volume brings together voices that examine how identities, systems, histories, ecologies, technologies, and embodied experiences intersect to shape the conditions through which knowledge is produced, contested, and lived.

As an international, peer-reviewed, open-access journal, *IEDAs* remains committed to fostering transdisciplinary dialogues that move across and beyond conventional academic and artistic boundaries. Situated within the Mariam Dawood School of Visual Arts and Design at Beaconhouse National University, and developed under the patronage of the UNESCO Chair on Inclusion through Art, the journal continues to position artistic and design practices not merely as aesthetic exercises, but as vital methodologies for critical engagement, social reflection, and speculative thought.

This volume expands upon the journal's ongoing commitment to practice-based and research-led contributions by foregrounding intersectionality as both a conceptual framework and a lived experience. The works assembled here explore multiplicities of applications and positionality through diverse forms of inquiry — textual, visual, performative, archival, pedagogical, and material. Together, they ask how creative practices can illuminate overlapping structures of power, resistance, memory, displacement, ecology, gender, technology, labour, and belonging within rapidly shifting global and local contexts.

Rather than treating intersectionality as a fixed category, the contributors approach it as a dynamic and evolving process: one that reveals the layered negotiations between self and system, body and institution, history and futurity. Across

geographies and disciplines, the volume highlights voices that challenge singular narratives and instead embrace complexity, contradiction, hybridity, and relationality as productive sites of knowledge-making.

IEDAs continues to benefit from the guidance of its international editorial and advisory networks, alongside the support of the South Asia Foundation and Madame France Marquet, whose sustained commitment to cultural dialogue and regional collaboration remains foundational to the journal's vision. The journal also carries forward the pedagogical and artistic legacies of the UNESCO Madanjeet Singh Institute for South Asian Arts (UMISAA), reaffirming the importance of collaborative and transnational approaches to art and design education.

With this second volume, *IEDAs* further consolidates its role as a platform for rigorous, experimental, and situated forms of inquiry. It invites readers to engage with creative practice not only as representation, but as a critical and transformative act — one capable of opening new ways of seeing, relating, and imagining otherwise.

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Patron's Note

The layered nature of experience resists singular description. Simone Weil reminds us that attention is an ethical act through which the world becomes legible not as isolated parts, but as an interdependent field of relations.¹ In contemporary art and design practice, such attentiveness has become increasingly urgent, as creative production is shaped by overlapping technological, ecological, social, and epistemic forces that cannot be understood in isolation.

It is within this expanded field that the second volume of the *IEDAs Journal* takes up the theme Intersectionality: Creative Inquiries. While “intersectionality” originates in feminist legal thought as a framework for understanding the co-constitution of race, gender, and class, its conceptual elasticity now allows us to consider how multiple systems of relation, material, institutional, sensory, and infrastructural, shape creative production itself.² In this sense, intersectionality becomes not only a lens for identity, but also a method for understanding art and design as entangled systems of knowledge.

From the perspective of the UNESCO Chair on Inclusion through Art, this shift is significant. Our work at the Mariam Dawood School of Visual Arts and Design, Beaconhouse National University, has consistently approached inclusion not as representationally alone, but as a structural and epistemic condition. Inclusion, in this expanded sense, is not simply about visibility within systems of production, but about how those systems are formed, sustained, and transformed through encounters across difference.

This volume of *IEDAs* makes such encounters visible through diverse methodologies and situated practices. Across archaeological archives, digital game worlds, ecological field sites, pedagogical experiments, and embodied artistic interventions, contributors demonstrate that intersectionality is not merely a theoretical framework applied to practice, but a condition already embedded within practice itself. What emerges is not coherence

but productive dissonance, a field of overlapping temporalities, materials, and epistemologies that resist simplification.

In this regard, Achille Mbembe's notion of the "becoming world" of relations is instructive, where boundaries between human and nonhuman, local and global, historical and contemporary are constantly reconfigured.³ Within artistic and design practice, such reconfigurations are methodological as much as they are thematic. They shape how materials are selected, how narratives are constructed, how technologies are mobilised, and how audiences are implicated.

Importantly, the contributions in this volume also suggest that intersectionality is not only about convergence, but also about friction. It is in the friction between systems, cultural history and representation, ecology and extraction, embodiment and data, that new forms of inquiry emerge. These frictions are not obstacles to be resolved but generative tensions through which knowledge takes shape otherwise.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos' notion of an "ecology of knowledges" becomes particularly relevant here.⁴ It reminds us that no single epistemic system can claim completeness, and that knowledge is always produced through partial, situated, and often unequal exchanges. Within art and design education, this challenges assumptions of disciplinary mastery and instead foregrounds relational literacy as a central pedagogical orientation.

The UNESCO Chair on Inclusion through Art has sought to support such relational approaches by creating platforms where disciplinary boundaries are intentionally unsettled. The Interdisciplinary Expanded Design and Art (IEDA) — the chair's key initiative — comprising a degree program, journal, festival, studio projects and a range of collaborative activities— continues to evolve as an ecosystem in which making, thinking, and teaching are inseparable. Within this ecosystem, intersectionality functions not only as a theme, but as a mode of institutional practice.

Several contributions in this volume embody this attentiveness. Whether through material investigations of extraction landscapes, reimaginings of cultural legacy through gamified environments, or explorations of air as both ecological and social medium, these works demonstrate how creative practice operates as situated epistemology. They ask not only what is represented, but how representation itself is structured through intersecting forces of history, infrastructure, and imagination.

From a pedagogical perspective, this carries important implications. It suggests that art and design education must move beyond discrete skill acquisition toward an integrated understanding of knowledge as relational and processual. In this sense, the classroom becomes not a site of transmission, but a site of intersection, where diverse experiences, materials, and epistemologies encounter one another in unpredictable and generative ways.

The second volume of the *IEDAs Journal* thus stands as both reflection and continuation. It reflects the multiplicity of ways intersectionality is being reimagined across creative fields, and it extends an invitation to think beyond inherited boundaries. In doing so, it affirms that art and design are not peripheral to knowledge production, but central to it.

I extend gratitude to all contributors, reviewers, and collaborators whose work makes this volume possible. Collectively, they demonstrate that intersectionality is not a fixed framework but a living practice, one that continues to evolve through the entanglements of art, design, and the worlds they seek to understand and transform.

Prof. Rashid Rana
Patron, IEDAs Journal
Chairholder, UNESCO Chair on Inclusion through Art

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Editor's Note

Quddus Mirza

Zadie Smith, in one of her essays, reflects upon writing fiction; particularly her novels, which include characters outside of her community, surroundings, history, such as a Malaysian girl, a Chinese man, a White American male. She, as a creative individual, defends the author's choice, capacity, and right to imagine the world not directly connected to, or experienced by her. To her "The old — and never especially helpful — adage *Write what you know* has morphed into something like a threat: Stay in your lane.... This rule also "pertains" that "the experience of the unlike-us can never be co-opted, ventriloquized, or otherwise 'stolen' by us"¹.

She further states, "As the philosopher Anthony Appiah has noted, these ideas of cultural ownerships share some DNA with the late-capitalist concept of brand integrity."². Practices cemented in the idea of authenticity are present in multiple spheres today — under the proud and popular banner of originality and political correctness. These also germinate from the concept of political representation; being a spokesperson for a specific community; and barred from commenting on others.

Actually this is not a new phenomenon, because in the past, due to the limits of travel, trade routes, human exchange, communities were contained in isolations; and as a result fabricated firm fables on the purity, superiority, even the divinity of their modes of existence, resulting into the unbreachable categorizations of race, religion, gender, class. To cross these borders, or un-shelf was an offence, a crime.

However creative inquiries have been bridging conventional

gaps; a course that was also evident in examples from the past; and now emerged in multiple ways, and due to diverse desires. The search to know an outsider — may that be a living being, an unfamiliar faith, an unknown language, an alien terrain, strange flora and fauna — is an effort to include oneself into the world beyond, and simultaneously assimilate this insurmountable territory inside the cubicle of the individual.

The second volume of *IEDAs Journal* is titled ‘Intersectionality: Creative Inquiries’. The theme is explored by contributors investigating cultural heritage, memory, systems of contemporary pictorial productions, examination of history, soil, and environment, trans migrations, comparison of production of rural setups to hi-tech factories; through multiple lenses ranging beyond regions, periods, personal and collective.

Language, a tool the entire humanity uses, is the apt example to illustrate intersectionality. It connects individuals across faiths, genders, classes, communities, and regions. By default, it serves to come out of one’s usual situation to look and locate others, to discover, perhaps not similarities as much; but the interconnectedness. These relations are recognized in the long history of conversations between cultures. Language is a form of conversion; where differences matter, but the value remains identical.

This exchange, between individuals, groups, communities, cultures is called translations. Imagine if there were no translators who facilitate overlaps, encounters, and ties, eventually connecting people across continents; how pure — in reality poor, and empty literature — consequently the imagination of each language would be world over.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o discussing the colonial imposition in the guise of superiority of European tongues over African languages, a construct transmitted through official discourse and education, informs that in the occupied lands, speaking

in one's native tongue during those years invited penalty, if not the capital punishment. In his book *Decolonizing Language*, he declares that the language of translation is the common, equal, and prime language of humanity.

This reality was realized by Arundhati Roy who titles her 'The W. G. Sebald Lecture on Literary Translation', delivered at the British Library, *In What Language Does Rain Fall Over Tormented Cities?* She concludes, "how shall we answer Pablo Neruda's question that is the title of this lecture?

"In what language does rain fall
over tormented cities?"

"I'd say, without hesitation, in the Language of Translations".³

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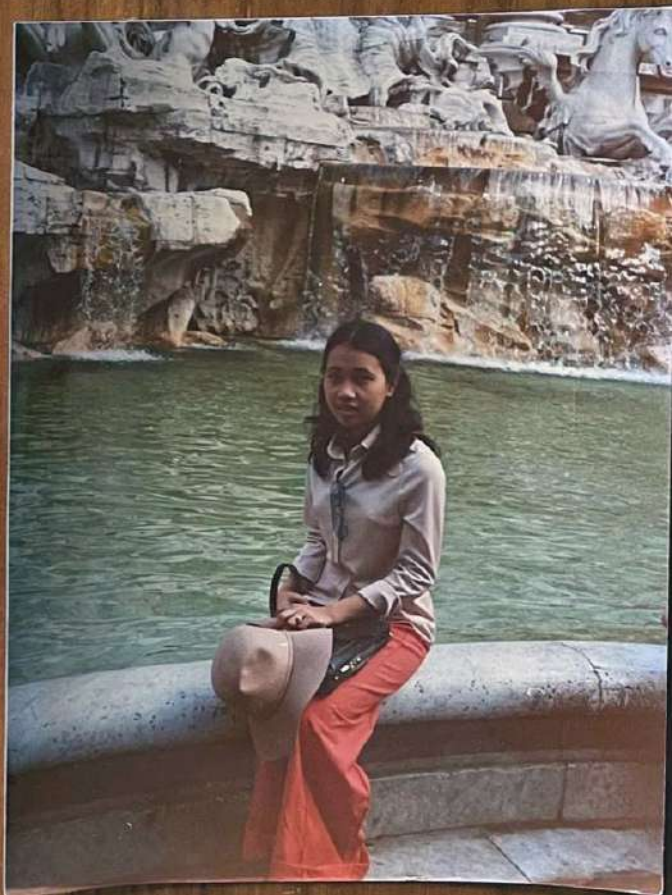
An Apparition of Lovely Things

Stephanie Misa

Recruitment

A Filipino-American curator visiting Vienna in 2022 had asked me if I knew why there were so many Filipino nurses in the city. This question made me think of Gina, the Filipino nurse I met when my partner needed knee surgery in 2010. She was my first Filipino contact on my new phone. I had just moved to Vienna.

What was not so clear to me then was that Gina was among a long line of nurses sent to Austria from the Philippines since 1973. “Was it Martial Law that drove them to flee?” asked the curator. That would have been my guess as well, but as further research brought to light, the deployment of Filipino nurses to Austria in 1973 was one of the very first organized, government-to-government arrangements for sending Filipino healthcare workers abroad under the Martial Law regime of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. and would be a key reference in the creation of the *1974 Labor Code* (Presidential Decree No. 442) to formally institutionalize labor export. This facilitated the first wave of approximately 600 Filipino health care professionals, who worked in 14 different hospitals in Vienna. The *Labor Code of 1974* formalized and legitimized the Philippine government's role in labor migration. This was not accidental—it was a deliberate policy by the Marcos regime to reduce domestic unemployment, generate foreign exchange through remittances, and stabilize the economy during a time of political and economic upheaval (Martial Law).





Francia ("Franzis" to her colleagues and "Fannie" to her family) seated center, during her first year in Vienna. She arrived in Austria on October 6, 1973, and would work at the Kaiserin Elizabeth Hospital, Surgery Room 6 till June 1981 (courtesy of the Ante family).



*Standing centred with their nurse colleagues at the Kaiserin Elizabeth Hospital, ca.1970s
(courtesy of the Ante family).*

The first wave of Filipino health professionals was the start of a significant, visible, and thriving Filipino community in Vienna. In 2023, the Philippine Embassy in Austria and the City of Vienna signed a new agreement to further bring Filipino nurses to Vienna under an agreement called the *Memorandum of Understanding* (MOU) that encouraged a new wave of recruitment between the Philippines and the Federal State of Vienna and the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber. The agreement comes exactly 50 years after the signing of a similar agreement between Manila and Vienna, this time under the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos's son, Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr.

Relations

In his work *Traité du Tout-Monde*, Caribbean poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant coins the term *archipelagic thinking* to reassess the insularity and heaviness of "continental thought". For archipelagic sea-faring people, the sea does not constitute a barrier, but rather a connective tissue crossed by perpetual flows of exchange. Does archipelagic thinking, then also allow us to think of language, identity, and culture in terms of flows?

Glissant's coined term not only touched on a geographic familiarity but also a certain longing, being a child of an archipelago myself. I could not help but think it funny how after growing up on an island, I have ended up living in a land-locked country, Austria. I chose to live in Vienna, almost as much as the nurses who came here to work did: it was somewhat through luck and chance and a search for other possibilities, the same sense of adventure and willfulness borne of seeing distance as just another sea-crossing. Does our affinity with the sea inform us differently? I can't help but ask this in a land where the Alps tower over us. Glissant's call for a reassessment of "continental thought" and the insularity within this mode of thinking is a clear attempt to open a discursive dialectic, to propose multitudes as a counter-point, as a way to describe being constituted

by many different flows and exchanges, of language, culture, dispositions, and ways of being. Archipelagic thinking accords with the elements of the world that spread out in archipelagos, precisely these sorts of diversity in space, that nevertheless bring shores together and ally horizons. We have become aware of how much continental density has been weighing us down in the glorious systematic thinking that has governed the History of humanities, but that is no longer adequate to our explosions, our histories and our no less glorious wanderings (Glissant, 1997).

I found our shared situated-ness of both being migrants and transients in Vienna, was the starting point for this exploration into a processual and open-ended “becoming” found in archipelagic thought. The Filipino Diaspora is quantified by those who’ve left the Philippines: we count the number of nurses we’ve sent abroad, the number of sea-farers, engineers, nannies, cruise ship workers, caregivers, occupational and physical therapists, contracts issued by various recruitment agencies and the legal frameworks that account for employment standards, labor relations, social welfare, and occupational safety. But the accounting is in one direction: a-here-to-there. There is a tally of Filipino citizens who leave (and perhaps return) but there is no accounting for those who choose to stay ‘abroad’ and the families and connections that root in this elsewhere. This work, that I shall introduce shortly, is about this elsewhere, the nebulous space that holds both the imagination and texture of ‘home’ and the desire lines that trace back to where this longing lays—perhaps a physical place: a hometown, a grandmother’s lap, or the backyard guava tree—or one that lives brightly only in the mind’s eye, no matter where one may find themselves.



Fannie's cohort of Filipino nurses who arrived in Vienna together celebrating "Philippine Independence Day" in Austria, ca. 1970s (courtesy of the Ante family).



Fannie's mother and father together with younger siblings. A photograph sent to Fannie from the Philippines dated December 10, 1974 (courtesy of the Ante family.)

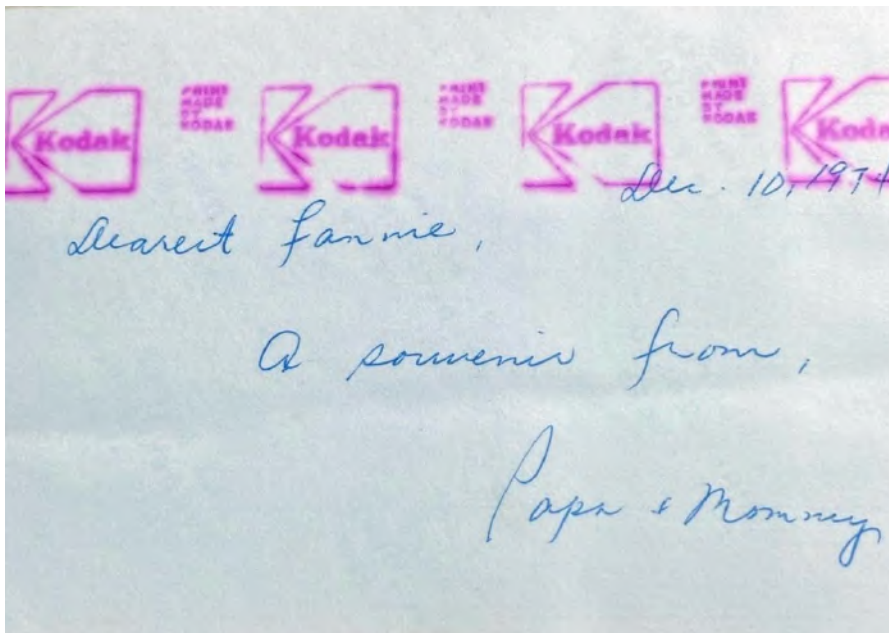
Relatives

The work-in-progress in this essay is also called *A Memorandum of Understanding*. It takes its working title from the mandate mentioned above that outlines the political implications of contract-labor from countries of the global south, especially in healthcare, and the effects of these frameworks of skill extraction. The work approaches this topic through the stories like those of Francia (Fannie), who on October 6, 1973, arrived with the first group of Filipino nurses to Vienna. Stories, however, are told from the point of view of her daughter, Elisabeth (Lisa), a second generation Filipino-Austrian who is a fertility nurse herself. The work focuses on an intergenerational dialogue, a lens through which questions of belonging and integration are examined. Through this dialogue, differing notions of “home” are explored: a topic visceral but also tangible through the various beautiful and lovely things from the family archive: photographs, cassette tapes, and other material mementos of a *here* and *there*.

Framing a family archive within economic contexts such as family obligation, debt, and care, while attempting to bridge the real economic impact of labor-export on the Philippine economy (especially through the financial remittances it brings into the country) is a huge task. To sketch the picture of a country in dire need of economic possibilities for its population, to show skilled workers ready to leave their family to provide for them from abroad, and a foreign labor market where there is a constant shortage of care-workers for its aging population, is intricate, complex and emotional.

Can this emotion and longing be wrapped into the neat trappings of a *remittance*? In her upcoming exhibition *Remittance*, curator Trisha Lagaso Goldberg closes in on its meaning: “A remittance is a transfer of money or goods by a foreign worker to an individual—usually a family member—in their home country. These transfers are a global phenomenon and a vital part

of many nations' economies, sustaining millions of families worldwide. They provide essential income for households to cover basic needs like food, education, and healthcare, and beyond their financial dimension, *embody profound acts of care and devotion.*" (Italics mine).



The inscription written behind the photo (December 10, 1974: "Dearest Fannie, A souvenir from Papa and Mommy"). (courtesy of the Ante family).

The entire creation of this work is open, as the stories of Fannie and Lisa are only a part of many stories that form what is now a very visible and vibrant community in Vienna, built of Filipino healthcare workers and families that came and decided to stay. If the work tries to honor this multiplicity of experience, it should remain an active, participatory practice in which stories unfold, and the weight of these memories becomes palpable.

The art installation, *A Memorandum of Understanding*, is primarily a soundscape composed of a collage of family archival recordings (such as cassette tapes sent to family abroad), interviews, songs and current narration by Fannie, Lisa and the Ante family. A textile piece, designed collaboratively, functions as a room divider creating an intimate space around the soundscape and visually references privacy curtains surrounding hospital beds. The textile piece is a collage of worked fabric, layered with embroidery and transfer prints. At the center of the “listening booth” stands a boom box, an 80s cassette tape player cast out of polyurethane and embedded with speakers. The work will be installed at the Mead Art Museum, Amherst College as part of the Independent Curator’s International touring exhibition *Remittance*, this September (2026).

Though the material composition of this piece may already be set, the addition of more stories to its current soundscape, like that of a mixed-tape, is of course always possible. The experiences of Lisa and Fannie are intended to provide the initial impetus, but it remains open to the addition of voices, stories, further interviews and archives, as we slowly try to give shape to the Filipino diasporic community in Vienna. Crucial to this endeavor though, is a beginning: the conversation between mother and daughter and their shared contributions (via photographs, drawings, and their voices) to this work.



Efren (Fannie's husband), Fannie (center) and a friend. Winter in Vienna ca. 1970s (courtesy of the Ante family).

Perhaps this is the practice (or a flailing attempt), political and utopian in its implications, of a processual and open-ended method. It highlights a decolonial way of seeing, of seeing from the margins. The work deals with the aspects of navigating and traversing different 'landscapes' whether cartographic and geological topographies, or internal and emotional spaces. I see them as attempts to map out different facets of ourselves—sometimes what is produced are artefacts of projection and desire (appropriated, created, disfigured, and chosen)—or representations of geographic places that also live on fictional, hybrid or even barely composed planes. *A Memorandum of Understanding* tries to tease out possible entanglements between *a here* and *a there* in an understanding of migrating identities: a study that although based on the historical construction of big narratives, also drifts towards the auto-ethnographic.

The book, *Traité du Tout-Monde* was Glissant's first theoretical work explicitly committed to *poetics* in global interconnectedness cites. Dr. Christina Kullberg, a Glissant scholar, in her article "Crossroads Poetics: Glissant and Ethnography", articulates Glissant's views on self-reflexive ethnography, as he was himself an ethnography student of Michel Leiris, "Glissant ultimately turns ethnography into a matter of an aesthetic appreciation of the world as a *common-place*, of *existing*, of *knowing* and establishing relations through the senses... he developed concepts for exploring ethnography as poetics in which the real encounter is a sensuous experience that informs the imaginaries of the world..." (Kullberg 2013). As my own archipelagic imaginary draws heavily from Glissant, a description of it seems apt to end with: "[all] archipelagic thinking is a trembling thought, a non-presumptuous thought, but also a thinking which opens out, a sharing thought." (Glissant 1997, pg.231).



Lisa (center) and her siblings, Vienna ca. 1980s (courtesy of Lisa Ante).



A cassette tape recording of Lisa (also known as Bing-Bing) at 3 years old, that was supposed to be sent to the family in the Philippines (courtesy of Lisa Ante).

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The Trilogy of Eternal Condemnation

Parimah Avani

Abstract

This paper examines a series of three site-specific installations at Villa M organized by Loop Art Residency on the fire-devastated island of Evia, Greece. Reimagining the Greek mythic figures of Atlas, Sisyphus, and Prometheus through local charred materials and animal remains, the project explores the intersection of ecological catastrophe, political tension, and ontological crisis. Grounded in a posthuman framework, the work dismantles hierarchies between human and non-human suffering, offering a material architecture of endurance in a damaged world.

Introduction

On Evia Island, a climate-driven catastrophe has left the land blackened. Dead animals and plants lie in burnt forests; the ground still carries pieces of bodies, dusted bones. Skulls, bones, and charred fragments are gathered as material evidence of destruction in site-specific works titled “The Trilogy of Eternal Condemnation”—my three installations at Villa M, Loop Art Residency on Evia Island in Greece. They form part of how the island remembers its very identity holding the weight of both human and more-than-human precarity. Into this material archive enter Atlas, Prometheus, and Sisyphus—figures of Greek mythology whose eternal punishments resonate with contemporary struggle. Their cycles of disobedience, resistance, repetition, and collapse echo the conditions of the island today. Reimagined through local materials, sourced in this damaged landscape, the works link the ontology of Greek myth to the material identity of Evia today, holding together different temporalities without a timeline. The ground of Evia no longer functions as mere landscape; it has been converted into a

terminal archive. If we follow Michel Foucault's (1972) definition, an archive is not a silent repository of the past, but the "system of dispersibility" that dictates what is allowed to emerge as reality. On this island, the "dusted bones" and charred fibers are not just remains—they are statements.

They consider how elemental forces—fire and sky—shift in meaning under today's planetary conditions, refracted through environmental catastrophe that destabilizes the very cosmologies these elements once upheld. The project questions the anthropocentric worldview through a posthuman lens, where matter and memory converge, and where hierarchies between human and non-human life are dismantled. Here, ecological devastation, human labor, and animal remains intertwine with mythic endurance, exposing a shared vulnerability across species and time. Through Prometheus, the site-specific project asks: if fire was a stolen knowledge—an elemental power humans were never meant to possess—what has this gift produced today?

This research operates at the intersection of three crises: the ecological (the blackened landscapes of Evia), the geopolitical (the escalating wars and political tensions in West Asia), and the ontological (the ancient Greek myths that dictate the boundaries of suffering in its repetitive and eternal forms). The Trilogy moves beyond the single-axis of 'environmental art' to practices of intersectionality, functioning as laboratories where materials, bodies, and mythologies negotiate timeless condemnation in a posthuman archive of a damaged world, where everything is interconnected in its suffering, requiring what Donna Haraway (2016) describes as 'staying with the trouble' of a damaged planet.

Atlas

In the burnt peripheries of Greece, mythology ceased to be a story and became a physical weight. As an artist archiving the memory of materials and places, I arrived in October 2024 on Evia carrying a "burden" on my shoulders, weighted by the constant arrival of war news and images of the dead and ruins, with escalating political tension from West Asia. There was the horizon of the calm, beautiful Aegean Sea touching the skies of sunrise, and then, in the opposite direction, we encountered a landscape that was blackened and charred—a cadaver of a forest condemned to death by dryness, fire, and human neglect. Here, the ecological collapse was visible in every piece of ash. I began to ask: do this land and its creatures remember the eternal punishment of Atlas? Are the birds, the trees, and the non-human beings condemned to suffer alongside him, carrying a weight they did not choose?

This is the core of eternal condemnation: the inability to rest, to have a pause, or to ever put down the burden. As Albert Camus suggests in his reflection on the absurd (1955), "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart." But on Evia, the struggle is not toward the heights; it is a horizontal endurance through the ruins. Atlas is no longer a distant deity; he is the material identity of a landscape that cannot breathe, a primordial space condemned whose spine is fused with the charred remains of the earth.

To physically manifest this weight, I integrated my archiving matter practice with a found structural remnant—a pre-existing wooden sphere left in the garden of Villa M—transforming it through a site-specific intervention into the 'Atlas dome'. By ritually covering this found structure with palm leaves that I gathered and cut daily from the dead trees, I reconfigured it into a celestial ceiling designed to rain over the remains of the land. Departing from traditional artistic historical representations that depict

Atlas as a human figure bearing a solid sphere on his shoulders, this intervention isolates the sphere itself, removing the human protagonist to let the structural burden speak entirely through the landscape's matter. I integrated this dome with the dead bones and skulls of animals found in the black land and forest, while a water system hidden behind the palm leaves was built to mimic a perpetual rain. In the process of creating, repetitive action became crucial. Like a ritualistic farmer salvaging remnants, I was gathering bones instead of seeds—skulls, spines, and pelvic bones. Many of them were blackened by the fire. I washed them, dried them, and touched them—a posthuman archive.

The silence of the burnt forest, the landscape of the sea were constantly interrupted by the distant, invisible noise of a world in crisis. I was standing in Greece, but my mind was anchored in the escalating shadows of West Asia; war in Palestine, suffocating tension, and the constant threat of war looming over Iran, where my family and friends remained, while simultaneously witnessing the shared grief of the residency organizer, whose home in Lebanon had become an active battlefield.

Every night, I began to dig a hole, learning how to use different shovels for this heavy labor. Seeking to create a small pond—a designated reservoir for water that the scorched earth desperately needed—I was ritually gathering water for the bones. To feed this pond and simulate a perpetual rain falling from above, I designed a closed water system. I routed a hidden network of perforated tubes behind the palm leaves of the dome structure, connected to a submersible pump that continuously pushed water through the holes in the pipe. They needed rain. I planned this water system to create an uninterrupted cycle of falling water over the remains. The process of making the central hole took many days and hours; it became as absurd as Atlas carrying his burden. Why was I digging? What was art in this act? I was searching for an answer in the soil—the same soil that, throughout history, grew the seeds of many myths.

I was questioning the soil, searching within it. The dome structure was finished with a wooden web covered by tubes and palm leaves. I began to "hang the dead," letting them have their macabre dance. I used restoration gauze and cotton rope around the spines and skulls and bones, playing the role of a doctor for the already dead. Every night, the bones would fall. Every night, I was condemned to make them dance in the wind again. I was hanging them, and hanging them again. Every night, the spine would slip; every night, the rope would untie. I was gathering, I was washing, I was digging—again and again. This was the absurdity of the repetition: to fix what is already broken, to uphold what is already fallen.

As Arthur Schopenhauer (1818/1966) observed, the human "will" is an endless, restless striving—a blind urge that exists without a final goal. My digging was this blind urge. In the rhythm of the shovel hitting the dry earth, I found the 'science of freedom' Joseph Beuys (as cited in Tisdall, 1979) spoke of—where the act of shaping the earth becomes a pedagogical tool for liberation. I did not know when to stop. The deeper I went, the more I questioned the nature of this burden: Is Atlas holding the consequences of our failure to be kin to the earth? I began to see that his burden is not a physical weight, but the ontological weight of a "posthuman" world where the sky is no longer a divine ceiling, but an atmosphere destabilized by our own hands.

By digging, I was not searching for a grave, but for the roots of this planetary exhaustion. In extracting the soil, I felt as if something sacred had been stolen— perhaps an answer—and for that theft, we were condemned forever.

The pond was ready. I filled it with water and activated the system; soon, the bones were in the wind and in the rain. I placed white stones on the ground—a Zen garden of death? In Zen, the garden is a space to witness Mujo (impermanence); it is where the stone represents the eternal and the water represents

the fleeting (Hisamatsu, 1971). The pond was beautiful until I found a turtle shell; just a shell, black and destroyed—a home without a being. In this shell, I found the essence of Wabi-sabi: the profound beauty found in the broken, the scorched, and the abandoned (Suzuki, 1959). By placing it into the center of this ritualistic pond, I created a space where the living and the dead meet. Zen is often found in the 'Mu' (無)—the void or the presence of what is missing. Here, the contradiction of a 'home without a being' became a meditation on the absence that defines our era. Beside this dead garden, I "planted" a tree—a spine-tree. I raised a huge, vertical spine and connected it to a very thin tank using gauze. It stood as a dystopian stick in the earth, a monument to the power of being powerless.

Figure 1. *Atlas Dome (The Trilogy of Eternal Condemnation)*, 2024, site-specific installation with wood, palm leaves, animal skulls and bones, rope, restoration gauze, fabric, stones, and water system tube (materials gathered from the island's burnt landscapes, marked by forest fires and animal deaths caused by climate change), dome diameter 400 cm (157.5 in), Evia, GR

No Direction Home, LOOP, Evia, GR





Figure 1.1. *Atlas Dome* (Detail)



Figure 1.2. *Atlas Dome* (Detail)

Sisyphus

If Atlas is the weight, Sisyphus is the distance. On the coast of Evia, the myth shifted from a mountain to a shoreline. I found a massive stone south of Villa M, a natural monument standing against the horizon of the sea. After the vertical burden of Atlas, this stone was a sign of a new condemnation: a horizontal struggle across the parched earth.

The installation Sisyphus is a 20-meter scar across the landscape. I used coal and ash from the burnt forest to mark two lines on the earth—a charcoal rail connecting the ancient to the industrial. At one end sits a gigantic, abandoned children's toy car, a plastic ghost found in the sand near a construction site. This is not a gift from the tide; it is a relic of industrial play.

Why is this object here? It was found in the shadow of the yellow crane that drilled from sunrise until sunset—extracting, changing the lands, and changing the stone. The stones loaded into the back of this "toy" are not smooth sea-pebbles; they are jagged, industrial debris extracted by the crane from the exact construction site where the crane itself became a mechanical Sisyphus. Is the one sitting in that crane, carrying stones from one part of the land to another, any less condemned than Sisyphus carrying his stone up the hill? What is happening to the being and non-being of this island? How they are displaced, burnt, and shifted by the human magic wand of "progress" and greed?

As Camus (1955) suggests, the absurd is born from the confrontation between human need and the "unreasonable silence of the world." By dragging this plastic car—a sign of the very machines that drive climate collapse—through 20 meters of charcoal, the work performs a ritual of repetitive grief, displaced oppressed stones. If in Atlas, I was questioning and in dialogue with water and soil, here my ally was stone. Yet, within this eternal condemnation, rarely does anyone consider the

perspective of the material itself: how did the stone Sisyphus carried feel, if it could feel? What is the true role of the stone in this environmental devastation? Even when you are a stone—heavy and unchangeable—they change you. They change your pacing, they change your shape, playfully and absurdly, at the cost of the devastation of all. This is our sign on you, stone: a human rebel who wants to refuse, but whose marks are only black charcoal that will be washed clean by the first rain.

Alongside the charcoal line, a sound installation played the constant, violent labor of drills and cranes. This is what Martin Heidegger (1977) termed "Enframing" (Gestell): the technological gaze that reduces the Earth to a "standing reserve" for human expansion. The crane's noise is the soundtrack to Sisyphus's labor, the industrial "progress" that continues to scream against the twilight. I began to draw a visual lexicon of archaic glyphs and rebel figures upon the stone with charcoal. While watching Werner Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* on a screen flickering in the wind, the connection between the ancient hand and the industrial machine became clear. The repetitive act of drawing became my own resistance. We are not just dragging a car; we are manifesting a revolutionary impulse—the active force of more-than-human beings who refuse to be "enframed." Like the Sisyphus of Camus (1955), I found that the struggle itself is enough to fill a heart, even while playing with the toys of our own destruction.



Figure 2. *Sisyphus (The Trilogy of Eternal Condemnation)*, 2024, site-specific installation with found children's car, stones (gathered from industrial construction site), charcoal, ashes, spanning approximately 20 × 1.5 × 0.8 m (65.6 × 4.9 × 2.6 ft), Evia, GR

No Direction Home, 2024, LOOP Athens, GR



Figure 2.1. *Sisyphus* (Detail)

Prometheus

If Atlas is the weight and Sisyphus is the distance, Prometheus is the cost. In the final installation of the trilogy, I returned to the meat, exploring the inseparable threads of connection between flesh and fire. Through Prometheus, the work asks: if fire was a stolen knowledge—an elemental power humans were never meant to possess—what has this gift produced today?

As we consume the non-human being without question, and as we build blackened landscapes for the very animals whose meat we eat, I wanted to see things through an eagle's eye, from above. I gathered dried wood and fallen twigs into a circular nest—a nest for a liver. In Greek mythology, Prometheus's punishment was to have his liver eaten daily by an eagle, only for it to regenerate every night—a cycle of eternal extraction. To bring this material memory into the present, I sourced a real, raw animal liver from a local butcher shop in Evia, placing it at the center of the installation where a chain hung over a spine and the liver. By leaving this raw meat exposed to the elements, the installation became dynamic; it was left to decompose or be consumed by the local wildlife and insects—the real-world equivalents of Prometheus's eagle. Where is the home of meat? This nest on the earth was made from the bones of dead animals and rusted fencing. They faced one another, as if in a hidden conversation between spine and meat across a rusted fence.

Prometheus stole fire—the first technology—and for this, his body became a site of eternal extraction. In the burnt forests of Evia, this "gift" of fire has matured into a catastrophe. As Heidegger (1977) warned, the danger of technology is not the machine itself, but the way it transforms the world and the human body into a "standing reserve." Here, the liver is not just a growing organ; it is the material memory of sacrifice. Can the meat survive the fire it helped create? By placing the liver in a nest of burnt twigs, I am asking: what is left of our biological being when the "fire" of

progress has consumed the horizon? This return to the meat is an encounter with our own being through flesh. The spine and the liver in the rusted cage are the last remains of a "posthuman" anatomy—a specimen of what it means to be alive in a land that has been scorched by its own knowledge. If there were bones and skulls to be found on the land, meat could only be found in a shop; there is no meat left upon the blackened earth. Meat is precious; it makes the human "more human" only to consume, to extract, and to feed a bigger fire.

Conclusion

The Trilogy of Eternal Condemnation does not seek to restore what was lost, nor does it offer the false comfort of a solution. It is a site-specific architecture of endurance. By weaving together the island's trauma—burnt wood, restoration gauze, animal bones, and industrial debris—the work embodies what Donna Haraway (2016) identifies as the necessity of "staying with the trouble." To exist in this era is to refuse the easy exits of optimism or despair. Whether we are digging a hole for a rain that never comes, dragging a plastic ghost across a charcoal scar, or watching a liver perish in a nest of ash, we are participating in a shared devastation. Atlas, Sisyphus, and Prometheus are no longer distant myths; they are the names of our current condition. We are not just holding the weight; we are digging through it, marking it with charcoal, and feeding it with our own flesh, finding a way to exist within the contradictions of a damaged world. Beside the dead garden, my spine-tree remains—a dystopian stick in the earth, a monument to the power of being powerless.



Figure 3. *Prometheus (The Trilogy of Eternal Condemnation)*, 2024, liver meat, wood, stone, fence, branches, animal skulls and bones, iron chain (materials gathered from the island's burnt landscapes, marked by forest fires and animal deaths caused by climate change), 150 x 400 x 400 cm, Evia, GR

No Direction Home, 2024, LOOP Athens, GR

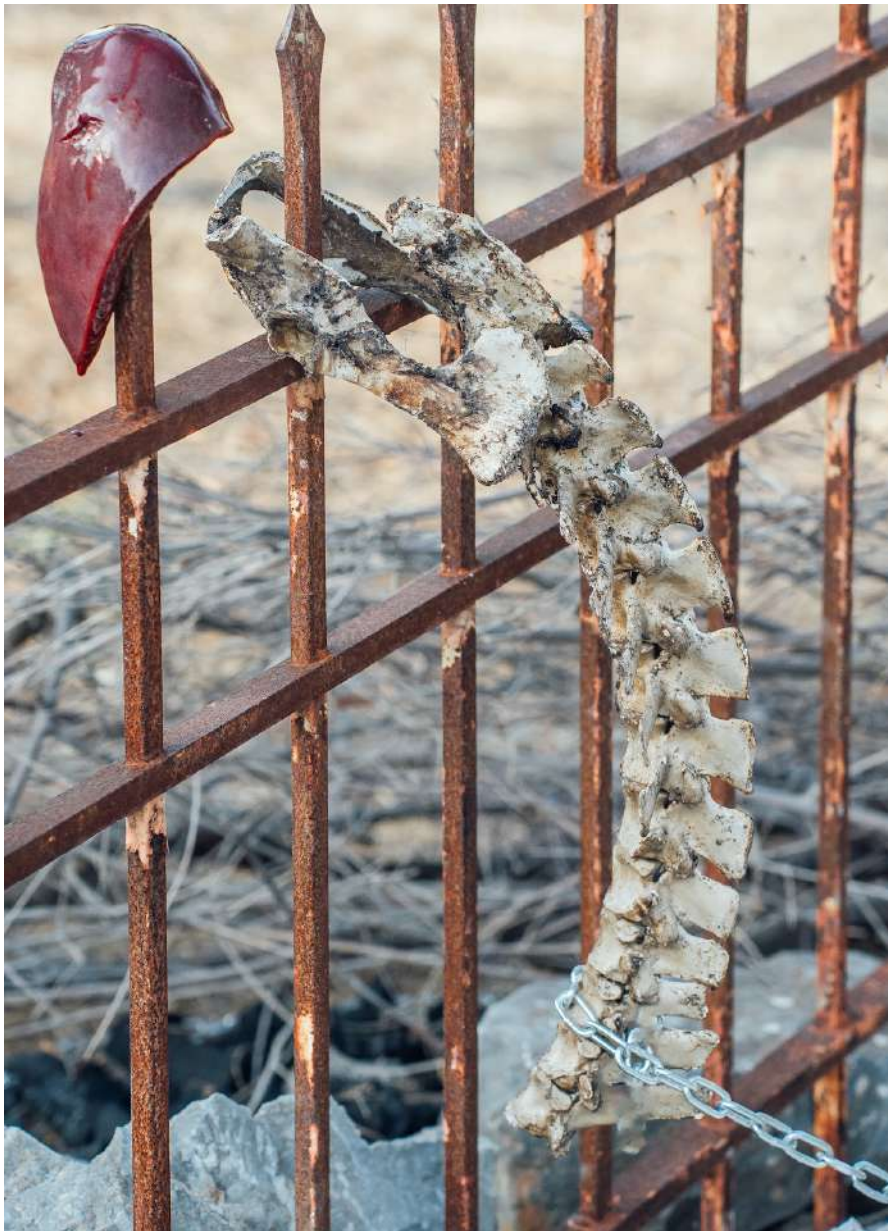


Figure 3.1. *Prometheus* (Detail)



Figure 3.2. *Prometheus* (Detail)

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The Void at the End: Cosmology, Urdu Poetry, and Intersectional Ways of Knowing

Usman Ahmed

Introduction

This essay is based on a public lecture given at the Beaconhouse National University, Lahore in November 2025 titled *The Void at the End*, conceived as a performative exploration of cosmology through narrative, image, and Urdu poetry. Using a narrative structure, the lecture explored the scientific timeline of the universe, tracing its life from the earliest moment of emergence to its eventual heat death. Each cosmological stage was accompanied by a poetic intervention as a parallel mode of knowledge. While the lecture unfolded primarily as a performative and audiovisual experience, the present essay develops its underlying conceptual framework more explicitly, extending the cosmological timeline into a sustained reflection on poetry, temporality, and interdisciplinary ways of knowing.

The concept of intersectionality has traditionally been used within feminist and critical race scholarship to describe how overlapping structures of identity and power shape social experience (Crenshaw, 1989). In this essay, the concept is extended beyond identity-based analysis toward intersections of epistemology. Instead of focusing exclusively on social positionality, the paper explores how different systems of knowledge, i.e., cosmology, poetry, and philosophical reflection can integrate with one another. Intersectionality, therefore, becomes a method for thinking across disciplinary boundaries, allowing scientific and literary modes of understanding to co-exist without requiring adoption of a single explanatory framework.

In this manner, cosmic time intersects with human emotional time, and scientific explanation intersects with cultural memory. Further, contemporary scientific cosmology, articulated largely through English academic discourse, intersects in this essay with the metaphysical and poetic traditions of Urdu. In doing so, this essay proposes creative practice itself as a method of inquiry, one capable of uncovering multiple forms of knowledge together without hierarchy. Drawing on the idea that all knowledge is situated (Haraway, 1988), this work is based on the South Asian literary inheritance and contemporary scientific imagination. Scientific knowledge itself emerges through historically situated practices, instruments, and interpretive communities rather than detached observation (Latour, 1987). The universe becomes not only an object of study, but a shared narrative within which poetry, philosophy, and physics can speak to one another. The timeline of the universe thus functions as both a structure and method, allowing the vast and the intimate to unfold together.

The Big Bang: Emergence and Beginning

The Big Bang marks the beginning of the universe as it is currently understood as a moment in which space, time, matter, and energy emerge together (Weinberg, 1977). Contemporary cosmology does not describe this event as an explosion occurring within space, but as the expansion of space itself from an initial state of extreme density and temperature. While the occurrence of this emergence is widely accepted, its cause remains unknown (Carroll, 2010). Questions about what preceded the Big Bang remain unanswered, often revealing more about the human desire for knowledge rather than about the universe itself.

Religious, philosophical, and poetic traditions have long grappled with this paradox of existence arising from nothingness. In Islamic thought, the command *Kun* gestures toward creation as utterance rather than mechanism, suggesting emergence

without explanation (Almirzanah, 2020). Urdu poetry often approaches this condition obliquely, presenting creation as hurried, imperfect, and unresolved. Jaun Eliya captures this sense of abrupt becoming with characteristic irony:

حاصل کن ہے یہ جہان خراب
یہی ممکن تھا اتنی عجلت میں

*This broken world is what was produced;
Such was the only outcome in so much haste*

The verse captures the philosophical discomfort surrounding origins. Creation appears not as perfection but as contingency, echoing cosmology's own unresolved questions about the conditions preceding the Big Bang. Here, existence is not celebrated as completion but accepted as compromise; something brought into being quickly and therefore marked by incompleteness. Creation appears less as a completely perfected act and more as an outcome shaped by sheer urgency.

Popular representations of the Big Bang have frequently framed cosmological origins as a moment of sudden illumination or revelation, reflecting the broader cultural impact of modern cosmology itself (Krauss, 2010). Contemporary cosmology, by contrast, remains cautious, recognising the limits of language and measurement at the threshold of time itself (Cox & Forshaw, 2012). Urdu poetry moves differently still, neither seeking explanation nor spectacle, but allowing paradox to remain intact. Mirza Ghalib articulates existence as a condition that does not negate absence, but rather emerges alongside it:

نہت کچھ تو خدا ہوتا، کچھ نہ ہوتا تو خدا ہوتا

*When there was nothing, God was; had nothing
existed, God would still have been*

Placed against the cosmological narrative of emergence, this verse does not explain the Big Bang. Instead, it creates space for it. The beginning of the universe becomes not a solved problem but a site of wonder, where scientific uncertainty and poetic insight co-exist. Becoming takes precedence over causation, thus allowing the universe to enter the narrative as presence rather than proof.

The Early Universe: Heat, Expansion, and Becoming

Following its initial emergence, the universe entered a phase defined by extreme heat and rapid expansion (Cox & Forshaw, 2012). Energy dominated matter, and space itself stretched at a rate that defies ordinary intuition. In this early epoch, the universe was not yet a place of form or structure (Carroll, 2010). It was a field of motion and potential, gradually cooling as expansion continued, allowing the simplest elements to emerge. Hydrogen and helium formed as the first stable constituents, laying the foundations for everything that would follow (Hawking, 1988).

Although cosmological diagrams often compress this phase into a moment, the reality is different. The phase required time and thus the cooling was not abrupt. In fact, the expansion did not pause, has not paused, nor slowed down. It is still unfolding irreversibly across immense spans of time (Penrose, 2011). What appears sudden from a human vantage point is, at the cosmic scale, the result of sustained transformation. The early universe gained structure not through stability but through continuous change (Weinberg, 1977). Urdu poetic thought has long

articulated this principle, recognising motion and transformation as fundamental conditions of existence rather than temporary states. Allama Iqbal captures this insight with striking clarity:

سکون محال ہے قدرت کے کارخانے میں
شبات ایک تغیر کو ہے زمانے میں

*Stillness is impossible within the workshop of nature;
Only change itself possesses permanence in time*

The verse reflects a philosophical understanding of becoming that closely parallels cosmological models of the early universe, where instability and motion generate the conditions necessary for structure and complexity to arise. Read alongside early cosmology, the verse resonates powerfully. Heat, expansion, and instability are not anomalies to be resolved but the very mechanisms through which form emerges. The universe does not arrive at meaning by settling into rest. It becomes what it is precisely because rest is deferred. In this sense, the early universe exemplifies a broader philosophical truth shared by both physics and poetry, i.e., existence is shaped not by equilibrium, but by the necessity of motion.

The Present Universe: Infancy at Cosmic Scale

Despite its immense age, the universe remains young when measured against its full lifespan (Carroll, 2010). At roughly fourteen billion years old, it has only begun its long movement toward equilibrium. Stars continue to form, galaxies rotate and collide, and complex chemistry persists. Heavy elements forged in stellar interiors circulate widely, consequently enabling planets, atmospheres, and life (Cox & Forshaw, 2012). From within this abundance, consciousness briefly emerges, capable of reflecting on the universe that produced it.

Yet the present is also the only temporal position we can claim with relative certainty. Our knowledge of the universe's beginning comes through inference, models, and residual traces rather than direct witnessing. Its end remains theoretical, projected far beyond any human timescale (Cox & Forshaw, 2012). Between these two limits sits the present, the only chapter we inhabit from within, the only chapter we can measure in real time, and therefore the only chapter that can feel knowable.

Urdu poetry has long articulated this condition of limited knowledge with remarkable clarity. One does not hear the full story of existence from its opening or its closing, but from the middle, where uncertainty becomes the human condition:

سنی حکایتِ ہستی تو درمیاں سے سنی
نہ ابتدا کی خبر ہے نہ انتہا معلوم

*I heard the story of existence only from its middle;
Neither its beginning is known, nor its end*

From a cosmological point of view, the couplet by Shad Azimabadi becomes an epistemic statement as much as an existential one. We listen to the tale of being from the middle because both origin and conclusion remain unseen. The present universe is vivid precisely because it is unfinished. It is a temporary clarity suspended between two relative unknowns, one behind us, one ahead of us. In recognising this, the present becomes neither a triumph nor a comfort. It becomes a location, an interval in which we make meaning while knowing that the universe began without us witnessing and will end without our presence.

Stars and Galaxies: Gravity, Motion, and Order

As the universe continued to cool, gravity emerged as the dominant organising force. Vast clouds of gas collapsed under their own weight, igniting nuclear fusion and giving birth to the first stars. These stars did not exist in isolation. Bound by gravitational attraction, they gathered into galaxies, forming immense rotating systems that structured the universe on the largest observable scales (Carroll, 2010).

Gravity imposes neither stillness nor finality. It generates order through motion, binding matter into patterns that are stable only for as long as energy permits. Stars orbit galactic centres, galaxies merge and re-organise, and cosmic structure emerges not as a completed design but as a continuously negotiated arrangement (Cox & Forshaw, 2012). Order, in this sense, is provisional. It exists within motion, not in opposition to it. Urdu poetic thought has long articulated this idea of an unfinished cosmos, one that continues to unfold rather than reach completion. Allama Iqbal gives voice to this intuition when he writes:

یہ کائنات ابھی ناتمام ہے شاید
کہ آ رہی ہے دما دم صدائے کن فیکوں

*Perhaps the universe is not yet finished,
For the command "Be" is still being spoken,
unceasingly*

Considering cosmology, the couplet resonates with striking clarity. Star formation is not a closed chapter in the universe's history, but an ongoing process. New stars continue to ignite even as others exhaust their fuel. Galaxies form, collide, and transform, responding continuously to gravitational forces that neither rest nor conclude. In a few billion years, our own galaxy,

i.e., the Milky Way, is expected to collide and merge with the Andromeda galaxy (Cox & Forshaw, 2012). The universe appears ordered not because it has reached completion, but because it remains in the act of becoming.

In this current phase, creation is not confined to an origin moment. It persists through structure, motion, and repetition (Cox & Forshaw, 2012). Gravity does not bring the universe to rest; it sustains its unfinished character. The cosmos remains open, responsive, and dynamic, held together by forces that organise without resolving, and that allow form to arise without bringing change to an end.

Cosmic Expansion: Distance, Separation, and Drift

While gravity binds stars into galaxies, cosmic expansion governs the universe at its largest scale. Space itself continues to stretch, steadily increasing the distance between galaxies over time. This expansion is not a force that can be resisted or reversed. It is a property of space itself (Hawking, 1988). As a result, regions of the universe that are visible today will eventually pass beyond any possibility of contact. Light emitted from distant galaxies will weaken, redshift, and finally fail to arrive and those galaxies, stars, and worlds will be out of our reach forever (Penrose, 2011). Separation thus becomes a structural condition rather than a dramatic event.

This gradual distancing alters the meaning of connection. Galaxies may remain internally coherent, their stars bound by gravity, yet they are carried away from one another by expansion that no attraction can overcome (Carroll, 2010). The universe does not tear itself apart. It thins. What once shared a common history slowly loses the possibility of mutual awareness. This expansion transforms what was once togetherness into isolation

without requiring departure. Urdu poetry has long recognised this form of separation, one that can exist even in apparent closeness as described by Adeem Hashmi:

فنا صلی ایسے بھی ہوں گے یہ کبھی سوچا نہ تھا
سامنے بیٹھا تھا میرے اور وہ میرا نہ تھا

*I never imagined that such distances could exist
He sat right before me, and yet was no longer mine*

The couplet offers an evocative metaphor for cosmic expansion, where increasing distance transforms relation itself rather than simply enlarging space. From a cosmological perspective, the couplet captures the logic of an expanding universe with remarkable precision. Distance here is not only a matter of space, but of relation. Even what appears near becomes unreachable. Expansion does not merely increase physical separation. It alters the terms under which connection is possible at all. In this phase of the universe, distance becomes embedded in structure rather than movement. Separation unfolds quietly, realized by the fabric of space itself. What remains is not catastrophe, but solitude. The cosmos continues to exist, but increasingly alone, its shared horizons slowly dissolving into unreachable elsewhere.

Stellar Death and the Dimming of Light

As cosmic expansion carries galaxies apart, another process unfolds within them. Stars, the primary sources of light and structure, are not permanent. Each star is sustained by a finite reserve of fuel. Nuclear fusion allows it to shine, but only by steadily consuming the material that keeps it alive. Over time, this balance fails. Massive stars exhaust their fuel quickly and die violently, collapsing or exploding and dispersing heavy elements into space. Smaller stars burn more slowly, fading over immense

spans of time into dim remnants (Cox & Forshaw, 2012)

This phase marks a decisive shift in the character of the universe. Where earlier epochs were defined by abundance and formation, stellar death introduces gradual scarcity. Star formation continues for a while, but at a diminishing pace (Cox & Forshaw, 2012). The universe does not suddenly lose its light. It spends it slowly. Illumination persists precisely because exhaustion is slow. Urdu poetry has long understood this logic of endurance followed by depletion. Ahmed Faraz captures the paradox of delayed extinction with quiet precision:

کتنا آسان ہوتا ہے عشق میں مرنے کا
پھر بھی اک عمر لگی جان سے جاتے جاتے

*It was so easy to die in love;
Yet it took an age for life to slowly ebb out*

Read alongside stellar evolution, the verse speaks directly about the fate of stars. Burning itself is not difficult for the star. What takes time is finishing the burn. Stars do not die at the moment they ignite, but only after enduring the long task of shining. Their death is postponed by the very success of their radiance. In this era of the universe, extinction is not abrupt. It is stretched across time. The sky grows darker not through collapse, but through patience. Light fades because it has already done its work. What remains are traces, remnants, and a universe slowly learning how to exist without illumination.

Entropy, the Void, and the End of Structure

After the last stars fade, the universe enters a phase governed not by formation or illumination, but by entropy. Energy gradients flatten and all motion slows down. Structures that once sustained complexity gradually dissolve. What remains are

cold remnants, inert matter, and vast stretches of space where nothing meaningful occurs (Cox & Forshaw, 2012). The universe does not collapse into ruin. It thins into uniformity.

In this late epoch, familiar markers of time lose their significance. Without stars to burn or processes to distinguish one moment from the next, change becomes negligible. Black holes persist longer than any other structures, yet even they are not permanent. Over inconceivably long spans, they evaporate, releasing their remaining energy into an already cold universe (Hawking, 1988). Whether protons themselves decay remains uncertain, but either outcome leads toward the same condition: a universe incapable of sustaining structure, chemistry, or memory (Carroll, 2010). Faiz Ahmed Faiz articulated the experience of arrival that fails to fulfill expectation, of an ending that does not deliver the promised resolution. With stark clarity, he has said:

یہ داغِ داغِ احبالا، یہ شبِ گزیدہ سحر
وہ انتظارِ ہمتِ جس کا یہ وہ سحر تو نہیں

*This stained dim light, this night-wounded dawn;
This is not the dawn for which we waited*

In this context, the verse becomes an interpretive lens for entropy, framing the universe's final state not as a dramatic collapse but as a quiet exhaustion of expectation. Viewed from a cosmological frame, the couplet presents the idea of heat death as an anticlimax rather than a catastrophe. The end of the universe does not arrive as a revelation or closure. It arrives as a muted remainder, a darkened dawn that bears the marks of exhaustion rather than renewal. What was awaited as an end turns out not to be the end that was imagined. In this final phase, the universe does not announce its conclusion. It persists in a diminished state, stripped of contrast and event. Time continues, but without narrative. Space remains, but without landmarks (Penrose, 2011). Entropy completes its work not by destruction,

but by erasure of difference. What is left is not nothingness, but a void so uniform that finally nothing further can happen within it and we are left in the void.

Intersectionality as Creative Method and Conclusion

This essay has traced a cosmological timeline not to narrate the universe as a spectacle, but to use the universe's journey as a method of thinking. By juxtaposing contemporary cosmology with Urdu poetry, it has treated intersectionality not as a taxonomy of identities, but as a practice of relation. Science and poetry are not reconciled here, nor reduced to metaphor for one another. They emerge instead as parallel modes of inquiry, each grappling with time, finitude, and becoming through different but equally partial forms of access.

Intersectionality, understood in this way, becomes a discipline of attentiveness. Cosmology relies on inference, mathematics, and instruments that translate the unobservable into structure. Poetry works through language, silence, and ambiguity, allowing meaning to emerge without resolution. Both acknowledge limits. Both operate at thresholds where (un)certainly gives way to speculation. Their intersection does not resolve these uncertainties, but makes them inhabitable.

Even at the far edges of cosmological thought, finality remains provisional. While entropy describes a universe trending toward uniformity and stillness, physics does not foreclose all possibility. Theoretical constructs such as the Boltzmann brain suggest that, given sufficient time, consciousness could briefly re-emerge through random fluctuation (Carroll, 2010). Other models allow for quantum instability or the spontaneous emergence of new universes from vacuum states, events that would resemble new beginnings without requiring intention or design (Penrose, 2011).

These ideas are not predictions, but reminders that closure in cosmology is always conditional.

It is here that an Urdu verse by Naresh Kumar Shad offers a quiet counterbalance, not by denying darkness, but by refusing to treat it as absolute. Hope appears not as certainty, but as possibility held open against despair:

اتنا بھی ناامید دل کم نظر نہ ہو
ممکن نہیں کہ شامِ الم کی سحر نہ ہو

*Let the heart not fall into such narrow despair;
Even sorrow's night carries the possibility of
morning*

Read alongside cosmology, the couplet does not promise renewal. It resists total negation. It suggests that even where endings seem complete, imagination need not concede finality. Absence may still contain the conditions for emergence, however improbable.

To think intersectionally, then, is to remain with these unfinished spaces. It is to resist the demand for definitive endings, whether scientific or poetic, and to treat knowledge as situated, relational, and open to revision. In a universe that begins without our witnessing and may end beyond our presence, creative inquiry becomes an act of care within the interval we inhabit. Meaning does not depend on permanence. It arises through attention, relation, and the willingness to think at the edges of what can be known, where silence does not cancel meaning and where new beginnings, however unlikely, are never entirely ruled out.

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Intersectionality as Infrastructural Labor: Knowledge, Mobility, and Transdisciplinary Science Across Unequal Systems

Tahira Pirzada

Abstract

Intersectionality is commonly used to describe how overlapping social identities—such as gender, class, and geography—shape lived experience. While this framework remains essential, this article extends intersectionality beyond identity to examine how it actively structures knowledge production, circulation, and application. Drawing on a trajectory that moves from rural Pakistan to high-technology research laboratories in the United States, and subsequently to agricultural fieldwork in Africa leading to commercialization efforts in the U.S., the article conceptualizes intersectionality as infrastructural labor. This labor includes the often-invisible work of coordination, translation, and adaptation required to move knowledge across institutional, cultural, and material boundaries. Rather than centering on individual achievement or entrepreneurial success, the analysis focuses on how unequal systems shape who performs this work and how scientific technologies take form. By situating transdisciplinary crop protection research within contexts of gendered mobility, resource disparity, and agricultural practice, the article argues that intersectionality operates as a condition of possibility for both learning and design. In doing so, it reframes scientific innovation as a social process embedded in relationships, infrastructures, and accountability across borders.

Introduction

Intersectionality is frequently described as a framework for understanding how multiple social positions such as gender, race, class, and geography intersect to shape experience (Collins & Bilge, 2016). However, intersectionality also shapes how knowledge is produced, whose expertise is recognized, and how ideas and technologies travel across spaces. These dynamics are especially visible in scientific and technical fields that operate across uneven institutional and geographic contexts. At the same time, transdisciplinary research has emerged as a response to complex global challenges that cannot be addressed within single academic fields. Rather than prioritizing disciplinary completeness, such work focuses on real-world problems and emphasizes collaboration across domains of knowledge (Klein, 2014). However, the practical demands of transdisciplinary research—especially across unequal contexts—remain insufficiently examined.

This article brings these two bodies of thought together. Using my personal experience at different platforms, it conveys that intersectionality operates not only as an analytic lens, but as a form of infrastructural labor that shapes coordination, translation, and material practice. Drawing on experiences that span rural education, international scientific mobility, agricultural research, and commercialization, lived experience is used not as an autobiography, but as an analytical lens for broader social processes. My focus is on the often-invisible work required to align people, institutions, and materials across boundaries of culture, discipline, and resource access, and how human learnings from diverse cultural and scientific backgrounds facilitate resource management and achievement of milestones in unusual ways. In this framing, intersectionality becomes inseparable from the infrastructures that support learning, research, and innovation.

Rural Contexts and the Early Politics of Learning

Growing up in rural Pakistan in the last decades of the 20th century meant encountering education within a social environment shaped by tradition, limited institutional access, and strong expectations around gendered roles. For many women in such settings, pursuing advanced education particularly in science was not a straightforward extension of schooling, but a negotiated process. Learning required sustained demonstrations of seriousness, usefulness, and responsibility within established social norms. In that environment, for me, pursuing higher education became a way of negotiating space within a conservative social order, one that valued continuity and care while leaving limited room for deviation. This struggle unfolded within a cultural context of collective responsibility, moral accountability, and mutual support which I continue to respect deeply. Over time, encouragement and support from family members created room for exploration, even as expectations remained. What emerged was a careful reworking of tradition: learning how to carry cultural belonging alongside intellectual ambition.

External validation of competency such as merit-based scholarships often function as critical turning points in this process. Beyond financial support, they signal that competence is acknowledged beyond local environments. Such recognition makes visible an important lesson: knowledge is not neutral. Access to learning, legitimacy, and mobility are deeply shaped by social position and geography. From early on, education becomes linked not only to personal development, but to broader questions of power, negotiation, and movement. In my case, earning merit-based scholarships offered by the education boards and Higher Education Commission (formerly University Grants Commission) throughout college and university education

supported my pursuit of higher education not only financially, but also by affirming my academic ability and sense of competence.

Learning Across Borders: How Mobility Reshapes Knowledge

After navigating early constraints around gender and access, mobility itself becomes a site of learning. Opportunities for international training, particularly for students from resource-limited contexts, are often culturally negotiated and socially consequential. Seeking education abroad is rarely a simple departure from tradition; it is more often an extension of earlier negotiations, requiring continued demonstrations of purpose and accountability. During my PhD, the decision to pursue a short term U.S. research fellowship offered by Higher Education Commission of Pakistan did not signal a departure from societal and cultural norms, but rather an extension of the same process through which higher education had been pursued earlier: demonstrating purpose, responsibility, and competence as a woman seeking knowledge. The experience of working in a high-technology research environment fundamentally reshaped how I understood scientific practice: collaboration across disciplines is routine, and research problems are framed around impact rather than narrow specialization. Laboratories function less as isolated spaces and more as interconnected systems linking people, infrastructure, materials, and external contexts. Openness to cultural and intellectual diversity within academic institutions creates conditions in which international students can accelerate learning, build confidence, and form relationships that extend beyond short-term training. Such environments support deeper engagement with research while also fostering mutual understanding—leaving host institutions and communities with a more nuanced appreciation of diverse cultural perspectives and work practices.

For students trained in settings with limited resources, such environments offer both expansion and contrast. They reveal how institutional conditions shape which questions are asked, which problems are prioritized, and which forms of expertise are valued. At the same time, mobility makes visible what is absent. Many challenges that shape everyday life in developing/under-developed countries—such as power outages, lack of clean water, seasonal impact on quality of crops, agrochemical overuse, declining soil health and lack of operational resources—are often peripheral within advanced research agendas.

Returning to resource-constrained contexts sharpens this awareness. Academic knowledge, when it exists, can feel distant from daily practice, disconnected from the realities of everyday life. Innovation is frequently discussed elsewhere, while its potential users remain overlooked. This gap between formal research and practical application highlights the uneven circulation of knowledge across geography and infrastructure. Rather than resolving this tension, mobility redirects attention toward translation and adaptation. Learning across borders reshapes not only where knowledge is acquired, but how relevance and responsibility are understood. Education becomes a means of bridging divides—between theory and practice, innovation and access, and scientific systems and lived experience.

Transdisciplinary Research as Coordinated Practice

These insights became central during my later engagement in the U.S. as a postdoctoral researcher for a research initiative funded by Bill & Melinda Gates foundation for enhanced food security in African smallholder systems. The project aimed to develop biodegradable, plant-based delivery platforms for targeted delivery of pest control products, addressing crop losses in staple crops such as yam and potatoes. The work not only used my research expertise in material fabrication (Fig. 1 a & b) but offered opportunities for sustained coordination

across disciplinary domains, including materials science, chemical engineering, plant pathology, and forest biomaterial, alongside collaboration with universities and research institutes across multiple countries in three continents. Agricultural waste materials (banana harvest residue), procured from Costa Rica and Tanzania were transformed in laboratory settings into functional delivery systems (sheet-like seed wraps (Fig. 2) and deployed in field trials across seven African countries (Benin, Kenya, Togo, Ghana, Uganda, Nigeria, Tanzania). Knowledge, materials, and expectations moved continuously across borders, revealing research as a circulatory process rather than a linear pipeline.

Figure 1a. Tahira Pirzada conducting laboratory evaluation of banana fiber sheet matrix in NCSU Chemical Engineering.



Figure 1b. Beatrice Kashando (RHS) from Tanzania Agricultural Research Institute, Tanzania and Omowumi Adewuyi (LHS) from International Institute of Tropical agriculture, Nigeria holding sheet rolls ready for field testing. (African collaborators' visit to NCSU Forest Biomaterials production facility).



Figure 2. A yam seed piece wrapped with a banana sheet matrix by a farmer in Benin (Pirzada et al., 2023, Photo credit Prof. Antoine Affokpon, University of Abomey-Calavi, Benin).

Within this setting, intersectionality was not an abstract concept. It shaped everyday work. Coordination involved mediating among actors with different priorities: scientists focused on material performance, researchers were concerned with biological outcomes, social scientists examined adoption and profitability, collaborators emphasized labor constraints, and funders sought evidence of scalability. Transdisciplinarity functioned less as an ideal than as an ongoing effort to align diverse forms of expertise.

Periods of disruption made this coordination work especially visible. When the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted global mobility and supply chains, transnational research workflows became fragile. Borders closed, shipments stalled, but agricultural seasons continued regardless of institutional timelines. For our teams, keeping projects moving required constant improvisation: reorganizing laboratory access, negotiating alternative distribution pathways, and coordinating logistics under rapidly changing conditions. Such labor rarely appears in scientific publications, yet it is essential to research that spans unequal contexts. It is relational, emotional, and infrastructural. Disruption also revealed how vulnerability is unevenly distributed within global research systems. Delays affect actors differently depending on access to resources, institutional buffers, and local constraints. While we were able to prepare, ship, and get our material in the field in five African countries, coordinating across these differences was not only a technical challenge, but also an ethical one—raising questions about responsibility, accountability, and design.

Material Translation into Agricultural Practice

At the material level, the project involved translating agricultural waste into functional infrastructure. Agrochemical delivery platforms were produced using plant residues through low-impact, processing methods. By adjusting composition

and structure, it was possible to tune performance. Design choices were inseparable from context. Materials needed to be affordable, biodegradable, scalable, and compatible with smallholder practices. Here, form emerged as much from social and environmental constraints as from laboratory optimization. Agricultural waste became a site where environmental concern, local availability, and scientific design intersected.

Field trials demonstrated that low-dose delivery systems could effectively control pests while improving yield and crop quality (Pirzada et al, 2023; Ochola et al. 2022). Beyond technical performance, these outcomes altered everyday conditions for farmers, reducing losses, improving storage, and increasing market value (Dedehouanou et al., 2022., Fig. 4). Quality, in this context, was not aesthetic. It was directly tied to livelihood stability, food security, and household resilience. Sustainable crop protection is not only about reducing chemical inputs. It is about redesigning relationships between materials, soils, farmers, and food systems. Biodegradable matrices derived from agricultural waste close loops. Ultra-low-dose delivery reduces environmental burden. Improved quality reduces waste and improves farmers' returns in terms of premium pricing of high quality produce. Intersectionality ties these threads together: environmental sustainability, economic viability, and social wellbeing are thus not separable objectives.



Figure 3. Farmers in Benin with harvested yam tubers. Photo credit Prof. Antoine Affokpon, University of Abomey-Calavi, Benin.



Figure 4. Evaluation of the yam flour quality in Benin. Photo credit Prof. Antoine Affokpon, University of Abomey-Calavi, Benin.

From Research Output to Organizational Form

As the technology matured, its trajectory shifted from an experimental research artifact to an organizational form designed to enable broader adoption across agricultural systems. While the initial validation focused on smallholder farmers in resource-limited contexts, subsequent work examined how these insights could inform large-scale farming practices. This required engaging with farmers in the U.S., existing pest-control products and agrochemical manufacturers to understand how performance, formulation format, and integration into current value chains shape commercialization potential. Participation in the U.S. National Science Foundation's Innovation Corps (I-Corps) programs enabled me and key team members to reach out to dozens of ecosystem stakeholders to evaluate the market need, stakeholder landscape, and commercialization potential of a technology that had demonstrated efficacy through extensive laboratory and field validation. Effectiveness alone was not sufficient; how a technology is delivered, handled, and adopted proved equally critical. These considerations informed the establishment of Soteria Formulations (www.soteriaformulations.com), a North Carolina—based startup created to commercialize a delivery platform validated through years of multiple field validations in different countries. The formation of the company marked a transition from research output to institutional embodiment. An organization, in this sense, functions as a designed system: it encodes priorities and values about relevance and responsibility. The platform's origins in smallholder agriculture shaped how problems were framed and why low-dose efficacy, ease of use, and biodegradability were prioritized. Early validation emphasized performance under real-world conditions rather than optimization within controlled environments.

Team formation and leadership practices reflected this orientation. The organization brought together expertise spanning formulation

science, plant pathology, materials engineering, and technology commercialization, with attention to collaboration across disciplinary and cultural differences. My personal evolution—from a rural background to international academic and research environments, and from project management within complex collaborations and scientific programs to the challenges of commercialization—shaped how I understood leadership as both relational and adaptive. The struggles and triumphs of overcoming societal barriers, navigating academic systems, managing cross-cultural collaboration, and fulfilling institutional expectations became part of the preparation that enabled me to lead Soteria Formulations as CEO. Leadership relied less on hierarchy and more on relational coordination, recognizing that innovation at this scale depends on aligning diverse forms of knowledge and experience. Here, intersectionality became collective rather than individual: the organization itself operated as an assemblage shaped by multiple social, institutional, and epistemic positions. The transition from academia to entrepreneurship further intensified the work of translation. Technical complexity had to be rendered legible to partners, investors, regulators, and industry collaborators. This translation was not neutral. It was shaped by power, credibility, and expectations about who is authorized to speak for technology.

For founders from underrepresented backgrounds, entrepreneurial learning involved both skill development and ongoing negotiation of identity and legitimacy. Drawing on prior experiences navigating cultural and institutional boundaries proved critical in shaping how audiences were addressed, how trust was built, and how value was communicated. In this context, translation itself became a form of design labor—shaping not only how technologies were understood, but how they were valued, supported, and scaled. Commercialization emerged not as a departure from earlier commitments to sustainability, but as a continuation of them, extending lessons learned from resource-constrained farming systems into broader agricultural markets. This journey from research to entrepreneurship thus reflects a

cumulative process in which learning, mobility, and intersectional positioning informed the development of technologies—and organizations—aimed at more sustainable agricultural practice and a larger global impact.

Conclusion

This article has argued for a broader understanding of intersectionality—not only as a framework for identity, but as a material and organizational condition that shapes coordination, translation, and design. Grounded in experiences that span rural education, international mobility, transdisciplinary research, and commercialization, it shows how intersections of gender, geography, institutional power, and material infrastructure shape what can be learned, built, and sustained. From this perspective, personal journeys become part of the infrastructure through which knowledge travels. The work of coordination emerges as a creative and often unseen form of labor, and scientific innovation appears as a social practice embedded in unequal systems. Sustainable crop protection, in turn, becomes more than a technical solution—it becomes a space where care and social transformation take material form.

The solutions discussed here, particularly crop residue based delivery systems to establish sustainable crop protection technologies, make this argument material. These delivery systems (sheet wraps as foundational formats together with granular and seed coating formulations currently being developed at Soteria Formulations) are not simply technical platforms for carrying active ingredients to plants. They are sites where multiple forms of knowledge must come together: materials science, plant pathology, agronomy, soil ecology, formulation engineering, farmer experience, regulatory knowledge, and environmental responsibility. Their development depends on transdisciplinary labor—the labor of translating between laboratory results and field realities, between scientific performance and grower

adoption, and between environmental goals and commercial feasibility.

Viewed intersectionally, these delivery systems also respond to overlapping vulnerabilities in agriculture. They address crop loss, input cost, pesticide exposure, environmental contamination, climate stress, and unequal access to sustainable technologies. A biodegradable or crop-residue-based delivery platform, therefore, becomes more than a formulation strategy; it becomes a way of reorganizing relationships among waste, value, plants, people, and ecological systems. It links agricultural residues to new material infrastructures, reduces dependence on conventional chemical delivery, and creates possibilities for agricultural practices that are more sustainable, accessible, and responsive to diverse agricultural contexts.

Sustainable agriculture, in turn, becomes more than a technical solution. It becomes a space where care, responsibility, and social transformation take material form. By bringing together scientific experimentation, lived experience, environmental ethics, and practical agricultural needs, these technologies demonstrate how innovation itself can be understood as a kind of intersectional infrastructure labor: the ongoing work of building systems that hold together social justice, ecological resilience, and material design.

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Worlds In-Between: Intersectional Encounters with Pakistani Visuality in Game Art and Design Pedagogy

Faisal Rehman

Abstract

As a digital artist and educator influenced by the sensory world of Faisalabad, Pakistan- a city known for its walled localities, dense street life, folk narratives, and ecological textures, and a practitioner of worldwide disseminated digital tools (including Adobe Creative Cloud Applications), my practice resides in what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) names the *in-between*: a shifting, generative terrain where digital technology, personal identity, and cultural memory negotiate with each another. This essay blends my game art practice, game design explorations, and pedagogical interventions in a classroom setting to propose intersectionality beyond its sociopolitical origins as a creative method for world-building, teaching, and imagining new futures in game art and design.

Using Donna Haraway's influential essay *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (1988) and Kimberlé Crenshaw's foundational writings on intersectionality (1989; 1991), I outline how local visual vocabulary, colloquial architecture, folklore, and ecological textures can be translated into the world of digital games without being blurred or overshadowed by dominant global aesthetics. This blending was accomplished through classroom experiments involving two design instructions; one demanding Pakistani cultural grounding, and the other, culturally unrestricted. I observed that the "restricted" group consistently created more creative, emotionally resonant, and critically aware artworks. The outcomes demonstrate that cultural ancestry can work as an intense generator of creative possibility.

Accompanying my own digital concept artwork and 2d game concept art, the body of work produced by the students of National Textile University position the design studio as a laboratory in which materials, bodies, technologies, and histories cross each other, resonating Audre Lorde's (1984) insight of difference as creative power. Here, students obtain not only hard skills but also the art of unlearning an inherited folder of visual influence, challenging worldwide conceptions of what video game environments, storytelling, and characters should look like.

Lastly, this essay contends that reclaiming local Pakistani existence in video games is not an act of nostalgia but an immediate epistemic and aesthetic intervention. When local folklore or myths encounter modern software, when architecture or local landscape encounter concept art, and when pedagogy encounters intersectionality, new worlds become feasible and more attractive. These new worlds are grounded in care, cultural specificity, and the transformative possibility of the in-between.

Keywords: in-between, visual art, design pedagogy, digital art

Locating the In-Between

Digital game worlds have spread globally with remarkable pace, yet their visual language and world building remain prominently narrow. From hyper-realistic Western architecture/worlds to fantasy-based environments rooted in Eurocentric mythologies and symbols, mainstream video games continue to redevelop familiar aesthetic hierarchies, leaving many cultural worlds and architectures underrepresented or completely absent. The rich history, folklore, myths, symbols, landscape and architecture, and ecological textures of Pakistani visual culture are rarely included in these digital mediums. This void is more than just a representation issue; it reflects the power structures that determine which histories are playable and which worlds and stories are not.

The underrepresentation of Pakistani realities in games is not limited to visual aesthetics. It extends to the social, ecological, and ethical concerns that shape Pakistani daily life — from food insecurity and urban waste to informal labour economies and community care practices. These concerns rarely appear in mainstream game narratives, which tend to privilege conflict, competition, and accumulation as primary mechanics. This essay proposes that intersectional design pedagogy and culturally situated game art can begin to address this absence — not by making 'issue games' in a didactic sense, but by building worlds whose internal logic is shaped by local values, local problems, and local forms of care.

My own situatedness is specific: I am a Punjabi educator and digital artist based in Faisalabad, Pakistan, working within the Bachelor of Animation and Multimedia Design programme at the National Textile University (NTU). My visual sensibility has been shaped by the *mohallas* of Faisalabad — its congested *galis*, the rhythmic patterns of textile mills, the colour of local *bazaars*, and the oral narratives embedded in Punjabi folk traditions. It is from this particular location that my creative and pedagogical practices emerge.

As a digital artist and educator, I was shaped by the visual culture of Punjabi communities and worked within digital production pipelines and with widely accepted industry-standard tools such as Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, and Moho. I live in what Gloria Anzaldúa describes in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) as the “in-between”; a dynamic, generative space where identity, technology, and cultural memory regularly interact. This is a dynamic position rather than one that is static or resolved. New visual languages, pedagogical approaches to art and design, and world-building techniques can arise within this borderland.

This essay uses intersectionality not just as a tool to study identity, but as a creative approach—a way to think, create, and teach in game art and design. Drawing on Donna Haraway’s (1988) idea that “all knowledge is situated,” the work emphasizes how creative practices always reflect the worlds they come from. In my case, these traces include the textures and symbols of regional Punjabi architecture, elements of Punjabi folklores, lived social realities, and the experiences of undergraduate students in the Bachelor of Animation and Multimedia Design programme at NTU Faisalabad — specifically, students from the 2023–2024 batch enrolled in my Fundamental of Texture and Lightening Studio — who are developing their creative identities within digital spaces. Intersectionality, described by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991), offers a foundation to understand how

these layers overlap instead of existing separately.

Within this framework, the studio is more than just a place to learn skills. It becomes a space for intersectional inquiry where students, materials, technologies, and histories come together. In a specific lab classroom experiment, I asked students to design game characters and environments under two different conditions. One group had to base their work on the Pakistani cultural experience, while the other was given complete freedom to choose their aesthetic and creative direction.

Interwoven with this teaching exploration is my own game art practice. My digital paintings and 2D concept designs translate local architecture, folklore ideas, and regional ecosystems into imagined digital worlds. These works do not aim to nostalgically reproduce tradition. Instead, they reposition ancestral forms to engage with modern software and allow memory to interact with digital strokes. In this process, they challenge common beliefs about what game worlds, stories, and characters should look like.

Drawing upon Audre Lorde's reflections on difference in *Sister Outsider* (1984), where she frames difference as a site of creative power rather than alienation, this essay stages intersectionality as an ethics of making. If students are to develop technical proficiency in game art — including both digital craft skills (rendering, rigging, environment design) and critical design literacy — they must first do the harder work of unlearning inherited visual hierarchies: those which treat universalized, Eurocentric aesthetics as neutral defaults, and local visual languages as decorative exceptions. The hybrid quality of this essay, which weaves written analysis together with concept art, process sketches, and speculative game world visuals reflects this intersectional methodological stance: a commitment to letting visual and textual material speak together, across cultural contexts and disciplinary boundaries, rather than subordinating

one to the other.

Eventually, this work argues that reclaiming Pakistani presence within digital worlds of games is not an act of nostalgia, but a crucial epistemic and aesthetic intervention. When folklore encounters digital tools, when architecture encounters concept art, and when pedagogy encounters intersectionality, new worlds become feasible — worlds shaped by cultural memory, critical imagination, and the productive tensions of the in-between.



Fig. 1. Digital Game Concept Art Set in a Pakistani Urban Streetscape

Intersectionality as a Creative Method

Intersectionality is most usually understood as a framework for analysing overlapping systems of power, identity, and marginalization. However, within creative practice and particularly within art and design pedagogy, intersectionality can function less as a category of analysis and more as a method of creating. In this context, it functions not primarily to classify identities, but to shape how decisions are made, how constraints are negotiated, and how relationships among material, culture, technology, and imagination are configured.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's primary articulation of intersectionality in *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex* (1989), and later in *Mapping the Margins* (1991), emphasized the inadequacy of singular frameworks in capturing varied lived experiences. While her study emerged from legal and social critique, its implications expand beyond sociopolitical analysis into creative inquiry. For designers and artists, intersectionality proposes that forms, contents, and processes are never neutral; they are always informed by certain histories, tools, and positionalities. In digital game art and design, this signifies that environments, characters, game mechanics, and narratives carry embedded assumptions about whose worlds are rendered visible and whose are rendered peripheral.

Donna Haraway's essay *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (1988) additionally sharpens this understanding. Haraway denies the illusion of universal, disembodied objectivity, arguing instead that all knowledge surfaces from specific positions, bodies, and conditions. Applied to creative practice, this framework reevaluates cultural specificity not as a bias, but as an epistemic strength. In practice, this means that when I design a game environment referencing the crumbling plaster walls and hanging wires of a Faisalabadi *gali*, I am not decorating a neutral

digital space with ethnic motifs. I am making a spatial argument that this texture, this light, this density of life carries design intelligence that no global pipeline can replicate. The local is not a limitation to overcome — it is the methodology itself. Within my own pedagogical approach and artistic work, this aspect allows Pakistani visual culture- architecture, stories, spatial rhythms, and ecological textures- to function as an appropriate source of design intelligence rather than decorative reference added after the fact.

Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of *nepantla* (1987), articulated in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* as the in-between space of transformation, offers a language for expressing how these situated knowledges function in practice. The art and design studio of NTU becomes a borderland where students and educators negotiate between rooted visual hierarchies and emerging creative possibilities. Digital tools, generally understood as culturally neutral, are revealed instead as sites of negotiation where universal pipelines intersect with local memory. It is within this fickle terrain that new forms emerge, not by resolving contradiction, but by working through it. In the NTU studio, this borderland is not metaphorical. Students trained in software built in other countries use those tools to render courtyards their grandmothers grew up in, translate Punjabi riddles into game narrative logic, and encode the spatial rhythms of the walled city into level design. The friction between the tool's origin and the material's origin is itself the creative site.

Audre Lorde's declaration that difference is not an intimidation but an origin of creative power (1984) resonates strongly within this pedagogical context. Instead of encouraging students to smooth out differences in pursuit of global aesthetic fluency, intersectionality as a creative method calls them to work *through* differences to treat cultural grounding as an effective design constraint. In practice, this manifests through projects or creative practice tasks that deliberately foreground locality, memory, and

context. These constraints do not restrain imagination; instead, they enhance it by demanding deeper engagement, ethical attention, and formal innovation.

Across classroom practice and personal work, intersectionality thus operates as a structuring logic rather than a thematic label. It outlines how briefs are written, how references are selected, how critique is performed, and how effective outcome is evaluated. The question changes from, “Is this universally legible?” to “What worlds does this work emerge from, and what worlds does it make feasible?” In this sense, intersectionality turns into an operative design methodology, one that empowers creative practice to function as a site of care, unlearning, and world-building. Perhaps this reorientation — from universality to situatedness — is the methodological core of this essay.

Translating Pakistani Visual Vocabulary into Game Worlds

Visual culture of Pakistan are made up of a wide and diverse range of forms, from the thick spatial rhythms of informal metropolitan neighbourhoods to the symbolic richness of local folklore and myth. Architectural elements such as courtyards, walled city skylines, balconies, congested streets, and layered posters and billboards shape daily experiences of space, while ecological textures like dust, humidity, foliage, light, inflect how environments are experienced and inhabited. These visual and sensory attributes offer fertile ground for digital world-building, yet they are seldom -considered within mainstream game design above surface-level representation.

My own game art practice approaches these materials through translation rather than replication. Digital paintings and 2D concept art reimagine the vernacular architecture of Faisalabad and Lahore — their walled-city streetscapes, *chowks*, and

layered signage — alongside rural Punjabi landscapes, using industry-standard tools including Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator, enabling local forms to encounter universal production pipelines without being reduced to static symbols or nostalgic pastiche. Instead, cultural memory intersects with technological affordances, and traditional visual grammars are redesigned through digital techniques.

A critical distinction must be drawn here. Mainstream examples of 'culturally inspired' game art — from the orientalist visual vocabulary of Disney's *Hercules* (Eurocom, 1997) and *Aladdin* (Virgin Games, 1993) to the flattened South Asian aesthetics of games like *Far Cry 4* (Ubisoft, 2014) — treat local culture as costume, atmosphere, or exoticism. The visual signifiers of culture are present, but the cultural logic — the spatial relationships, the symbolic layering, the social relationships embedded in architecture — is absent. My practice resists this by treating cultural forms as structural rather than decorative: the density of a *mohalla* does not merely look like a Pakistani street, it behaves like one, with the spatial compression, the overlap of private and public, the accretion of histories embedded in its walls. The goal is not to evoke recognition in a Western player but to construct a world that carries internal cultural coherence.

Significantly, this approach resists the tendency to handle local culture as a thematic overlay applied to otherwise common game systems. Instead, cultural specificity informs spatial design, narrative logic, and environmental storytelling. By situating Pakistani visual vocabularies within game worlds—whether set in imagined futures, alternate presents, or historical reframing — the practice challenges the assumption that local culture belongs only to the past or to realist documentary modes. A Faisalabadi street can be the setting for a speculative science fiction game; a Punjabi legend can generate mechanics for a contemporary action platformer.



Fig. 2. Character and Environment Concept Art Drawing on Faisalabadi Streetscapes, Local Transportation, and Muhalla Architectural Forms





Fig. 3. Character Design of a Punjabi Village Man (Game Character Concept Art)

The Studio as an Intersectional Laboratory: Pedagogical Experiment

The Fundamentals of Texture and Lighting Studio at the National Textile University (NTU), Faisalabad function not merely as a space for skill acquisition but as a testing ground where creative constraints reveal the deep entanglement of identity, memory, technology, and cultural positioning. In the 2023–2024 academic year, I conducted a structured design experiment with undergraduate students in the Bachelor of Animation and Multimedia Design programme. Both groups received identical project briefs, timelines, assessment criteria, and access to the same software — primarily Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator for visual development, with optional use of Moho or After Effects for basic environment presentation. The sole variable was the source of creative reference.

The culturally grounded group — asked to root their game characters and environments in Pakistani visual culture — produced work of striking specificity and intentionality. One student, drawing from childhood memories of Gulberg, Faisalabad, developed an environment around a beloved neighbourhood shop (see Fig. 4): the work captured not just the shop's visual form but its social geometry, the shade of the peepal tree, the ritual of eating *pattha*, the communal ownership of a space that was never officially 'public.' Another student translated his ancestral *haveli* in Koray Shah, Sahiwal, into a Tekken-style fighting arena (Namco, 1994) (see Fig. 5), retaining the architectural grammar of the *haveli*, its arched doorways, warm plaster tones, courtyard scale — while recontextualising it within the kinetic logic of a fighting game. A third student created a 2D fighting arena set in a Sindhī wasteland, drawing on the region's historical tensions between Sindhī and Baloch identities, encoding this inter-ethnic complexity into the character design and environmental atmosphere (see Fig. 6). In each case, the

cultural constraint did not limit the students' imagination — it deepened it, forcing engagement with spatial memory, social symbolism, and contextual meaning.

The unrestricted group produced technically accomplished work, but their outputs revealed a different kind of imaginative constraint: the constraint of existing visual hierarchies. Without a cultural anchor, many students defaulted to the dominant aesthetic languages of mainstream games — the high-fantasy character designs of *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009), the hyper-stylised environments of *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo, 2020), and the militarised urban aesthetics of *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward, 2003). These are not failures of skill; they are symptoms of a visual culture in which 'neutral' or 'universal' design defaults to a particular, globalised aesthetic vocabulary. The absence of cultural grounding did not produce creative freedom — it produced creative dependency.

This contrast illuminates intersectionality's function as a design methodology rather than a theoretical label. For the culturally grounded students, design decisions were inseparable from questions of memory, identity, and meaning: Whose space is this? What does it remember? What does it value? These questions constitute what Haraway (1988) would call situated knowing — knowledge that is always embodied, always positioned. Students were not simply making games; they were negotiating between personal experience and digital form, between inherited visual grammar and new technological affordances. In doing so, they engaged in a process of epistemic unlearning: questioning whose aesthetics count as 'neutral,' whose references are considered universal, and whose visual languages are rendered peripheral. The experiment also reshaped the studio's critique culture. Peer discussions shifted from surface-level assessments of technical polish toward deeper conversations about intention, memory, and ethical representation. Students were able to articulate why certain forms felt meaningful — how the colour

palette of a Punjabi harvest field carried emotional registers that no reference board could reproduce, or how the spatial compression of an old city street communicated a social reality that an open-world fantasy map could not. Digital tools, once assumed to be culturally neutral instruments, were revealed as sites of negotiation where the tool's embedded assumptions and the student's cultural memory met, even though sometimes in friction, but always productively.

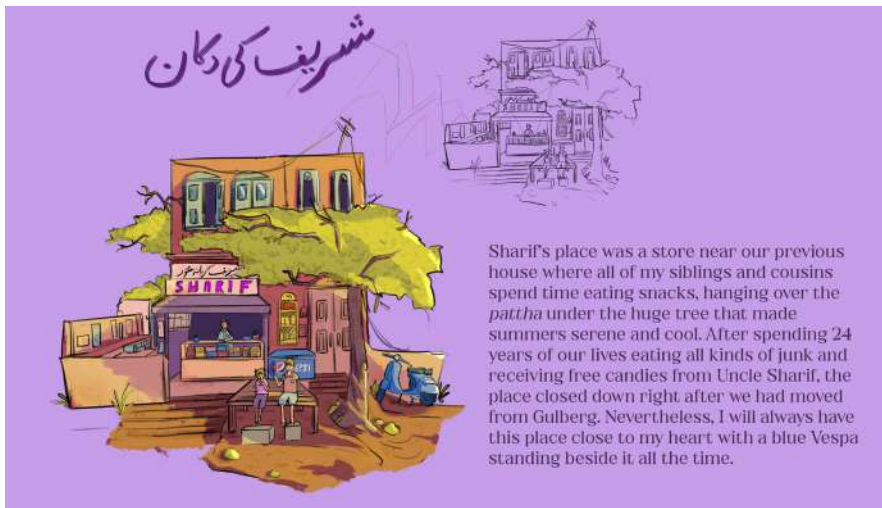


Fig. 4. Student Environment Design Inspired by Childhood Memories



Fig. 5. Student Game Arena Concept Art Inspired by His Ancestral Haveli



Fig.6. Student Game Arena Concept Art Inspired by a Sindh Landmark

In this sense, the studio enabled a creative practice that tested how cultural grounding, technological skills, and pedagogical structures intersect to create new forms of knowledge. The outcomes suggest that meaningful creation in game art and design does not emerge from cultural neutrality, but from situated engagement. By treating cultural specificity as a design methodology rather than a thematic limitation, the studio enabled students to imagine worlds that are not only visually distinct, but epistemically grounded.

Difference, Unlearning, and Creative Power

The pedagogical experiment described above demonstrates that cultural specificity, when structured as a design constraint, does not narrow creative possibility — it expands it. Students who engaged with their own situated knowledge produced work that was more formally inventive, emotionally invested, and ethically grounded than those who drew from globalised aesthetic references. This finding resonates with Paulo Freire's (1970) understanding of education as a practice of critical consciousness: learning is not the passive absorption of established knowledge, but the active transformation of one's relationship to the world through reflection and action. In this

studio, the world students were reflecting on and acting through was their own cultural inheritance.

Local references — once treated as decorative gestures or nostalgic impulses — became legitimate sources of visual knowledge and narrative meaning. A grandmother's courtyard became a game level. A folk villain from Punjabi oral tradition became a game character. The texture of monsoon-damp brick became an environment creator. In each case, the move was not backward into tradition but forward through it, using cultural memory as a generative design resource rather than a constraint to overcome.

This process of unlearning is especially important within postcolonial academic contexts, where creative subjects often laud external models as a baseline of excellence. Intersectional pedagogy, as demonstrated here, empowers students to imagine alternative futures — worlds in which plurality, care, and cultural specificity are fundamental design values rather than marginal concerns. The studio becomes, in this sense, not just a place of skill formation but a site of epistemic reclamation.

Serious Games, Ethics, and Situated Future

The major focus of game art and design discussions includes visuals, immersion, and entertainment value. 'Serious games' — defined within game studies as interactive works designed primarily for purposes beyond entertainment, including education, advocacy, training, and social behaviour change (Bogost, 2007; Flanagan, 2009) — represent a shift in orientation from consumption to responsibility. Within this piece of work, the design of serious games was approached as an ethical practice, one that accepts that interactive systems can shape behaviour, perception, and social imagination. When we situate these games in local cultural realities, they can be systems of care rather than

abstractions. This happens through the specificity of cultural reference embedded in mechanics, characters, and narrative logic. When a game's winning condition is not domination but redistribution and when its environments are drawn from real streets and social economies rather than generic fantasy worlds, players are invited into a relational understanding of action and consequence. The game does not abstract ethical problems into puzzles; it situates them within recognisable human contexts, making care a structural feature of gameplay rather than a thematic decoration.

In Pakistan, food waste, environmental degradation, and unsustainable urban practices represent pressing social and ecological challenges. Pakistan generates an estimated 36 million tonnes of solid waste annually, with food waste constituting a significant proportion (Papargyropoulou et al., 2014). These are not abstract global concerns — they are embedded in the everyday rhythms of Pakistani urban life. Making games about these issues requires more than global sustainability narratives; it calls for cultural, contextual, and ethical sensitivity. Intersectionality, in this way, becomes a guiding method for aligning ecological concerns with social behaviour, cultural memory, and visual storytelling.

These concerns are particularly acute in the informal urban economies of Pakistani cities, where cart-pushers, waste-pickers, and street vendors operate complex systems of redistribution and recycling that remain invisible in formal waste management frameworks. Situating a game within this economy is itself a representational act — an argument that these overlooked figures and their quiet ethics of care deserve to be the protagonists of interactive worlds.

I illustrate this approach through the development of a serious game concept centered on Sakhi — a character inspired by the street economies of Faisalabad's older commercial districts.

'Sakhi' (سَکھی) is an Urdu and Punjabi word meaning 'the generous one' or 'the giver,' a name embedded in the Sufi tradition of charitable giving that runs through the cultural fabric of South Asian Muslim communities. The name is not incidental; it positions the character's ethics at the intersection of cultural inheritance and contemporary environmental urgency. Sakhi is a humble cart-pusher who collects surplus food from the *bazaars* and *dhabas* of a Faisalabadi neighbourhood, distributing it to those experiencing food insecurity, and recycling organic waste through worm composting. Instead of rendering heroism in the scale of spectacle or power, the character embodies care, continuity, and quiet resistance, which are local values. Sakhi's design draws from local costumes, street economies, and community rituals, situating the game's ethical framework within familiar cultural codes.



Fig. 7. Sakhi's Game Backstory Comic Visual

This game concept includes mechanics based on ethical awareness rather than on competition. The choice to - food wastage and ecological responsibility in the Sakhi game concept is not arbitrary. Activities like gathering leftover food, moving

through cities, engaging with mechanics of recycling, are organized in such a way as to foster a sense of balance, care, and consequence. Failure is not punished through loss alone but through visible social and ecological impact. The way these mechanics operate, gameplay is experienced as a relational system, where decisions reverberate far beyond the player's immediate goal.

Design choices present ethics out front as a part of interaction. They contrast the codes of efficiency and accumulation that reign in many games with cycles of responsibility and attentiveness. This connects with bigger intersectional issues, highlighting how some forms of action become privileged while others become marginalized, and how design can help reinforce or disrupt that.

Embedding ethical narratives into culturally situated characters and mechanics may make serious games more reflective than instruction. They do not dictate moral outcomes but enable players to inhabit systems shaped by scarcity and interdependence. By doing this, they broaden the definition of game design from representation to ethical participation.



Fig. 8. Backstory Visual Illustrating Food waste



Fig. 9. Gameplay Prototype Interface (Screen 1)



Fig. 10. Gameplay Prototype Interface (Screen 2)

Conclusion

Reestablishing local presence within digital games is not a practice of nostalgia but an epistemic and aesthetic intervention. When folklore encounters modern industry standard software, when architecture encounters reflective game concept art, and when pedagogy encounters intersectionality, new worlds become possible worlds built on cultural memory, situated knowledge, and the generative possibilities of the in-between. By adopting intersectionality as a creative method, this work contributes to wider conversations on pluriversal futures in game design and pedagogy. It argues for practices that do not minimize differences in the pursuit of universality, but instead create newer worlds through differences, enabling multiple worlds to coexist and speak across contexts.

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Breathers and the Air

Aun Raza

Abstract

Each winter, Lahore records some of the highest air-pollution levels in the world: the result of poorly refined fuels, mismanaged traffic, illegal industrial energy sources, unchecked emissions, and pervasive construction dust. While the pollution blankets the entire city, its consequences are unevenly distributed, shaped by class, income, education, and urban geography.

Working-class neighborhoods, often located near industrial corridors and major traffic arteries, bear the heaviest burden. Residents in these areas experience higher rates of respiratory illness, stillbirths, and mental health issues, despite contributing least to the problem. Accessing medical care frequently requires traveling long distances across the city, a cost many low-income families can barely afford. Health outcomes are further complicated by limited educational infrastructure, where children and their families grow up with reduced awareness, fewer protections, and without means to escape polluted environments.

Official records suggest regulatory compliance, yet lived realities tell a different story. Construction sites operate amid visible dust clouds, factory chimneys often emit untreated smoke, and vehicular exhaust remains largely under-controlled.

Although upper-income areas are not immune to hazardous air, financial resources allow partial insulation through private healthcare and access to air purification technologies. For families earning about one hundred dollars a month, a one-time cost of one hundred and fifty dollars for an air purifier is unattainable. Exposure, therefore, becomes a condition of poverty.

Recent years have seen the emergence of locally led scientific research and citizen-led legal and environmental advocacy, occasionally resulting in court victories. Still, meaningful change depends on systematic monitoring, transparent data, and political accountability.

Lahore's air pollution illustrates how environmental harm intersects with economic inequality, urban planning, education, and public health. It raises a fundamental question for Pakistan's future: whether clean air can be recognized not as a privilege, but as a constitutional right?

I thank Dr. Aurangzeb Haneef for his help in connecting me with some of the people consulted for this photo essay.



Lahore, PAKISTAN.
On the outskirts of Lahore, dust and emission
particles accumulate over a makeshift tent.





Lahore, PAKISTAN. 2022.

A view of Liberty Roundabout, a main junction in the city centre, clouded over with smog.

Smog catches public attention every winter. But it is only one among several aspects of air-pollution in Lahore. The phenomena of smog is caused by temperature inversion where cooled polluted air gets trapped near the ground level and binds with moisture molecules.



Lahore, PAKISTAN. 2023.

Children playing in a ground with unfiltered smoke in the background on a Sunday afternoon when all such factories were required to stay shut, by law.

More pollution means more visits to hospitals. Exposure to air pollution is associated with higher blood pressure & asthma (Sughis et al., 2012; Aslam et al., 2022).

Considering Lahore's persistent environmental pollution, pediatric respiratory illnesses occur at the cross-section of environment, class, gender, education, and urban geography.

The children depicted in these photographs are at the pulmonary ward of Gulab Devi Hospital, Lahore. They are not only patients but subjects shaped by overlapping structural inequalities that precede and extend beyond illness.

Most patients come from low-income neighborhoods where exposure to industrial and vehicular pollution is highest and public infrastructure is weakest. Although treatment is formally free, access to it is constrained by economic uncertainty; families reliant on daily wage labor delay hospital visits until conditions become severe, as seeking care requires forfeiting income and undertaking long, costly journeys across the city. These spatial and economic barriers transform healthcare into an emergency-only resource.

Care within the hospital is overwhelmingly gendered. Children are accompanied almost exclusively by mothers or sisters, reflecting the unequal distribution of unpaid care labor. Resource scarcity forces each child to bring a personal blanket, a small but telling marker of institutional neglect. At the same time, that personal blanket becomes the only piece of “home” in a place as terrifying as a hospital in the mind of a child.

Such illnesses disrupt schooling and cognitive development, exacerbating learning inequality for children already confined to under-resourced educational systems.





Lahore, PAKISTAN. 2022.

7-year old Eman Fatima holding her chest x-ray, accompanied by her mother, in the pulmonary ward of Gulab Devi Hospital, a “trust” hospital in Lahore with limited funding from the government, relying mainly on donations.

Eman Fatima has been suffering from pulmonary damage & infections resulting from air-pollution. She lives in the ‘China Scheme’ area, which is full of scrap metal foundries and small to medium scale factories.



Lahore, PAKISTAN. 2023.

Eman Fatima in her neighbourhood after recovery from pulmonary illnesses. She is holding her school identity card, surrounded by scrap-iron furnaces & factories. The air in her area is known to be toxic.



Lahore, PAKISTAN. 2023.

Dr. Aurangzeb Haneef holding an air-quality monitor, with his asthmatic daughter, Mareha, sitting between two air-purifiers, while his wife Mehwish, also asthmatic, offers a nebulizer to their daughter.

Despite living in an upper-class part of the city, Dr. Aurangzeb's family has suffered constant sickness due to air pollution. During the peak pollution season of 2022-2023, his daughter had two major asthma attacks and missed about half of her school days.



Lahore, PAKISTAN. 2023

Construction funded by the government at Kalma Chowk, a busy central area of Lahore.

Construction dust is one of the biggest sources of air-pollution here. All construction sites in the city produce Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) reports which are then approved by the Environment Protection Department Punjab. They always promise to prevent or mitigate environmental damage.



Lahore, Pakistan 2022.

A resident of a highly-affected area showing the thick layer of grime on a house-gate, caused by the accumulation of pollutant particles.



Lahore, PAKISTAN. 2023

A worker of a scrap-iron foundry, retired due to breathing ailments and now working as a gardener. He shows oranges covered with industrial soot and emission particles.

Quitting such factory work often doesn't bring sufficient relief because many workers live close to industrial areas due to lower housing costs.





Mehmood Booti open-dump Lahore, PAKISTAN. 2011.

A view into the city's main landfill site, where a garbage collector had covered their possessions with a carpet. Here, the daily burning of refuse, uncovered waste piles, and haphazard sorting routines generate dense airborne particulate matter, soot, and harmful gases, polluting groundwater with heavy metals and compounding Lahore's already severe air quality crisis and exposing nearby residents and workers to toxic emissions.

Large swathes of municipal waste are often left to decompose and burn in the open, releasing methane, carbon monoxide, and other pollutants into the atmosphere. After decades of criticism, authorities began to treat the Mehmood Booti legacy dump as both a health hazard and a climate risk site, moving toward closure and remediation: today a reported 14 million tons of waste at the Mehmood Booti footprint are being buried, while the city administration, in partnership with development actors like Ravi Urban Development Authority, is advancing plans for a solar park and re-urbanised land.



Lahore, PAKISTAN. 2023.

*A diesel tractor passing by a parked truck with a painted back wall.
Vehicular emissions constitute one of the major causes of smog.*



Lahore, PAKISTAN. 2022.

Employees of PHA burning dry leaves and branches. The ground workers say that they are too under-paid to compost the branches & leaves they collect.

There is a recently-imposed fine of ~\$725 (PKR 200,000) for burning such fires. Since that announcement, these fires are now conducted away from public areas, composting is still an unexplored alternative.



Lahore, PAKISTAN. 2022.

Burning plastic clippings for heat in the winter, a family in their 2-room home, waits for warmth to accumulate in an unventilated and uninsulated house.

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Forgotten Worlds: Cultural Heritage Preservation at the Intersection of Gamification and the Virtual Realm

Mahnoor Zahid

Abstract

When heritage becomes playable, history becomes participatory. We have long utilised architecture in films and games, but can we now use gaming to explore and preserve untapped heritage sites? In Pakistan, where political, social and geographic constraints result in limited access to heritage, the digital realm offers an alternate venue for encountering and experiencing what is otherwise obscured. A question arises: how can heritage conservation be reframed as a creative and participatory act that integrates exploration and accessibility within a single platform?

By positioning gamification and virtual world-building as methods of engagement, we explore how digitized heritage can shift from static archives to interactive experiences. These digitized environments are envisioned not merely as archives, but as living, navigable universes—educational, speculative, and experiential in nature. This approach expands heritage preservation into the realm of virtual world-building, using architecture as a vessel to both conserve and reimagine cultural memory.

The 21st century brings us at the intersection of cultural revitalization with a vast digital landscape, exploring the past with gamified elements of the future. This body of work will pursue cultural exploration through a speculative prototype, where research and visuals will inform our creative inquiry into interactive archives for cultural heritage in Pakistan. While the implications are broad, through virtual world-building and epistemic research, this paper focuses primarily on architectural accessibility and digital archival.

Keywords: Digital heritage, gamification, world-building, explorability

Introduction

The tales of lives lived in the heart of an ancestral city passed down through generations, the first time you felt the weight of history while wandering through narrow alleys, surrounded by weathered stone, crumbling structures, and the awe of standing beneath the shadow of an ancient monument are some of the many moments etched into our collective memory that anchor our personal narratives within an ever-evolving cultural landscape. As these physical sites become increasingly obscured, these memories risk becoming fragments of a world we can no longer reach.

Culture is the synthesis of the tangible and the intangible, wherein the values of a society are materialised in objects, sites, practices, and oral tradition. This synthesis ensures that a physical site is not merely stone, clay, or brick, but a vessel for collective memory. Folklore, traditions, and heritage sites function as cultural pivots, yet within an ever-changing world, they require mechanisms that not only support their conservation, but their archiving in ways that record their existence and significance as well as promote accessibility and exportability. With the advent of technology and its integration into preservation efforts, such mechanisms have increasingly shifted toward digital interfaces, allowing digital forms of the physical world to exist. Cultural heritage sites, when reconstituted as digital archives, reshape how cultural ecosystems are preserved by experts, and encountered, consumed, and understood by the masses. These mechanisms help create a framework for preserving cultural heritage within the expanding urban configuration of our cities. However, despite the availability of technology and expertise, cultural heritage in Pakistan remains the subject of conservation efforts (some more successful than others), with various sites at risk of being lost



Fig. 1 A visualisation commenting on architectural explorability in videogame urban dynamics. The first step towards exploring capacity of videogame architecture
- Designed by Mahnoor Zahid

due to environmental degradation, terrorism, vandalism, and encroachment. Several heritage sites are either untapped ruins or are simply inaccessible to the public, resulting in the gradual erosion of cultural memory and collective affluence.

To address these challenges, this research positions gamification and virtual world-building as critical methods of engagement. By transforming digitised heritage from static archives into interactive, navigable universes, we can transition from a passive observation of the past to a participatory experience of the present. This paper utilises research-driven gamification to archive and reimagine Pakistan's cultural memory. Through this digital medium, history is no longer a stationary relic but a playable narrative, capable of digitally preserving structure beyond physical repair while facilitating access for those previously excluded by geographical, social, and institutional constraints. This inquiry sets a critical question in motion: How can heritage conservation be reframed as a creative and participatory act that integrates explorability and accessibility within a single platform?

Answering this question requires situating the inquiry within a broader landscape of digital precedents; a fabric of participatory frameworks and platforms that collectively establish virtual world-building as an operative cultural system. This research identifies this landscape as the 'Existing Grid', where emerging design practices are already utilising digital media to promote the engagement of both tangible and intangible heritage.

Existing Grid

The Existing Grid represents a paradigm where heritage preservation in the 21st century is progressively shifting towards digitally experimental frameworks that focus on the digitisation and promotion of cultural assets (both tangible and intangible heritage). Within this landscape, virtual world-building has evolved into an infrastructural asset, particularly within sandbox and open-world environments. By leveraging these platforms, the digital territory functions as a navigable universe that transcends geographical borders, the limitations of distance, and other restrictions (social and institutional). Archives becoming interactive holds the potential to provide accessibility for the masses to the country's heritage, and in turn educating people about the rich history, creating awareness for the need for protecting cultural memory, and prompting people to take ownership of their own heritage by promoting community participation in the preservation process. This research categorises the existing grid into three primary modes of engagement to understand complex digital mechanics: Speculative Archiving, Commercial Reconstruction, and Global Accessibility Platforms.

Speculative Archives and Participatory Discourse

This potential has been explored and implemented by studios such as Blockworks, a design collective that creates speculative architectural projects in Minecraft. Their project, the Uncensored Library (2020)-a virtual library hosted within Minecraft (2011), a 3D sandbox videogame preserves and disseminates censored journalism. As stated in its release, "Even where media is blocked or manipulated, Minecraft remains accessible: the Uncensored Library uses this loophole to make censored journalism available" (Reporters Without Borders, 2020). This project establishes a precedent for speculative reconstruction as a tool for cultural

and political discourse, demonstrating how game environments can function as alternative archival spaces that empower the agency of the user and promote their engagement. Similar methodologies are evident in the reconstruction of Charles Booth's London (2025), developed in partnership with the London School of Economics, which produces a digital twin of historic maps to enable educational exploration by creating a digital twin of historic 'Poverty Maps' within Minecraft. Such projects exemplify how participatory open-world environments enable educational exploration while preserving the socio-spatial narratives of specific historical periods.

Commercial Reconstruction and Historical Continuity

Commercial game studios have likewise engaged in heritage reconstruction at scale. Ubisoft's Assassin's Creed series (2007-2025) embeds historically researched architectural environments within playable cityscapes, reconstructing sites at their temporal peaks and allowing players to engage with lived histories through exploration. These environments function as more than just visual backdrops; they form a dialogue surrounding spatial narratives that maintains historical continuity and a sense of identity. Additionally, Ubisoft's digital reconstruction of Notre Dame Cathedral was offered to be used as a reference during the physical reconstruction of the Cathedral following the 2019 fire (Assassin's Creed maker*, 2019). The model originally digitised for Assassin's Creed Unity (2014) functioned as an infrastructural asset for virtual tourist exploration while the physical site remained under construction (Save Notre Dame*, 2019).

Global Accessibility and Cultural Unification

Platforms like CyArk, Google Arts and Culture have created online mediums accessible via mobile applications and the internet. CyArk's 3D virtual tours have made the world's cultural heritage accessible on a singular webpage, positioning digital media not as a segregator of history, but rather as a unifier of diverse cultures, as indicated by their tagline, "Globally recognized places that belong to all of humanity". Through a team of professionals, they enable documentation and archiving to create "digital records" and precise 3D replicas that aim to guide restorations and be utilised during disaster management.

While digital space and cultural heritage operate as distinct domains, their intersection constitutes a scalable and sustainable cultural infrastructure with long-term implications for access, preservation, and education as showcased by the Existing Grid.

Limitations

Digital media creates unprecedented accessibility, but it also opens cultural heritage to a new layer of risk: narrative bias. To create playable archives, we must establish a framework of transparent, research informed storytelling that acknowledges the risk of a conscious or unconscious rewriting of history. In the work of studios like Ubisoft, the inclusion of history specialists is essential to ensure historical accuracy (Games as Historical Immersion*, 2026). Digital archives must not simply preserve the physical structure, but also the history, narrative, and culture associated with it. Without these elements, the sites are subject to distortions that can be detrimental to the collective memory of an area.

The risk of creating an inaccurate, playable archive necessitates the foundation of a rudimentary framework, one that ensures

historical research, archiving, and narrative storytelling are grounded and documented facts. In many contemporary media betrayals, historical environments are often adapted to prioritise aesthetic appeal over factual accuracy. However, the portrayal of Pakistani heritage must prioritise rigorous research since Pakistani heritage has not yet had considerable global exposure. The inaccurate archival can be detrimental to the history and portrayal of local heritage. The methodology to ensure this accuracy depends on fact-checking every narrative and research element, consolidated by human historians, ensuring that even speculative elements are grounded in historical data.

It is inevitable that through gamification of cultural heritage, the perception of the structures will change. With several sites being inaccessible in Pakistan, digital exposure creates opportunities for discourse and tourism. The motive is to facilitate exposure to existing heritage, not replace physical exploration; what is explored digitally can reduce ambiguity surrounding physical sites. Online digital traction strengthens the potential for on-site restoration and preserving local ecology. Ultimately, access to digital media leads to inherent exposure, serving as a vital tool in preventing the erasure of historical memory.

While the goal is accessibility, it is important to note that many audiences, including students, women, researchers, and those with disabilities still face barriers to accessing cultural heritage. A digital platform is particularly useful for these groups, although the technological barriers must be acknowledged as a limiting factor. Internationally, over the years, cultural heritage has gained traction as a tourist commodity. As many nations globally have already begun digitising and archiving their cultural heritage, Pakistan's efforts in conservation and promoting tourism can deeply benefit from creating these playable, interactive archives, letting the world experience Pakistan's unique cultural heritage digitally and attract tourists to take the trip and explore in-person.

However, implementing these mechanisms for archiving requires more than technical adoption. It calls for a dedicated conceptual

territory to be established where the challenges of narrative bias and the need for factual accuracy, transparency and diligent preservation can be addressed. For this purpose, this paper coins the term 'White World', as a neutral digital canvas that dissolves the constraints of physical time, space, and other restrictions to provide the capacity for speculative reconstruction grounded in historical research. By establishing this conceptual space, the project moves beyond the global 'Existing Grid' of technology and digital archiving towards a framework where history and heritage are not a stationary relic but a transparent and participatory narrative.



Fig 2. An empty grid depicting the neutral digital canvas 'White World' in the virtual realm-
Designed by Mahnoor Zahid

White World

The 'White World' is defined in this study as a neutral digital canvas which serves as an empty architectural site within the virtual realm that provides space necessary for the digital preservation of culture without limitations of physical degradation. Unlike the 'Existing Grid' which consists of established industry precedents, the White World serves as an epistemic instrument designed to reshape our understanding of Pakistan's history through interaction. Here, speculative reconstruction is utilised not to distort the past, but as a research informed methodology to fill the gaps where physical evidence is lost, irreparable, or at risk of being lost. The White World creates a resilient foundation for Pakistan's cultural heritage to be digitally preserved and experienced by a local as well as a global audience.

The conceptual framework of the white world is implemented through research driven gamification, which is a methodology that translates primary architectural mapping, archival data, and ethnographic folklore into interactive gaming space. In an era defined by the attention economy, where traditional archives often remain stationary, inaccessible, and seemingly unexciting to the masses, gamification transforms heritage engagement into an active and participatory experience. These interactive systems act as an epistemic instrument, reshaping our understanding of history by allowing it to be encountered as an embodied experience, rather than a passive recollection.

By utilising gamification, this project aims for universal accessibility, allowing users, including students, women, people with disabilities et cetera, to engage with heritage beyond geographical, social, or physical borders. This approach does not seek to replace physical exploration, but rather to narrate interactive stories, preserve irreparable structures, and promote culture and community engagement in a way that emulates experience of the ancient eras.

This research introduces ‘Forgotten Worlds’- a speculative research prototype designed to archive and reimagine Pakistan’s cultural memory. The following chapter details the construction of this world, presenting a montage of cultural heritage sites on a singular digital plane. It outlines the game’s core architecture from its diverse heritage sites to the specific mechanics (including architectural modelling, historical integration, narrative side quests, environmental storytelling), transforming these sites into living, interactive archives.

Gameplay: The Forgotten Worlds

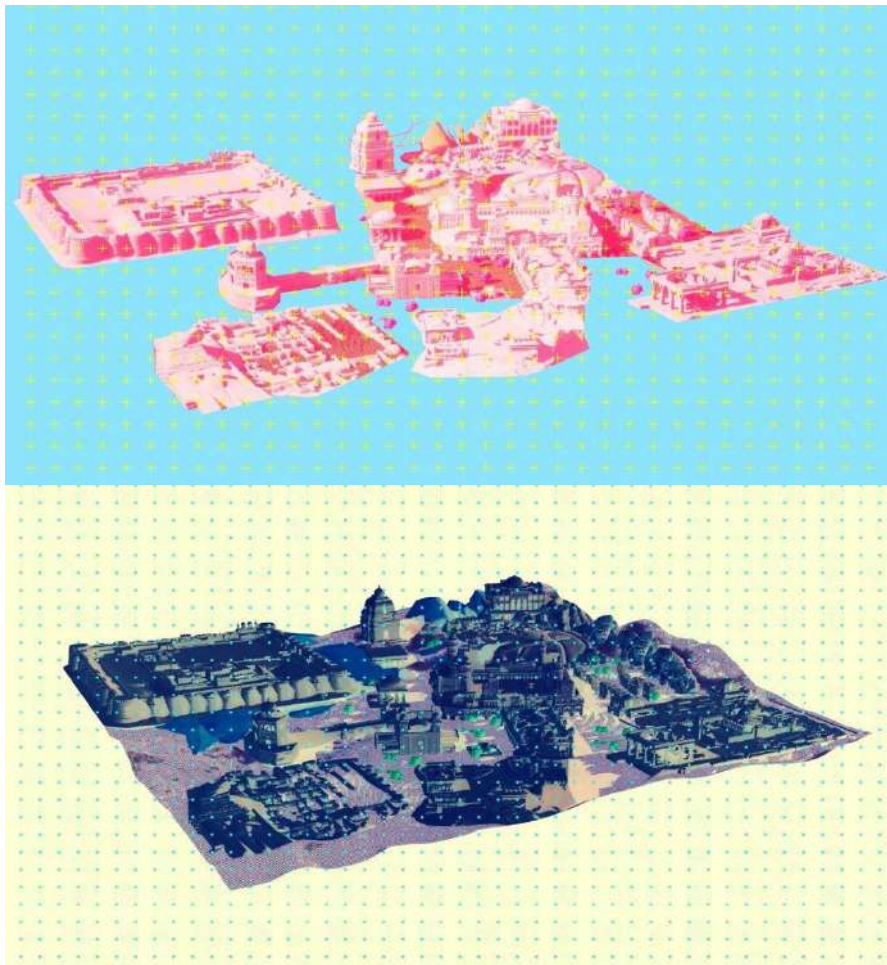


Fig 3. Axonometric of 'Forgotten Worlds' - Designed by Mahnoor Zahid

The Forgotten Worlds is a proposal for a game based on Pakistan's cultural heritage, a virtual realm built to explore heritage through gamification. The premise of this realm is to create an environment in which players navigate through heritage sites, cultures, and urban spaces, experiencing these sites during their

prime. It comprises of an amalgamation of the many cultures that form Pakistan's cultural landscape. Building on this diversity, the gameplay creates an environment for exploration and historic learning by embedding the players within different eras, nurturing curiosity. This innate curiosity to learn of the land's past is what Forgotten Worlds represents.

The game follows the narrative of player 'A', who, intrigued by the world's heritage, seeks to learn as much as s/he can. S/he reads, consumes media, plays games, studies satellite maps, all to understand the growth of humankind. Although, his/her efforts flicker whenever they cross Pakistan's territorial lines, s/he wonder about the state of heritage archival when a country so integrated within humankind's evolution has such a small digital footprint. Several of the heritage sites being inaccessible due to geography, bureaucratic red tape, and public hesitation have made this learning even more difficult.

One night during his/her internet deep dive, s/he comes across a webpage 'forgottenworlds.untitled.com'. S/he's curious so s/he clicks the link. Alas, s/he is swallowed whole into her laptop screen. S/he looks around, startled; s/he's in a white world, surrounded by a grid that spans as far as s/he can see. S/he walks ahead; his/her movement triggers the opening of a portal. A sign reads 'Forgotten Worlds: Walk through the portal to start exploring'. Startled as s/he may be, s/he enters through the portal, intrigued by whatever wonders exist on the other side, a dream within a dream, some might philosophise. As his/her new surroundings evolve around him/her, s/he finds herself in the middle of a forest. The forest glitches and a set of instructions play out in front of him/her. 'The cultural heritage of your country is at your disposal. To explore, continue the game. Each level will take you to one heritage site. Your quests will be given to you. Upon completion, a portal will appear, ready to take you to another level. Each level is an era with its relics and sites archived, tucked away for you to explore and interact with. Once you have

completed all the levels, you will be able to explore the entire realm. You can go through portals at will, uncover the meaning of old frescoes, fly at birds-eye view, collect relics, and do much more. To proceed, walk past this message'. S/he walks past the message, and the game begins.

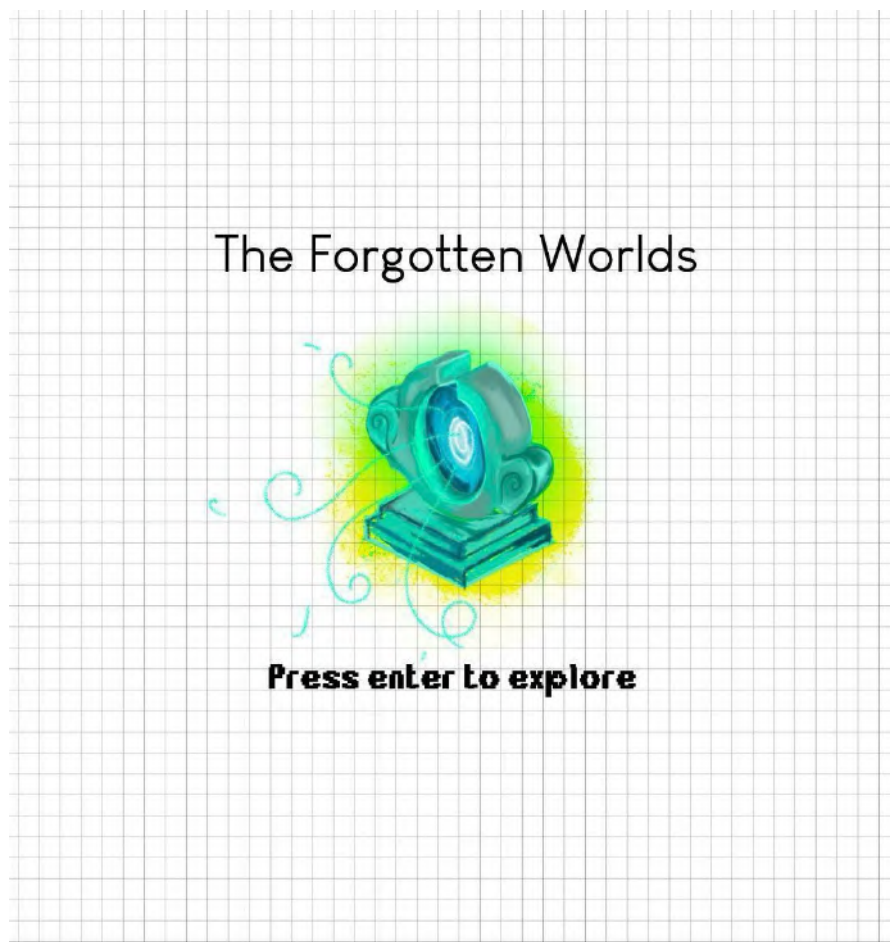


Fig 4. Web interface for 'The Forgotten Worlds' - Designed by Mahnoor Zahid

Game Narrative:

The player's journey is designed as a chronological discovery of Pakistan's cultural lineage using the "White World" as a starting hub and portals to overcome the "geographical constraints and institutional restrictions" that limit access in the physical world.

The journey begins in the White World, described as a neutral space, an empty architectural site. Here, the player dissolves the constraints of time and space to design their personalised avatar, making them legible within the navigable universe. From this space, the portal appears taking the player on their journey, connecting the otherwise scattered cultural sites into a singular digital plane.

Player A's journey:

The game progresses through a series of levels as instructed to A. The portals connect each cultural heritage site to the other forming an urban fabric of an interconnected realm. The player's journey connects the sites chronologically, starting from Mohenjo Daro in 2500 BCE and journeying all through the end to Jamia Masjid in 1903. The narrative continues; the quests are laid out for A to accomplish. Each quest and side-quest is built for A to learn as she explores.

The Forgotten Worlds



Fig 5. Master plan for 'The Forgotten Worlds' showcasing heritage sites on a single digital plane - Designed by Mahnoor

Master Plan



Legend:

1. Mohenjo Daro
2. Takht-i-bahi
3. Katas Raj
4. Derawar Fort
5. Makli Necropolis
6. Hiran Minar
7. Wazir Khan Mosque
8. Mai Qamro Mosque
9. Muqarrab Khan Tomb
10. Jamia Masjid

Player Progression:

Mohenjo Daro is the first site of the journey. The player enters the first portal to discover the archaeological ruins of the Indus Valley. The focus is on urban settlement where they must explore the architectural features of the site from the elaborate drainage system to baked bricks to understand the civilization's administrative and economic abilities. Upon completion of the quest at Mohenjo Daro, a portal appears taking the player to the high hills of Mardan to explore the most complete Buddhist monastery in Pakistan, Takht-i-bahi. Here the gameplay involves navigating through monastic cells and studying the stone patterns. Moving through a portal to the Salt Range, a new geographical location, the player engages with Katas Raj, a Hindu pilgrimage site. This site introduces a new form of discovery for the player, exploration through water and land. As the player completes their quests at Katas Raj, the journey shifts to the Cholistan Desert, Derawar Fort. The player uses a portal to access the 40 bastions of the fort, navigating ancient mercantile and pilgrimage routes from Central Asia.

The quest here includes the safety of the mercantile routes from Central Asia to the heartland of the Sub-continent. To ensure historical continuity, they must tackle an environmental state for the safe retrieval of trade routes using learning scrolls embedded within fort walls. Proceeding, the portals bridge the gap to Sindh's funerary architecture of Makli Necropolis. The player investigates the fusion of diverse influences, such as Rajput pillar canopies within Islamic family graveyards, identifying how diverse cultural threads assemble into a single fabric. The portal then opens to Hiran Minar, a structure of geometric splendour where the balance of built and natural environment leads the player to identify the Mughal geometric patterns. This is done through a quest to calibrate Hiran Minar's geometry by treating each space as a part of a puzzle. Our focus on historic continuity highlights how each site should be viewed correctly to carry on

as cultural memory. As the portals open, taking our player to the Gakhar era of Mai Qamro Mosque, the player partakes in clan history by finding the hidden poison vial that Mai Qamro used to poison her husband, Hathi Khan. The journey continues into the Walled City of Lahore. The portal places the player at the intersection of major routes and bazaars where they document frescoes, geometry, and find hidden architectural gems that are placed within Wazir Khan Mosque. As we approach our last two sites, our journey closes on a more integrated note. At Muqarrab Khan Tomb, the player must recover building blocks of the tomb from all subsequent heritage sites and help build the tomb. This inclusion in historical acts prompts the player to view history as a participatory act. Finally, the last portal opens at Jamia Mosque in Rawalpindi. Our player has to embed him/herself within the urban fabric, finding scrolls, relics that reveal the structure's history. This final act positions the player as the 'researcher' of cultural heritage, imparting lessons that serves the learning outcome of 'The Forgotten Worlds'.

Historical accuracy and advisory

Historical accuracy is one of the core components of the proposal. Since the game's purpose is to bridge the gap between cultural history and the present, the historical advisory needs to be prioritised. This will comprise of two significant layers:

Historically-accurate game environment: The environment is the core of the game. This includes the vegetation around the heritage sites as well as the trade, customs, and bazaars, comprising of all the urban elements a native would find around the heritage sites. If a heritage site was at the centre of its social structure during its prime, then for the game to be historically accurate, the design must convey the same urban-socio hierarchy.

Historically-accurate game narrative: The narrative is the story-line along which the game lets the player navigate. While

the narrative will be discussed on a further level, its historical accuracy is the main component upon which the legitimacy for the game is built. Historical advisors, archaeologists, and era-specific historians have to be consulted for a history-sensitive game to come to fruition.

Architectural modelling

The architectural sites that mark each era, dynasty, and their culture are far and wide. With their digital twins reconstructed in the virtual realm, the archival of history becomes a less intimidating act. The photogrammetric mapping of sites near ruin with accurate environmental storytelling becomes a tool for experiencing heritage beyond decay. The Forgotten Worlds is essentially an archival of architectural heritage sites that have been modelled and restored digitally with accuracy.

Character and regional diversity development

An integral part of Forgotten Worlds are the non-playable characters that showcase the culture of each level. Linking to historical accuracy, much of the knowledge of the ancestral ways of life comes from verbal communication between the people of the area now and historians who fact-check the statements. Their attire, social construct, behaviour, and livelihood are some of the aspects that build accurate data for non-playable character development. In civilizations such as the Gandhara, the religious beliefs, and foreign relations also impact the sort of characters that are found within the level.

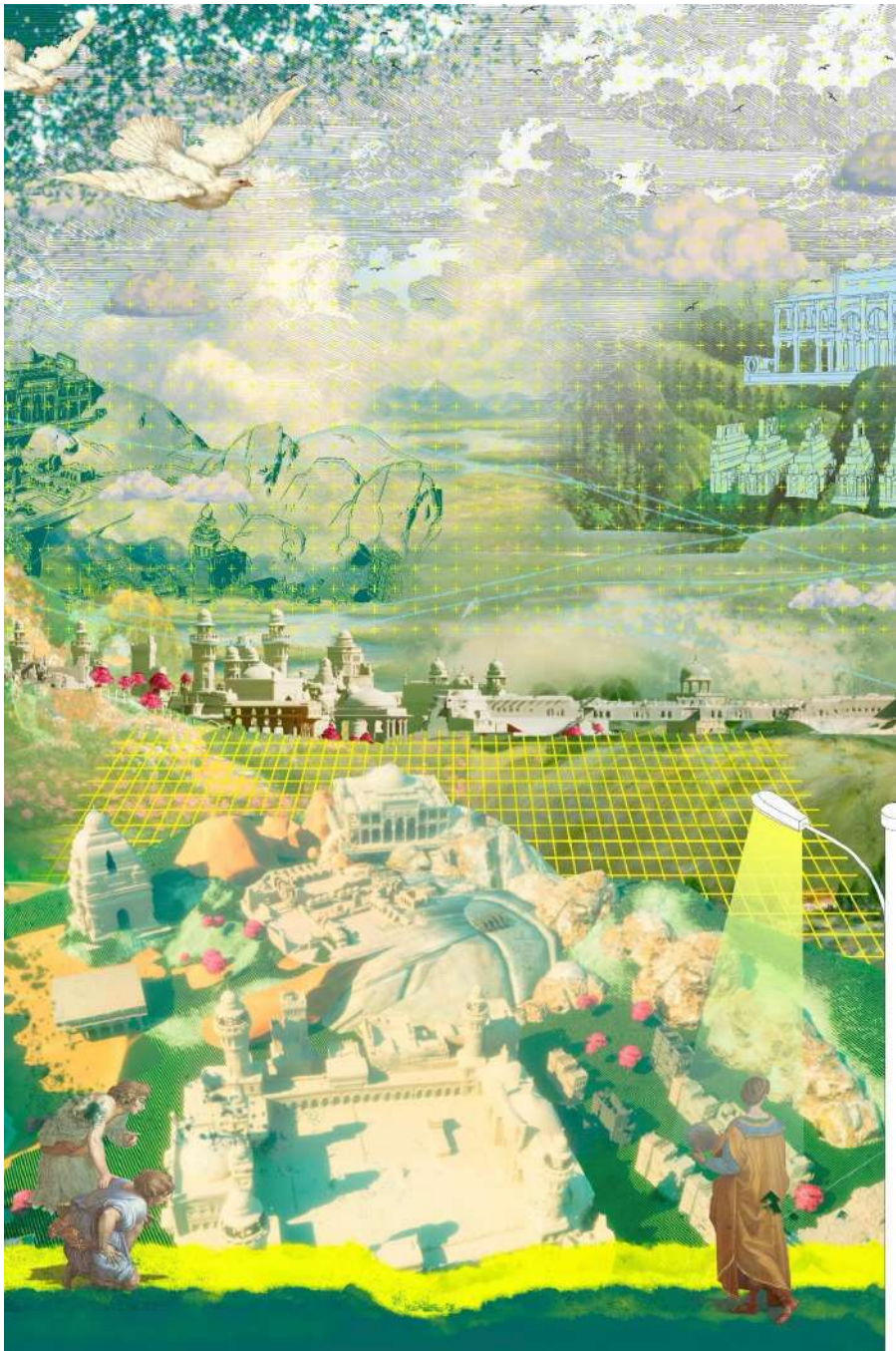


Fig 6. *Prototype Visualisation* - Designed by Mahnoor Zahid

Environmental storytelling

One of the most important considerations for the virtual realm in *Forgotten Worlds* is the environment. Most of these heritage sites are located across considerable distances, but in the game, they're proposed to be on a singular grid, accessible via portals. This narrative is important to the paper since the portals connecting the heritage sites and their respective eras to each other enable to cultural accessibility. The environment needs to extend beyond the narration of each era; it should embody the spirit of the era. Rebuilding the urban social structure of the era, the landscaping, and the marketplaces creates a realistic experience of each site. One of the core components of environmental storytelling are the built pathways. This includes on-ground exploration, rooftop manoeuvring, and off-ground trekking. The pathways help the player navigate between their main and side quests, providing the design of the player's journey.

Rituals, culture, and interactive elements

Between the necropolis at Makli and the pilgrimage rituals at Katas Raj, the cultures that existed around each heritage site are unique. They also form the ground for side quests in *Forgotten Worlds*. For 'A' to explore each culture and truly learn, s/he has to complete a set of quests. The quests range from intellectual pursuits to small tasks as the player embark on their journey. For exploration to expand beyond the quests, objects of historical importance are to be made interactive. This means that the player can toggle the objects and learn more about them such as studying the drainage system of Mohenjo Daro, or understanding the hidden frescos in Masjid Wazir Khan.

Open-world exploration

On the completion of all levels including side quests, players gain access to the entire map. They can then wander through the portals and explore different heritage sites and learn about them. There will be interactive toggles through which the player can learn the history and architecture of each site.



Fig 7. Visualisation for open-world exploration - Designed by Mahnoor Zahid

Intersectionality

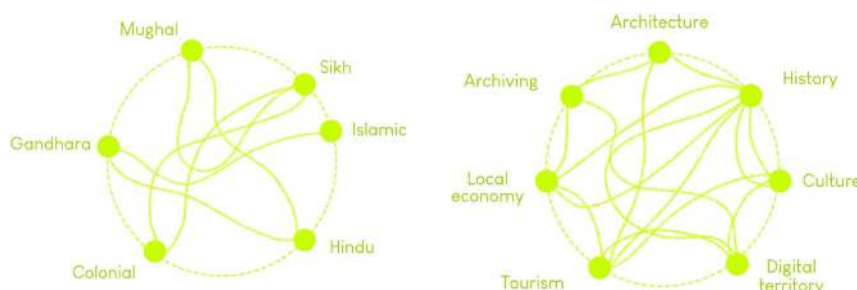


Fig 8. *Intersectionality mapping* - Designed by Mahnoor Zahid

We stand at the intersection of critical mediums, and pursuing cultural awareness can be made possible by situating these mediums across one another as tools of cultural awareness. Through research-driven gamification, these narratives can be situated within archives that operate as living heritage ecologies, spaces where memory, architecture, and interaction coexist beyond the limitations of physical preservation. As eras intersect, so should our cultural growth within the multi-temporal landscape of Pakistan.

Technology now operates at the precipice of emerging realities, and with each iteration, new worlds are created that allow these realities to unfold. Forgotten Worlds positions itself as both a call to action and a critical insight into the latent possibilities embedded within Pakistan's cultural heritage. Gamification is not meant to replace actual exploration. Instead, it will narrate interactive stories, preserve irreparable structures, making exploration a playable and catalytic act that emulates the experience of ancient eras.

The intersection of historical, digital, and creative fields in the

pursuit of cultural uplifting makes cross-disciplinary work not just a method of achieving results, but also of building community. Through cross-collaboration with different fields, a strengthened sense of community is achieved, or rather built. Furthermore, based on digital archives, research opportunities for young individuals increase. All in all, gamification of heritage aims for accessibility for all, beyond borders, economies, and immigration.

Conclusion

“Forgotten Worlds” redefines cultural heritage conservation in Pakistan by utilising gamification as a means of digital archiving, transforming static archives into a participatory, navigable universe. Thus, this provides players with an embodied experience by framing history as playable, providing accessibility through alternate means to heritage sites that are currently inaccessible or in ruins. Despite the limitations, the game has the potential to be an epistemic instrument that would reshape how we understand and interact with our cultural ecosystems. In addition, it can aid in giving global exposure to Pakistan’s rich and extensive cultural heritage, and in-turn, promote cultural tourism, be a venue for cross disciplinary collaboration, and international cooperative conservation efforts.

As articulated by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions in *Digital Cultural Heritage: Theory and Practice* (2024), “Digital technologies strengthen the educational function of cultural heritage by encouraging wider participation and enabling new modes of research, communication, and engagement.” While digital space and cultural heritage operate as distinct domains, their intersection constitutes a scalable and sustainable cultural infrastructure with long-term implications for access, preservation, and education. By utilising primal archival data and architectural mapping in research-driven gamification, we can prevent the erasure of

historical memory and archive our heritage for decades to come.

Notes:

- The Forgotten Worlds was designed by the author on Unreal Engine 5 with 3D models of heritage sites generated via Meshy AI, an interactive modelling software.
- The Visuals were designed and illustrated on Photoshop.

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Thinking with Extraction Landscapes: Soil Chromatography as Artistic Knowledge Production

Nilra Zoraloglu

Johannesburg's mine dumps, located in Soweto, southwest of central Johannesburg in Gauteng, South Africa are among the most extensive artificial landforms in the Southern Hemisphere. Composed of crushed rock, tailings, and chemically altered soils, these vast accumulations materialise the extractive legacies of colonialism, even as they are normalised within the contemporary urban landscapes as scenic backdrops.

Yet to stand on these terrains is to encounter a different temporal register: one in which extraction has not ended but continues to unfold materially through dust, toxicity, erosion, and chemical interaction. This paper approaches these landscapes as active material formations.

The mine dump is not *terra firma*- a stable foundation upon which narratives may be projected- but relational ground; a dynamic field of intersecting forces that metabolise the afterlives of extraction (Krzywoszynska & Marchesi, 2020). This perspective also aligns with emerging discussions in material activism, where matter is understood as an active participant in political and ecological processes (Coole & Frost, 2010; Bennett, 2010; Davis & Turpin, 2015).

Such terrains resist singular disciplinary capture. Environmental science can measure contamination; history can trace colonial economies; urban studies can map spatial injustice. Yet none

of these perspectives alone can account for how extraction continues to operate materially, sensorially, and temporally within the soil. What is required instead are methodologies capable of engaging complexity, uncertainty, and transformation as conditions of knowledge. Artistic research offers such an approach, not as illustration, but as inquiry (Borgdorff, 2012).



Figure 1. View from Soweto Mine Dump

The Mine Dump as an Ongoing Condition

In 2025, as part of the New Futures Artist Residency, an international programme dedicated to artistic research on extraction, a site visit was undertaken to the mine dumps bordering Soweto. The ground here is visibly stratified: pale yellow horizontal faces cut by fissures and erosion channels, their surfaces powdery yet compacted, registering uneven density and ongoing material movement.



Figure 2. Crushed rock and tailings



Figure 3. Yellow horizontal faces

Vegetation has been introduced to attempt stabilisation, but roots frequently lie exposed, failing to bind the artificial soil. Wind, water, and gravity continue to reshape the landform daily.

What distinguishes prolonged exposure to these sites is their impact on human health. Respiratory discomfort, a toxic taste in the air, and heat radiating from the exposed surfaces of the mine dumps have made the site's toxicity physically perceptible. During site visits, protective measures such as wearing masks, limiting time spent on-site, and covering exposed skin were necessary to reduce direct exposure.



Figure 4. Fallen Tree with exposed roots at Soweto

Crucially, the mine dump announces itself not simply as a landscape, but as chemical mass. Crushed rock and tailings interact continuously with air, water, and biological matter, producing transformations that extend far beyond the moment of extraction (Bennett, 2010). Heavy metals oxidise, migrate, and reconfigure; soils leach and compact; microbial life is disrupted or suppressed. The mine dump thus operates as a slow-moving system, where extraction persists as an environmental process rather than a historical event.

This recognition carries methodological consequences. Knowledge of extraction landscapes cannot be produced solely through detached observation or analytical measurement. It demands forms of engagement that are situated, processual, and responsive to material behaviour (Haraway, 1988).

Reading the Ground from Above

Satellite imagery offers one register of understanding. Google Earth reveals the mine dumps as pale, linear scars tracing Johannesburg's former mining belt; an aerial archive of extraction etched into the city's fabric. From above, these formations read as infrastructural residues, their scale and alignment legible within broader urban systems.

Yet this synoptic view flattens material difference. Toxicity, chemical stress, and biological absence remain invisible at this distance. The ground's internal dynamics, its ongoing reactions, require a different mode of attention, one that works with the soil rather than merely observing it.

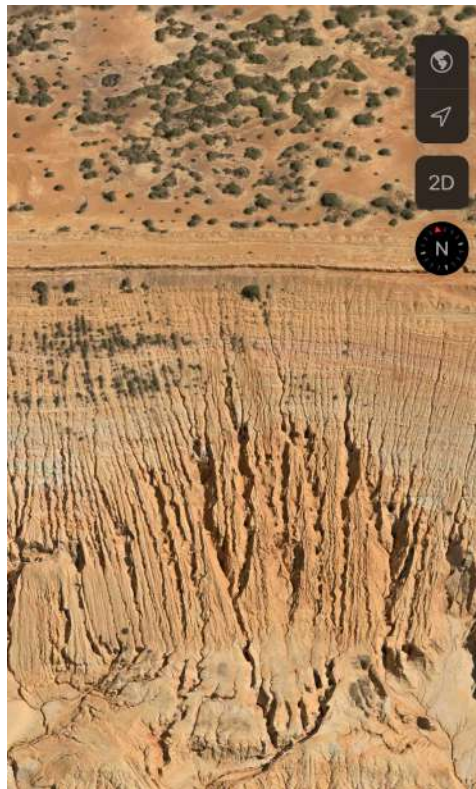


Figure 5. Satellite Imagery of Soweto from Google Earth

Soil Chromatography: Making Material Processes Visible

The primary method employed in this artistic research is soil chromatography, a chemical imaging process in which compounds extracted from soil are separated through capillary action on treated filter paper, generating visual patterns that reflect variations in mineral and chemical composition.

Soil samples were collected from nine different locations across Johannesburg's extraction landscapes. The imaging process involves drying and sieving the soil before extracting it in a sodium hydroxide solution. The resulting extract is then drawn through silver nitrate—treated filter paper by means of a central wick and capillary action, separating the soil's soluble compounds into distinctive visual patterns. As the paper dries and is exposed to light, characteristic patterns and colours emerge.



Figure 6. Different Soil Samples from the Site



Figure 7. Capillary action of the soil extract



Figure 8. Chromatograms developing with the sunlight

These chromatograms are not treated as scientific diagnostics. They do not quantify contamination or produce measurable data. Instead, they function as material translations: visual events through which the soil's internal dynamics become perceptible. The resulting images emphasize variability, sensitivity, and material instability rather than precision or control.

Methodologically, soil chromatography occupies a transdisciplinary space. It draws upon chemical processes without adopting scientific explanation, and it produces images without conforming to representational logic. Knowledge emerges here through interaction, through the responsiveness of matter itself. Such an approach resonates with recent work in material politics and environmental humanities, which

emphasises how material processes themselves can produce forms of political expression and critique (Latour, 2004; Gabrys, 2016; Davis & Turpin, 2015).

Toxic Soils, Broken Metabolisms

When read comparatively, the chromatograms reveal striking differences between fertile and extraction-impacted soils. Healthy garden soils, seen in Figure 9, exhibit coherent radial channels connecting centre to edge, dark brown outer zones rich in organic matter, and gradual tonal transitions that suggest metabolic continuity.

In contrast, soils drawn from mine dumps and polluted sites register fragmentation. Pale inner zones indicate mineral dominance and reduced biological activity. Abrupt pink-blue rings, jagged spikes, and truncated channels point to chemical stress, heavy-metal contamination, and disrupted soil structure. The absence of dark humus tones signals long-term ecological interruption. These visual characteristics are not symbolic representations but material effects. In this sense, the chromatograms operate as material registrations of environmental violence, echoing arguments that damaged landscapes themselves can function as material witnesses to extractive histories (Schuppli, 2020).

They testify to how metals extracted decades or centuries ago remain active within the ground, continuing to shape its chemistry and limit its capacity for regeneration. The chromatograms thus render legible a form of long-lasting material effects; the persistence of extraction's material presence across generations.



Figure 9. Soil Chromatography of Garden Soil Sample

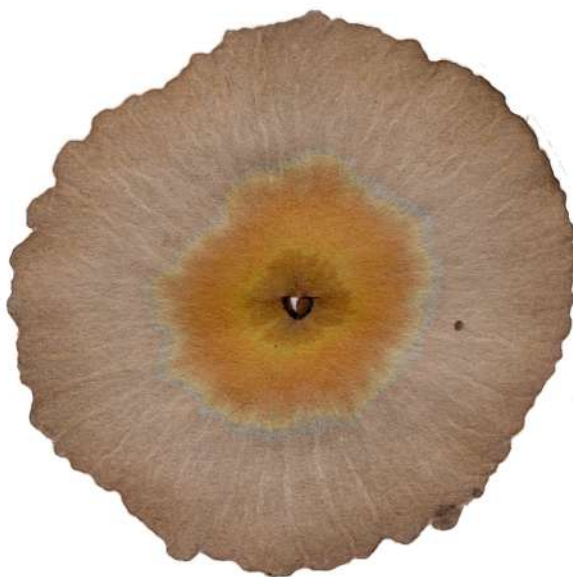


Figure 10. Soil Chromatography of Mine Dump Soil Sample

Artistic Practice as Inquiry

In this project, artistic practice operates not as illustration but as a mode of thinking that unfolds through action. Collecting soil, preparing samples, waiting for reactions, and interpreting emergent patterns constitute a research process shaped by intuition, chance, and material resistance. Research questions are not fixed in advance; they arise through engagement with the process itself (Borgdorff, 2012). Knowledge is produced as situated insight, inseparable from the conditions under which it emerges: the mine dumps, the chemical reactions, the temporal unfolding of the chromatograms (Haraway, 1988). The resulting soil portraits function as epistemic artefacts. They do not explain extraction, nor do they resolve its consequences. Instead, they hold extraction in suspension, allowing its afterlife to be sensed rather than stabilised.



Figure 11. *Soil Portraits: Traces of Extraction*, 2025, Fine Art Prints, 9 Prints, 30 × 30 cm.

Thinking with the Ground

Intersectionality, here, is understood as a material condition, a convergence of geological time, industrial processes, chemical stress, and environmental exposure that persists within the soil itself, and environmental exposure intersect within the soil, co-producing conditions that persist and mutate (Bennett, 2010; Tsing, 2015).

The chromatograms make these intersections perceptible without reducing them to representation. Dense cores register accumulation; fractured rings suggest disturbance; diffused edges indicate leaching and dispersal. These are not metaphors, but material traces of intersecting processes operating across scale and duration.

This project proposes artistic research as a methodology capable of thinking with extraction landscapes rather than about them. Through soil chromatography, it demonstrates how artistic practice can forms of knowledge that resist disciplinary containment and propositional certainty (Haraway, 1988).

The shift from terra firma to relational ground repositions both land and inquiry as dynamic processes. The mine dump is no longer a passive remainder of history, but an active participant in the present, one that continues to speak through chemical reactions, material transformations, and disrupted ecologies (Bennett, 2010; Tsing, 2015).

To work with such ground is not to seek resolution, but to remain attentive to extraction's ongoing material afterlives. Artistic research, in this sense, becomes a practice of staying with the trouble, holding matter open, and attending to the ways material traces continue to communicate the ongoing effects of extraction.



Figure 12. Impressions of the Soweto

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Memories and Thoughts Collide

Nazia Akram

Abstract

In an era of accelerated movement and mobility, individuals increasingly inhabit multiple places, temporalities, and modes of belonging all at once. Movement across geographies, whether through travel, migration, or everyday displacement, produces layered identities formed through memory, sensation, and lived experience. Memories do not remain fixed in the past; they surface unpredictably, interrupt the present, and reshape perception as thought and sensation collide.

Memories and Thoughts Collide explores memory and thought as an intersectional space where personal history, cultural belonging, spirituality, and cognition overlap. Through video practice situated within urban and domestic environments, the work examines how memories travel, fragment, and resettle, revealing how identities are continually reformed through movement, attention, and repetition. A person may stand within a crowded street while simultaneously inhabiting internal landscapes of remembrance, association, and reflection.

Treating memory as both material and methodology, the project positions intersectionality not as a fixed identity framework, but as a temporal and perceptual condition. The work asks what emerges when inner and outer worlds meet, and how these intersections generate new forms of meaning, belonging, and visual language within contemporary artistic practice.

Key words: Memory, Intersectionality, Video Art, Embodied Perception

Memories and Thoughts Collide emerges from a sustained engagement with memory as a lived, unstable, and evolving process rather than a fixed archive of the past. Memory in this work is not approached as something that can be neatly recalled or accessed at will, but as something that returns unpredictably, interrupts the present, and reshapes perception in subtle and often unnoticeable ways.

Thought is often understood as deliberate, reflective, and analytical, an activity associated with intention and conscious reasoning. Yet lived experience suggests that memory and thought rarely operate in isolation. They overlap, interrupt one another, and exist in constant negotiation. This paper reflects on how these processes collide and intersect through a video work situated within urban and domestic spaces, using repetition, sound, movement, and duration as methods of inquiry rather than explanation.

The video does not attempt to narrate a story, document a journey, or represent a singular experience. Instead, it constructs a temporal field in which memory and thought continually intersect. Through observation, repetition, fragmentation, and rhythmic return, the work challenges linear progression and mirrors the uneven way cognition unfolds in everyday life. Rather than functioning as an illustration of theoretical ideas, the video becomes a mode of thinking in itself. Knowledge emerges through sustained attention to sensation, rhythm, and movement rather than through language alone. In this sense, the work aligns with a practice-led understanding of research in which insight develops through the process of making.

Within the methodology of the work, editing and framing operate not simply as technical procedures but as ways of visualising cognitive processes. At several moments, overlapping screens appear within the video, allowing different fragments of experience to co-exist simultaneously. These compositions

suggest that memory and thought do not unfold sequentially but occur in parallel fields of awareness. Perception, recollection, and reflection occupy the same temporal space, intersecting rather than replacing one another. By allowing multiple images to share the screen, the work makes visible the layered condition of cognition itself. The viewer encounters simultaneous moments that echo the way memory surfaces while thought continues to process the present.

Memory is frequently positioned as something belonging to the past, while thought is associated with the present moment (Bergson, 1911). This distinction proves ineffective when examined through lived experience. Memories surface without warning, triggered by sound, movement, texture, or place, while thought frequently loops back on itself, revisiting and reinterpreting what has already occurred. The video, therefore, approaches time not as a sequence of discrete moments but as a fluid field in which past and present remain intertwined. Henri Bergson's notion of duration provides an important framework for understanding this instability. Bergson describes time as a continuous flow in which the past asserts itself on the present rather than disappearing behind it (Bergson, 1911). Memory, within this understanding, is not stored elsewhere and retrieved when needed. It remains active within perception, shaping how the present moment is experienced.

This philosophical understanding of time resonates strongly with certain cinematic practices that allow duration to unfold rather than compressing experience into narrative progression. Abbas Kiarostami's film "24 Frames" offers an example of this approach (Kiarostami, 2017). Composed of contemplative scenes that unfold within extended shots, the film demonstrates how a single image can contain multiple layers of temporal experience. Inspired by this sensibility, the video opens with a long take of a child playing at the beach. Within this moment, the intersecting roles of artist and mother quietly shape the unfolding scene.

The shot develops slowly, allowing movement, sound, and atmosphere to accumulate without interruption. Rather than functioning as documentation, the image becomes a fragment of lived time in which observation, memory, and reflection begin to form simultaneously. The opening sequence establishes the temporal rhythm of the work, suggesting that memory can emerge through sustained attention rather than through rapid sequences of images.

The work also resonates with Aristotle's understanding of memory as inseparable from sense perception (Aristotle, 1984). For Aristotle, memory arises through *phantasia*, an imaginative faculty shaped by sensory impressions and time (Aristotle, 1984). Memory is not an abstract recall but a trace left within the body, gradually altered through duration and experience. In *Memories and Thoughts Collide*, memory similarly appears not as narrative recollection but as sensation. Gestures, movements, and rhythms surface as carriers of memory, often felt before they are consciously recognised.

The video allows these sensory fragments to unfold without using explanation, reinforcing the idea that cognition is grounded in embodied experience rather than detached reasoning.

Attention itself becomes a key site where memory and thought collide. Attention rarely operates evenly. At times it lingers; at others, it drifts. Certain moments insist on being held, while others pass almost unnoticed, only to return later with unexpected intensity. The video mirrors this unevenness through variations in duration. Some scenes unfold slowly, inviting prolonged observation, while others appear briefly and disappear again. This shifting rhythm reflects the way memory privileges sensation, repetition, and affect over narrative significance. What becomes memorable is not necessarily what appears important at the moment of experience.

The camera's relationship to space reflects a similar instability. Public spaces play an important role in the formation of memory within the work. Many of the environments encountered in the video could be described as touristic or collectively visited sites, places where people gather to observe, photograph, and remember. Such spaces are often understood primarily as spectacles or destinations, yet they also function as quiet sites where personal memories take shape. Standing among strangers who are themselves photographing, observing, and moving through the same environment creates a layered field of attention. Within these moments, memory is formed not only through private reflection but through shared acts of looking and recording.

The video observes these gestures without interruption or judgement. People photographing monumental architecture with their phones appear throughout the work. These actions reveal an impulse to secure experience through documentation, suggesting that memory can be captured and stored externally through images. The work does not critique this impulse but quietly situates it within a broader field of observation. As an observer, I film individuals who are themselves engaged in making memories. While they attempt to preserve their experiences through photographs, the camera I hold simultaneously transforms these encounters into another layer of memory production. Filming, therefore, becomes a reflexive act. It records the memory-making of others while generating a parallel memory for the filmmaker.

This reflexive dimension resonates with Jean-Paul Sartre's understanding of consciousness as intentional (Sartre, 2001). For Sartre, consciousness is always consciousness of something. Memory is not stored as an object waiting to be retrieved; it is continually re-enacted within the present. Remembering, therefore, becomes an activity rather than a recovery of the past. Within the video, the camera does not simply capture memory.

It participates in its formation.

As the work moves across locations, the camera occupies partial and shifting positions. At times, it looks outward from interiors; at others, it observes reflections through windows or pauses at thresholds between public and private space. These positions emphasise the camera's role as a participant rather than a detached observer. What appears within the frame is shaped by proximity, interruption, and circumstance. In this way, the act of filming parallels the act of remembering. Both are selective, incomplete, and shaped by what remains just outside the field of perception.

Movement across different spaces further complicates the relationship between memory and place. The video shifts between urban environments and domestic interiors without identifying specific locations. Rather than anchoring memory to a fixed geography, these transitions suggest that memory travels. Experiences accumulate across spaces and remain internally carried rather than externally located. Thought may attempt to organise these experiences into coherent narratives, yet memory often returns through fragments: gestures, textures, rhythms, and fleeting images that resist chronological order.

This movement through space is inseparable from the overlapping roles through which the work is produced. Being a mother, a visual artist, a traveller, and an observer does not occur sequentially but simultaneously. These roles intersect within the same moments of attention. In one scene, my own artistic practice briefly appears within the frame, creating a moment where the act of making art becomes visible within everyday life. My artistic practice often engages with birds and their movements, a recurring motif that appears across much of my photographic and video work. In the video, this presence of birds and their flight echoes broader ideas of movement, observation, and freedom, subtly connecting the natural world with human

experience. The inclusion of this motif also reflects how different aspects of my identity and artistic concerns intersect within the work. Motherhood, artistic practice, travel, and observation are not isolated categories but overlapping positions that shape how I see and record the world. Through this intersectionality, the video reveals how creative practice emerges from multiple, entangled perspectives rather than a single, fixed viewpoint. The video, therefore, does not separate artistic practice from daily experience. Instead, it acknowledges that creative work emerges from within the entanglements of ordinary life.

Gradually, the video shifts away from monumental spaces toward moments that resist stabilization, such as reflections seen through windows, fleeting domestic scenes, birds in flight, water bodies such as lakes, oceans, and swimming pools, as well as public gatherings where people dance or children move in and out of the frame. The work also incorporates fragments of personal vacation videos recorded by the artist during travel. These images are not presented as documentation of specific events but as traces of moments that continue to hold emotional or cognitive significance for the artist. Their presence reflects how certain images persist in memory and return unexpectedly within present perception, echoing Henri Bergson's idea that the past remains active within the present (Bergson, 1911). These images are not collected as records of events but as traces of attention. They register moments that become memorable not because they are exceptional but because they are intimate and recurring.

Thought becomes visible through moments of disruption and overlap. Bodies cross paths, appear to move through one another, or intersect through editing and framing. These encounters remain unresolved, producing subtle interruptions in perception. Thought attempts to organise direction and intention, while memory draws attention toward sensation and familiarity. The resulting collision echoes everyday experiences in which

reflection interrupts action and memories surface unexpectedly within the present.

As repetition intensifies, the work begins to evoke sensations of *déjà vu* (Bergson, 1911). Familiarity emerges without a clear origin, collapsing past and present into a single perceptual moment. Thought struggles to explain this recognition, while memory insists on its presence. These moments destabilise linear time, reinforcing Bergson's notion of duration and suggesting that perception and memory remain inseparable within lived experience (Bergson, 1911).

Kaleidoscopic sequences introduce another transformation within the visual field. Individual bodies dissolve into patterned movement, creating images that suggest both unity and multiplicity. Through repetition and symmetry, the image begins to resemble a collective rhythm rather than a singular perspective. Memory and thought appear here not as isolated mental processes but as movements that circulate across bodies and shared spaces.

Sound plays a crucial role in sustaining continuity across these visual shifts. Beats, musical fragments, and the rhythmic recitation of *zikr* persist across spatial transitions, functioning as internal rhythms rather than external cues. *Zikr*, a Sufi devotional practice involving the repetitive recitation of sacred words, names, or phrases in remembrance of the Divine, becomes both a spiritual and rhythmic structure within the work. These sounds mirror the way certain memories remain embedded within the body regardless of location. The presence of *zikr* introduces a Sufi understanding of remembrance that resonates strongly with the structure of the work. In the writings of Jalaluddin Rumi, remembrance does not refer to recalling the past but to sustaining presence through repetition (Rumi, 2004). Repetition becomes a means of inhabiting time rather than overcoming it.

Within the video, *zikr* operates as a collective rhythm that gathers memory and thought into a shared temporal field. The repetition of sound parallels the visual repetition of gestures and movements, reinforcing the idea that remembrance is not a singular act but an ongoing practice of attention. Memory here becomes rhythmic rather than narrative.

The process of making the work, therefore, aligns with a practice-led approach to knowledge. Meaning emerges through doing rather than through explanation.

Thought does not precede experience; it follows it. The video becomes a space where thinking occurs through movement, framing, repetition, and sound. Rather than illustrating ideas, the work generates them through its own temporal structure.

Within this process, the ethics of seeing become unavoidable. Looking is never neutral. Every act of framing involves choice, exclusion, and emphasis, shaping not only what becomes visible but also how it is perceived. Seeing is informed by history, memory, and position. In *Memories and Thoughts Collide*, this situated way of seeing becomes visible through partial views, reflections, and obstructed perspectives. The camera does not claim total knowledge of its surroundings. Instead, it reveals its own limitations.

The viewer enters this field of partial perception carrying their own histories and memories. The video does not guide interpretation through narrative explanation. Instead, it invites an encounter shaped by the viewer's own modes of attention. Carl Jung's description of psychological functions: sensation, feeling, thinking, and intuition, offer one way of understanding how viewers may engage differently with the work (Jung, 1971).

Some viewers may respond most strongly to rhythm, texture, or sound. Others may be drawn toward emotional tone, conceptual reflection, or intuitive resonance. No single mode of engagement

is prioritised. Meaning emerges through the interaction between the work and the viewer's perceptual and mnemonic frameworks.

This openness reinforces the idea that memory does not reside solely within the image. It is activated through encounter. As viewers recognise fragments that resonate with their own experiences, memory surfaces in ways that are personal, uneven, and unpredictable. Thought follows, attempting to interpret or contextualise these sensations. The collision between memory and thought, therefore, extends beyond the artist's experience into the act of viewing itself.

As the video approaches its conclusion, the density of repetition gradually loosens. Gestures dissipate, visual patterns thin, and the image opens into quieter moments of attention. This shift does not provide resolution but release. What remains is residue rather than closure, a sense of having moved through a temporal condition rather than having arrived at a final statement.

Memories and Thoughts Collide does not attempt to define memory or thought as stable categories. Instead, it emphasizes their overlap, allowing collision itself to become a productive space of inquiry. Through repetition, sound, movement, and duration, the video enacts a way of thinking that resists linear explanation. Memory and thought intersect within individuals, between individuals, and within the image itself. The work remains open, allowing memory and thought to continue colliding long after the image fades.



Video Specs

Title: Memories and Thoughts Collide

Artist: Nazia Akram

Year: 2026

Duration: 8 minutes 21 seconds



Format: Single-channel video with sound

Sound: Layered soundscape including rhythmic beats, ambient textures, nature sounds and *zikr* (repetitive vocal remembrance)

Video description:

Memories and Thoughts Collide is a single-channel video work that explores memory and thought as unstable and overlapping processes rather than fixed or separable states. Moving between urban environments and domestic interiors, the video constructs a temporal field in which past and present co-exist. Instead of following a linear narrative, the work unfolds through repetition, interruption, and rhythmic return, reflecting the way cognition is experienced without logic explanations.

The camera does not claim mastery over space; instead, it remains responsive to movement, proximity, and chance. In this sense, filming mirrors remembering, as both are selective, contingent, and incomplete. Repetition structures the work as gestures return with variation, producing sensations of recognition and disorientation that verge on *déjà vu*. Split-screen sequences further visualise how memory and thought unfold simultaneously rather than sequentially.

Sound functions as an internal pulse throughout the video. Beats, ambient textures, and *zikr* persist across visual shifts, acting as carriers of memory rather than simple accompaniments. The work engages intersectionality as a lived temporal condition in which roles such as artist, mother, observer, and traveller coexist, shaping how memory and thought continue to collide beyond the frame.



Time: 00:01:45:15



Time: 00:03:03:21



Time: 00:03:46:17



Time: 00:04:22:10



Time: 00:40:38:03



Time: 00:05:42:22



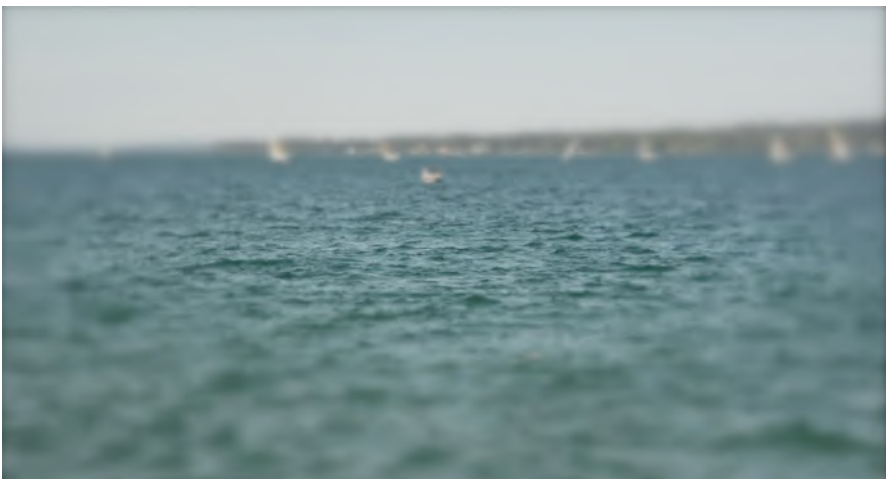
Time: 00:06:04:14



Time: 00:06:11:09



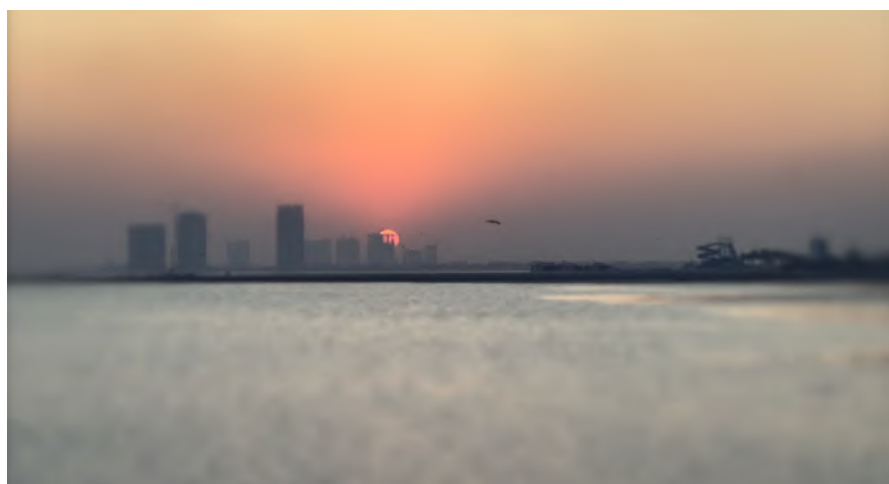
Time: 00:07:11:21



Time: 00:06:52:07



Time: 00:08:14:24



Time: 00:08:39:04

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Flag or Flesh: Imaginary Borders, Neglect, and Embodied Evidence

Mehrta Shirzadian

Abstract

This article offers an artistic research inquiry into how the neglect of women's health intersects with the financing and fetishisation of imaginary borders. Instead of treating neglect as a simple absence of data, the text argues that neglect is a structural effect of how evidence is organised, bodies are categorised, and budgets are justified. Drawing on feminist technoscience, intersectional theory and feminist nationalism, the article develops the phrase "flag or flesh" to name the tension between investment in national symbols and disinvestment in embodied care. Four biomedical papers—about a male physicians' trial of aspirin and β -carotene, sex bias in research, a sexualised study of endometriosis later retracted, and a careful trial of a non-hormonal male contraceptive—are treated as archive objects. They are not read for clinical guidance but for what they reveal about default bodies and authorised witnesses. The performative heart of the article involves painting the author's own legs with a paste of turmeric (*kurkuma*), then documenting the residue after wearing and removing trousers. *Kurkuma* functions as a material agent that stains and resists erasure, making the body into an archive of contact and neglect. The article concludes that when women are neglected by care systems and treated as noise, they are often recruited as symbols of the nation. Borders become corporeal as women are asked to stand in for the flag. The work invites readers to attend to residue, stain, and embodied evidence as sites where knowledge and politics meet.

Introduction

“Flag or flesh” names a dilemma that structures contemporary public life. Governments invest vast sums in defending national boundaries and imaginary ones. Flags fly over buildings, armies and fences are funded to protect lines drawn on maps, and borders become theatrically visible in policy debates. At the same time, care for the flesh—particularly for bodies that do not correspond to dominant norms—remains precarious. Women’s health, especially when it involves reproductive organs, hormones, or pain that is hard to quantify, is repeatedly downgraded. Treatment delays, underfunded research, and casual dismissal of embodied testimony are not anomalies but structural features of techno-scientific governance. The choice between flag and flesh is not presented to voters explicitly, yet it appears in budgets and in the continuing absence of embodied care.

Artistic research provides a way to interrogate this dilemma. It deploys performance, materials, and embodied practices as epistemic methods rather than illustrations. In this article, I adopt an artistic research approach to analyse how neglect of women’s bodies and fetishisation of borders co-produce one another. I begin by tracing how biomedical research has institutionalised a masculine default through large-scale trials such as the Physicians’ Health Study, in which 22,071 male physicians served as stand-ins for “the human” (Hennekens and Eberlein 1985). I juxtapose this with evidence of sex bias across biomedical research (Beery and Zucker 2011) and with a notorious study that rated women with rectovaginal endometriosis for attractiveness (Vercellini et al. 2013), and was subsequently retracted (Vercellini et al. 2020). These archive objects are evidence of what kinds of bodies become credible. Finally, I contrast them with the careful pharmacokinetic work of a first-in-human trial of a non-hormonal male contraceptive (Mannowetz et al. 2025), noting the asymmetry in caution and investment when men’s fertility is the site of innovation.

These papers are not analysed to propose new therapies: rather, they are read as cultural artefacts that reveal how authority and neglect are distributed. The article then moves into practice. Drawing on my own body, I develop a performance in which I paint my legs with a paste of turmeric (*kurkuma*) and document the residue after wearing and removing trousers. The turmeric stain functions as a material register of contact and neglect. It resists washing away, marking the body like a border line drawn on skin. This practice does not claim to heal. Instead, it provokes questions: when and why do states invest in imaginary borders but not in the health of their inhabitants? How does neglect of flesh push women towards nationalist narratives that promise protection, even as those narratives discipline their bodies? What is the knowledge that resides in residue?

Following the introduction, the article develops a theoretical framework that brings together feminist technoscience, intersectionality, and feminist nationalism. The second section explores the concept of imaginary borders and the affective investments in flags and fences. The third section elaborates on the artistic research method and the performance with *kurkuma*, describing the process and its epistemic stakes. The fourth section revisits the four archive papers as rehearsals of default making and violence. The article concludes with reflections on embodiment, memory, and the persistence of neglect.

Theoretical framework

Situated objectivity and the apparatus of evidence

Donna Haraway's critique of the "god trick" of seeing everything from nowhere provides a starting point for thinking about embodiment and neglect (D. Haraway 1988). Haraway argues for "situated knowledges" in which objectivity is not abandoned but accountability for the apparatus of observation is central. When evidence is treated as disembodied, the apparatus—comprising

instruments, protocols and social roles—disappears from view. In biomedicine, this invisibility has tangible consequences: when women's bodies are excluded from trials, as they were for decades, their exclusion is naturalised as methodological prudence. Only when policy changed did the apparatus become visible. Even then, the residue of exclusion remains. Haraway's later work in *Modest Witness* (D. J. Haraway 1997) investigates the figure of the credible scientist, arguing that credibility is tied to a social role more than to individual virtue. This insight helps explain why male bodies can stand for humankind while women's bodies must prove themselves as exceptions.

Sandra Harding extends this critique through the concept of strong objectivity (Harding 1986; Harding 1993). She proposes that objectivity is strengthened when inquiry begins from the lives of those structurally excluded. In other words, marginalised embodiments are not distortions of truth but sources of insight. Helen Longino similarly argues that objectivity is not individual but collective, emerging from community practices of criticism (Longino 1990). These frameworks justify the use of artistic research and performance as epistemic methods: starting from a body that does not conform to the default may reveal features that the apparatus otherwise erases.

Karen Barad's agential realism further destabilises the notion of pre-existing objects waiting to be observed. Measurement practices do not passively record; instead, they produce boundaries and phenomena (Barad 2007). Annemarie Mol's ethnography of the disease multiple shows that diseases are enacted differently across practices and sites, and that coordination stabilises a unitary object (Mol 2003). When applied to women's health, these arguments highlight why neglect persists: it is enacted in many sites simultaneously—through trial design, diagnostic scripts, insurance codes, research categories, and everyday interactions. Feminist epistemology, therefore, calls for embodied practices that expose the apparatus and produce

alternative evidentiary modes.

Intersectionality, Operational Exclusion and Feminist Nationalism

Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced intersectionality to show how single axis categories such as “woman” or “Black” fail to capture the experience of Black women, whose lives are shaped by the intersection of racism and sexism (Crenshaw 1989; Crenshaw 1991). Patricia Hill Collins develops intersectionality as a critical social theory that links inequality to knowledge production (Collins 2019). In this article, I treat intersectionality not as an identity checklist but as an operational condition: it is evident in how eligibility rules, measurement standards and administrative categories produce patterned exclusion. When a clinical trial excludes anyone with potential to become pregnant, when a funding category fails to track a disease that is clinically common but politically quiet, or when pain is taken seriously only when it resembles a masculine norm, intersectionality is at work as a structural effect. Miranda Fricker’s notion of epistemic injustice highlights how testimony can be downgraded because of social power relations, producing harm in knowledge production (Fricker 2007). Sara Ahmed’s concept of institutional walls builds on this: repeated encounters with institutional inertia produce affective labour that makes marginalised people “sticky” to obstacles (Ahmed 2017). When women report pain and are told it is psychological, the dismissal is not merely a cognitive error; it is a structural practice that disciplines their bodies and restricts their mobility.

The neglect of women’s bodies does not occur in a political vacuum. Research by Kavanagh, Menon, and Heinze shows that health vulnerability predicts greater support for right-wing populist parties in Europe (Kavanagh et al. 2021). Menon and colleagues argue that negative experiences with health systems can erode trust in democratic institutions and reshape political

engagement (Menon et al. 2025). These findings underscore how embodied neglect becomes political. Feminist nationalism scholarship provides a mechanism. Deniz Kandiyoti argues that nationalist projects articulate cultural difference through control over women and their bodies, positioning women as symbols of honour, reproduction and morality (Kandiyoti 1991). Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis demonstrate that women are both biological reproducers of the nation and cultural signifiers who are asked to carry the weight of tradition (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989; Yuval-Davis 2003). Leila Abdou describes “gender nationalism”, wherein feminist discourses are mobilised to mark national superiority against racialised “others” (Hadj Abdou 2017). Sara Farris has analysed “femonationalism” as the instrumental use of women’s rights by right-wing nationalists to justify anti-immigrant policies (Farris 2017). These concepts reveal how political projects can transform women’s neglect into nationalist symbolism: the same institutions that fail to provide care ask women to stand in for the flag.

Flag or flesh: Imaginary borders and the affect of protection

States do not simply delineate boundaries; they produce borders as methods (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson argue that borders are techniques that organise labour, subjectivities, and movement rather than static lines. Benedict Anderson’s concept of the nation as an imagined community highlights how shared imaginaries bind people who will never meet (Anderson 2006). These imaginaries require symbols such as flags, anthems, and monuments, and they often rely on embodied performances: pledging allegiance, participating in parades, displaying passports. Borders also operate on and through bodies. Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star’s work on classification shows that categories embed moral and political choices into infrastructure (Bowker and Star

1999). In research funding, categories organise which diseases or conditions become visible and how budgets are justified. When women's health is under specified, the invisibility is not accidental but designed.

The phrase “flag or flesh” captures the tension between investment in symbolic borders and the neglect of embodied care. The choice is not necessarily conscious. In many countries, military budgets dwarf healthcare spending; yet the justification for war is often framed in terms of protecting “our women” and “our way of life”. Emily Grabham’s analysis of corporeal nationalism describes how skin itself becomes a border: the body is imagined as the first line of defence, with whiteness and heteronormativity as unmarked norms (Grabham 2009). When women’s bodies are neglected as patients but celebrated as national symbols, the contradiction intensifies. Protection becomes metaphorical. Care is deferred to private spheres or charity. The border emerges not just on maps but on skin and in the classification of who counts as an authorised patient.

Political rhetoric often makes this substitution explicit. In debates about immigration, politicians claim to defend women’s rights by restricting migrants, invoking narratives of honour killings or sexualised violence. Meanwhile, domestic policies cut funding for reproductive health clinics. In this context, feminism becomes a weapon used against racialised others, and the nation is imagined as a safe space for “our women”. The neglect of flesh goes hand in hand with the fetishisation of the flag. The performance of protection is paid for with women’s bodies, but not in the form of care.

Performance and material method: Kurkuma as an epistemic agent

Why Kurkuma?

Turmeric (kurkuma) is widely known as a culinary spice and a medicinal plant. In bio-medical research, curcumin, its most studied compound, is marketed as an anti-cancer, anti-inflammatory, and antioxidant agent. The literature is vast and contradictory. A systematic review focused on cervical cancer models documents numerous inhibitory effects *in vitro* and *in vivo*, yet emphasises that translation to clinical practice is limited (Abdull Rahim et al. 2024). Critical analyses warn that trials often conflate different formulations and fail to account for poor bioavailability, leading to inflated claims (Bučević Popović et al. 2024). Khosravi and Seifert argue that clinical trials of curcumin in cancer have not convincingly shown benefit (Khosravi and Seifert 2024). Curcumin is thus a *pharmakon*: a substance that can be medicine or poison, hype or hope.

I do not use kurkuma as therapy. I use it as material epistemology. Turmeric stains. It leaves a yellow mark on skin, fabric, and paper that resists washing away. This property makes it ideal for marking contact. In my performance, I paint my legs with a turmeric paste composed of powder mixed with water and a small amount of oil to help adhesion. I leave the paste for a period and then remove my trousers. The stain on my skin and the residue on the fabric become traces of contact, friction, and removal. They mark where care ends and where the border between clothing and skin begins. The stain is a witness to neglect: when I wash my legs, the colour lingers in creases and hair follicles. It is memory in pigment.

Procedure and Documentation

The performance involves several stages. First, I prepare the paste and apply it to my legs from the knees down. The material is cold and thick. As I spread it, I think about protocols for topical drug delivery, which often require uniform coverage and timed exposure. I do not aim for uniformity. Instead, I allow thickness to vary, creating a map of residue. While the paste dries, I read aloud key passages from the four biomedical archive papers. I annotate the paper copies with notes about who is included and who is excluded. The reading is not a lecture: it is a ritual. I am inscribing into my skin the words that have shaped research priorities.

After the paste dries, I put on trousers. The fabric absorbs some pigment. The friction of cloth on paste produces a thin border of colour along seams. I move, sit, and stand. When I remove the trousers, the stain on my legs has patterns: darker areas where the paste was thick, lighter areas where cloth rubbed it away. The trousers bear lines and smudges, recalling border fences and national markers. I photograph my legs and the trousers. I wash my legs, noticing how the stain persists in creases and on hair follicles. I note the time it takes to fade.

The data in this performance are not numbers or mechanistic outcomes. They are traces, annotations, photographs, and sensory memories. The photos are not aesthetic; they are evidence that embodiment produces knowledge. Haraway's insistence on accounting for the apparatus (D. Haraway 1988) resonates here—the camera, the lighting, the angle, the time of day, the temperature of the water I use to wash my legs—all of these become part of the apparatus of evidence. The turmeric stain is not a symbol. It is a material agent that forces me to notice what persists.

Ethical Boundaries

It is essential to state what this performance is not. It is not medical research. There is no intravaginal application, no invasive procedure, no therapeutic claim. Curcumin is not an established treatment for cervical cancer or any other cancer, and self-treatment is not advised (World Health Organization 2024; Khosravi and Seifert 2024). The performance does not involve the cervix directly; the cervix is present in the archive as a site of medical obsession and neglect. Local delivery of curcumin in preclinical and early phase human studies has been explored (Debata et al. 2013; Gattoc et al. 2017; Basu et al. 2013), but these studies are not models for self-experimentation. My use of kurkuma is domestic, culinary, and epistemic. The performance uses common ingredients to make visible what budgets and research categories erase.

Archive papers: Witnesses of default and violence

The Physicians' Health Study Design

The Physicians' Health Study is often cited as a paradigm of rigorous randomised controlled trial design. Its primary goal was to test whether aspirin and β -carotene could prevent cardiovascular mortality and cancer among U.S. male physicians aged 40–84 (Hennekens and Eberlein 1985). The design is elegant: a 2×2 factorial, placebo controlled, double blind trial with a long follow up. Its participants are highly educated, motivated, and health conscious. From a methodological standpoint, the design maximises compliance and minimises confusion. Yet from a feminist technoscience perspective, the study constructs the male physician as the default human. Women were excluded due to concerns about pregnancy and hormonal cycles. Non-physicians were excluded due to concerns about compliance.

The result is not accidental: the apparatus is built to produce a reliable answer for a select population and then generalise it.

In my performance, I read the abstract and methods of this paper aloud. I mark the inclusion criteria and the language used to justify them. I note that the authors describe the participants as “highly motivated, dedicated, and health conscious physicians” who will “perform definitive tests” (Hennekens and Eberlein 1985). The epistemic consequence is that the male professional body becomes the gold standard for human health. The turmeric on my legs contrasts with the whiteness of the lab coat. As the stain dries, I think about how the categories of “motivated” and “dedicated” attach to social status rather than to the capacity to follow a protocol. Motivation is not a neutral attribute; it is built into professional training and recognition.

Sex Bias in Biomedical Research

Beery and Zucker’s review compiles evidence of sex bias across neuroscience and biomedical research. They show that male animals and male cells are used predominantly, and that when females are included, data are rarely analysed by sex (Beery and Zucker 2011). The justification often given is that females are too variable due to hormonal cycles. Yet empirical data contradict this assumption: males are not less variable. The paper thus exposes a methodological rationalisation for neglect. In my performance, I read this paper aloud while the paste dries. The act of reading becomes an incantation against rationalisations. I mark passages where the authors call for change. I note that the paper itself draws on policy mandates, such as the NIH’s requirement to consider sex as a biological variable (National Institutes of Health 2015). The turmeric stain becomes thicker while I underline the word “bias”. I feel the weight of the word as I wash my legs later.

Attractiveness of Women with Rectovaginal Endometriosis

The 2013 *Fertility and Sterility* paper that rated women with rectovaginal endometriosis for attractiveness stands out for its combination of methodological violence and sexualised gaze (Vercellini et al. 2013). The study claimed that women with severe endometriosis were rated as more attractive than controls. Not only is the premise ethically dubious, but the design reproduces objectification: participants are observed and judged by observers who are not identified. The authors suggest that sexual attractiveness may be linked to disease severity. The paper was later retracted (Vercellini et al. 2020), but the fact that it was publishable reveals a disciplinary blind spot.

During the performance, I read the abstract of this paper. I speak the words “attractiveness” and “endometriosis” aloud, feeling their juxtaposition as a visceral discomfort. I mark the retraction notice and the justification given. The stain on my legs has dried by this point, and the lines left by the fabric of my trousers resemble measures on a specimen. The border between the research subject and the objectified body blurs. The retraction does not erase the harm. It is like washing turmeric: the colour fades but persists in creases.

A Non-Hormonal Male Contraceptive Trial

Finally, I consider the phase 1a trial of the non-hormonal male contraceptive YCT-529 (Mannowetz et al. 2025). The study reports careful safety monitoring, dose escalation, and pharmacokinetic analysis. The authors emphasise reversibility, mood effects, and systemic exposure. They note the need for rigorous preclinical data before advancing to human studies. The caution is striking compared with many trials involving women’s reproduction. In my performance, I read this paper with my trousers on, the turmeric residue seeping into the fabric. I think about how investment and caution are distributed. When male

fertility is the site of intervention, safety cannot be compromised. When women's pain is the site of intervention, the research can be sexualised and trivialised. The asymmetry is not personal. It is institutional. The turmeric stains my trousers, and the marks look like border lines; the fabric becomes a flag that has absorbed flesh.

Residue, memory and the politics of neglect

From Neglect to Nationalism

The performance of painting, staining, and washing reveals how residue functions as memory. The turmeric marks persist on my legs even after washing; they fade over days. This persistence invites reflection on memory and politics. Health neglect leaves residues: chronic pain, fatigue, mistrust. Research shows that such residues can translate into political behaviour. Kavanagh, Menon, and Heinze find that health vulnerability predicts support for right-wing populism in Europe (Kavanagh et al. 2021). Menon and colleagues argue that negative healthcare experiences reduce trust in democratic institutions (Menon et al. 2025). Feminist nationalism scholarship helps make sense of this translation.

Deniz Kandiyoti notes that nationalist projects often promise protection to women while simultaneously disciplining them (Kandiyoti 1991). Women become symbols of honour and tradition, which must be defended. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis argue that women are positioned as biological reproducers and cultural carriers of the nation, making them central to national projects even as their health needs are marginalised (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989). Leila Abdou's concept of "gender nationalism" describes the mobilisation of feminist discourses to mark national superiority, often against migrants (Hadj Abdou 2017). Sara Farris's analysis of femonationalism shows how right-wing actors use women's rights to justify anti-immigrant policies

(Farris 2017). These frameworks suggest that neglect is not the absence of care but a mode of producing political subjects. When women do not receive care as patients, they may be re-inscribed as carriers of the nation. The choice between flag and flesh is not theirs. It is imposed. Kurkuma residue becomes a metaphor for the residue of neglect that drives political belonging.

Imaginary Borders on Skin

The lines left by turmeric on my legs echo physical borders. They are imperfect, porous and persist in creases. They are drawn not with precision but with friction. As I move, the marks shift and smudge. The process recalls Emily Grabham's argument that nationalism operates on skin, linking property and whiteness to corporeal borders (Grabham 2009). The stain also calls up Mezzadra and Neilson's notion of border as method: the border is not only a line on a map but a technique that organises labour and subjectivity (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Painting my legs becomes a way to feel how borders are not abstract; they are made on flesh.

Flag or Flesh as Epistemic Stance

The phrase "flag or flesh" is not only descriptive; it is an epistemic stance. It demands that we ask where public money goes and why. It implies a critique of funding priorities that elevate territorial security over health security. It does not offer a policy programme. Artistic research is not concerned with offering solutions in the form of recommendations. Its task is to make visible what is normally hidden and to provoke new questions. In this case, the question is: how does the apparatus of evidence and funding lead to neglect and nationalism being co-produced? The answer resides not only in documents and budgets but in residue. The turmeric stain is an archive of this investigation. It testifies to contact, friction, discipline, and persistence. It marks the body as a site where imaginary borders and neglect meet. It

refuses to wash away easily. In that refusal, there is knowledge.

Conclusion

This article has explored how neglect of women's health and fetishisation of borders co-constitute the contemporary condition. By bringing together feminist technoscience, intersectional theory, and feminist nationalism, I have argued that neglect is not simply a technical gap. Contrarily, it is produced through apparatuses of evidence, classification, and funding that value some bodies and discard others. The choice between flag and flesh is made in budgets, trial designs, eligibility criteria, and the distribution of care. Women's bodies become visible as symbols of the nation even as they remain neglected as patients. When women seek care and are dismissed, the residue of neglect can drive them toward nationalist narratives that promise belonging. "Flag or flesh" thus names both a structural dilemma and a personal experience.

The article has also presented an artistic research method that uses turmeric as a material agent. Painting my legs and documenting the residue after removing my trousers allowed me to materialise the border on skin and to feel how neglect persists. The four biomedical papers served as archive objects that illuminated different aspects of default making: the male body as stand-in for the human, sex bias as rationalised exclusion, the sexualisation of women's pain, and the asymmetry in caution when male fertility is at stake. Reading these papers while the stain dried integrated textual analysis and bodily sensation. The stain is memory and evidence. It is not easily erased.

Artistic research does not replace policy or clinical work, but it offers a way to produce knowledge that is accountable to embodiment. It invites different publics into dialogue and opens spaces for questions that do not fit into existing categories. In the context of women's health, it offers a mode of critique that

is not just spoken but felt. It also resists the appropriation of feminist discourses by nationalist projects. If the flag demands that women stand in for the nation, the flesh demands that we attend to care. Residue reminds us of what we owe to bodies that bleed, hurt, and heal. In a world where imaginary borders are funded more generously than embodied care, the choice between flag and flesh is ours to contest.

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Curating Legacy Collections: Archaeology, Museum Management, and Cultural Diversity in Nigeria

Abiodun Ayomide Oyewole

Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of Archaeology and Museum practice as institutions of diversity and creative inquiry. Building on Graham Connah's excavated materials stored in the National Museum, Benin City, the research investigates the management and curation of legacy collections. The study was conducted by a diverse team of Nigerian scholars, including Hausa, Benin, and Yoruba researchers, whose varied identities and perspectives shaped the process and outcomes.

By bringing Archaeological expertise in excavation and documentation with Museum practices of preservation and interpretation, the work demonstrates how disciplinary boundaries can be unsettled and reimagined. Curating legacy collections emerges not only as a technical exercise in conservation but also as a Creative Practice of Negotiating Cultural Memory, identity, and representation. Diversity within the research team itself served as a laboratory for intersectional thought, where aesthetics and ethics converged in the shared responsibility of safeguarding heritage.

This study argues that the convergence of Archaeology and Museum, Resource Management, enriched by cultural diversity, provides a framework for inclusive heritage management. It highlights how intersectionality can function both as a method and practice, connecting disciplines, communities, and histories while ensuring that collections remain meaningful for academic research, public engagement, and future generations.

Keywords: Graham Connah Collection, Curation, Archaeology, Museum & Heritage Management, Benin City, Cultural Diversity, Sustainability, Cultural identity, Representation, Accessibility

Introduction

Legacy collections refer to archaeological materials excavated many decades ago that remain stored in museums. Often under-studied, poorly documented, and rarely accessible, these collections are more than just boxes of potsherds. In the Nigerian context, they serve as tangible evidences of the historical development of the West African sub-region. They embody stories of trade, subsistence, ritual, and adaptation, and their neglect represents a missed opportunity to connect earlier research with current debates on heritage and identity.

These collections are especially important because they bridge the gap between colonial Archaeology and contemporary heritage management. They reveal not only the material culture of past societies but also the intellectual history of Archaeology itself shifting from extractive colonial practices to postcolonial struggles for representation, ownership, and inclusivity.

Graham Connah's Contribution and the Benin Sequence

Graham Connah's work in Benin City (1961–1964) remains a foundation of Nigerian Archaeology. He was a world-renowned archaeologist who substantially contributed to African Archaeology, particularly Archaeology of Benin in present day Edo state, focusing on the culture and history of the Benin Empire. Connah tried to overcome the challenges and difficulties he encountered while trying to shed light on the famous People who contributed to the art of the city. He worked closely with and maintained evidence from oral traditions, documentary, artistic, and anthropological data.

His excavations moved beyond the art and historical focus on bronzes and terracotta to investigate domestic occupation layers,

ceramics, faunal remains, and the monumental Benin Moats. His book *The Archaeology of Benin* (1975) was groundbreaking in applying rigorous stratigraphic methods to an urban African context, situating Benin within wider debates on African urbanism and state formation.

Nevertheless, for decades, the collections derived from Connah's excavations have faced what scholars describe as a curatorial crisis common to postcolonial institutions. At the National Museum, Benin City, these materials have been affected by poor climate control, deteriorating paper records, and limited digital accessibility. As Onuegbu (2022) observes, the post excavation life of these artefacts has remained stagnant, caught between colonial era museum structures and modern Nigerian management. This situation underscores the urgent need to move from passive storage to active curation.

Colonial and Extractive Archaeology

Early figures such as Shaw and Fagg were white, British scholars, whose work was conducted for Western audiences. Their discoveries were lived realities for local communities, not revelations. This positionality shows the colonial lens through which Nigerian material culture was first interpreted, privileging external expertise while sidelining indigenous knowledge. Recognizing this distinction is essential to avoid reinforcing the Western expert model and to align Nigerian archaeology within its own cultural and historical contexts. To appreciate the importance of legacy collections, it is necessary to revisit the history of Archaeology in Nigeria. Early researchers such as Thurstan Shaw and Bernard Fagg laid the foundations for identifying major cultures like Nok and Igbo Ukwu. While their discoveries were significant, Andah (1995) critiques these efforts as largely extractive, privileging high status art objects over the everyday artefacts of daily life.

Bronzes, terracotta, and prestige items were celebrated as markers of African civilization, while ceramics, shells, and lithics the materials that reveal subsistence strategies, technological adaptation, and social organization were often overlooked. This imbalance created a distorted narrative of Nigerian Archaeology, one that emphasized elite artistry while neglecting the lived realities of ordinary people. Legacy collections, therefore, hold the potential to correct this imbalance by highlighting the everyday objects and contextualizing the spectacular.

Intersectionality as a Systematic Tool

Typically, curation is understood as a technical exercise focused on conservation, cataloguing, and storage. In this project, we approached curation as both a social and intellectual process, recognizing that heritage management is inseparable from questions of identity, representation, and cultural negotiation. Hence, intersectionality provided the analytical framework, allowing us to examine how overlapping identities ethnic, disciplinary, and institutional shaped the interpretation of artefacts and the practices of preservation. By utilizing process diversity within the research team, we treated curation not only as a matter of technical expertise but also as a collaborative dialogue across cultural perspectives.

Team Composition and Internal Diversity

The research team was intentionally composed of scholars from Nigeria's three major ethnic groups, namely Hausa, Benin, and Yoruba, alongside other contributors. This composition was designed to serve as a laboratory for intersectional thought. Rather than relying on the traditional Western Expert model, which often dominates African heritage projects, we adopted a Collaborative National model that prioritized local expertise and cultural knowledge.

Hausa scholars contributed to understandings into long distance caravan trade and northern connections, situating artefacts within broader trans-regional networks. Benin scholars emphasized local memory, continuity, and symbolic meanings tied to the city's historical identity while the Yoruba scholars highlighted ritual practices and indigenous aesthetics, offering interpretations rooted in cosmology and symbolic traditions. This internal diversity ensured that artefacts were not interpreted through a single lens but through multiple, overlapping perspectives. It also created a reflexive environment where the team critically examined its own positionalities, acknowledging how identity and heritage intersect in the act of curation. The curatorial process was structured into four distinct phases, each combining technical precision with cultural interpretation.

Review and Retrieval

The National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM), established by Decree No. 77 of 1979, is the federal agency responsible for preserving, conserving, and presenting Nigeria's cultural heritage in Nigeria. It oversees more than 50 national museums, 65 monuments, and two UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including the Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove. Its mandate includes archaeological research, artifact documentation, conservation, exhibitions, and public engagement, making it the central authority for safeguarding Nigeria's material culture.

We began by re-cataloguing Connah's 1960s excavation labels against modern NCMM records. This phase involved cross-checking handwritten field notes with current museum inventories by identifying discrepancies in artefact numbering, provenience, and classification, creating a unified catalogue that integrated legacy documentation with updated metadata. This inspection was crucial for establishing a reliable baseline. It revealed gaps in earlier documentation and allowed us to reconstruct the excavation sequence with greater accuracy.

Conservation

Conservation focused on stabilizing fragile materials, particularly iron slag and mollusks. These conservation techniques included mechanical cleaning to remove encrustations without damaging surfaces, controlled humidity storage to prevent further deterioration, and the application of reversible consolidants for fragile specimens. This highlighted the tension between preservation and accessibility. While conservation aimed to stabilize artefacts, it also raised questions about how much intervention was appropriate, especially when dealing with materials that carried symbolic or ritual significance.

Ethnographic Consultation

The final phase involved interviewing local Benin artisans, particularly members of traditional guilds, to compare excavated motifs with contemporary practices. This ethnographic component provided insights into continuity and change in craft traditions, contextualization of artefacts within living cultural frameworks, and a reflexive dialogue between past and present, bridging archaeological interpretation with community memory. By engaging artisans directly, the project moved beyond academic analysis to incorporate community voices. This consultation reinforced the idea that heritage is not static but dynamic, shaped by ongoing practices and interpretations.

The methodology combined technical rigor with cultural inclusivity. By treating curation as a social and intellectual process, we demonstrated how intersectionality can function as both a method and practice. The multi-ethnic team composition ensured diverse perspectives, while the three phase workflow integrated checking, conservation, digital documentation, and ethnographic consultation. Together, these approaches transformed the Connah Legacy Collection from a neglected archive into a dynamic resource for scholarship, public engagement, and cultural negotiation.

The Connah Legacy Collection

The Connah Legacy Collection represents one of the most significant assemblages of archaeological materials in Nigeria, housed at the National Museum, Benin City and in the university of Ibadan and one other museum institution across the country. Excavated between 1961 and 1964, these materials were recovered from key sites such as the Clerks' Quarters and the Museum compound, offering a stratified record of Benin's urban and cultural history. While the collection has long remained underutilized, its reassessment provides critical information on continuity, trade, ritual practice, and the dynamics of cultural contact in West Africa.

Ceramic Analysis and Ritual Continuity

Ceramics form the backbone of archaeological interpretation in West Africa, serving as durable markers of technological traditions, trade networks, and ritual practices. The ceramic assemblages from Connah's excavations reveal a remarkable continuity in the improvement of potting techniques across centuries. Rouletting patterns were carefully inspected by Yoruba and Benin researchers, who identified distinctive designs on vessel surfaces. These patterns suggest sustained interaction between Benin and the Yoruba hinterland, pointing to regional trade and shared technological traditions.

Parallels with caravan trade were also noted by Hausa scholars in the team, who observed similarities between certain vessel forms and those used in long- distance caravan trade across Northern Nigeria. This situates Benin within broader trans-regional exchange systems, bridging inland urban centers to northern trade routes. Beyond utilitarian purposes, some vessels appear to have been employed in ritual contexts. Their continuity across stratigraphic layers suggests enduring symbolic practices,

reinforcing the idea that ceramics were not merely functional tools but integral to cultural identity and spiritual life. This ceramic evidence underscores the importance of legacy collections in tracing both technological stability and cultural adaptation.

Marine Shells

The most intriguing component of the Connah Legacy Collection is the presence of marine shells in inland Benin City. Their recovery from stratified contexts raises critical questions about trade, contact, and cultural symbolism. Indicators of maritime trade on the shells provide evidence of pre-European and early contact maritime networks. Their presence suggests that Benin was integral to coastal exchange systems long before European intervention, linking inland communities to Atlantic trade routes.

Curating these shells required precise taxonomic analysis. Determining whether they originated from the Lagos Lagoon or further down the Atlantic Coast has implications for reconstructing trade geography and the scale of maritime connections. Marine shells often carried ritual or prestige significance in West African societies. Their deposition in inland contexts may reflect symbolic practices, elite consumption, or ritualized exchange, rather than purely economic trade.

Challenges and Opportunities

The challenges faced in curation included poor documentation, fragile conservation conditions, and limited accessibility, which have hindered systematic study. Without digitization and updated cataloguing, these materials risk remaining invisible to scholars and the public. However, re-examining ceramics, shells, and other archaeological materials through intersectional collaboration enriches interpretation. Yoruba, Benin, and Hausa perspectives ensure that artefacts are contextualized within diverse cultural

frameworks, avoiding narrow or colonial readings.

Ceramics reveal long term stability in technological traditions, situating Benin as a center of cultural resilience. Vessel forms and marine shells suggest strong evidence for Benin's participation in both inland caravan trade and coastal maritime networks. Multi-ethnic collaboration in interpretation ensures inclusive heritage management, incorporating diverse voices in the curation process.

The Museum of West African Art (MOWAA) represents a promising new model of private-public partnership. By combining philanthropic funding with institutional expertise, MOWAA can provide the financial and technical support that NCMM currently lacks. Such partnerships should be encouraged and replicated across Nigeria to strengthen heritage infrastructure. Legacy collections should also be integrated into object-based learning in Nigerian secondary schools. By exposing students to artefacts and their histories, museums can foster pride, historical literacy, and a sense of ownership over cultural heritage. This approach transforms collections from passive archives into active tools of education and identity formation.

Conclusion

Curating the Connah Legacy Collection is more than a technical exercise or a cleanup of old boxes but is instead an act of cultural reclamation. The intersectional approach adopted by our team demonstrates that when Nigerians of diverse backgrounds collaborate on their shared past, the result is a richer and more nuanced insight into history.

Legacy collections are not relics of the past but they are seeds of future research. If tended through conservation, digitization, and inclusive interpretation, they will provide the data for the next century of African Archaeology. By addressing infrastructural

challenges, embracing decolonized practices, and reforming heritage policy, Nigeria can transform its museums into vibrant institutions of cultural diversity, intellectual sovereignty, and public engagement.

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Bubble Tensions

Ruby Sircar

Contextualization

What to expect when discussing intersectional artistic practices and artistic research-based knowledge in 2026? As a basic question regarding the necessity to still strengthen the view on artistic and cultural matters, one must also take into account what Laura Cottingham (1998) documented in *Not for Sale*, a video compilation and restoration of feminist artwork from the 1970s. The subtitle (*Feminism and Art in the USA during the 1970s*) appears to highlight feminism as an identity-forming one-dimensional marker to artistic practice, but fails to grasp the intersectional value of the artistic, collaborative and multiple-authorship works which are portrayed. In the late 1990s, it would have been possible to already consider the multiple dimensions and perspectives of origin in which art works, such as Yoko Ono's soundtrack to the compilation were negotiated— at least in retrospect. Furthermore, the field of intersectionality could have been discussed in a far more inclusive manner, as this is one of the highly meritorious results of intersectionality discussions since the late 1980s.

Inclusion always demands for an admittance of non-academically built, non-canonized voices and views so as to allow public participation in a field which is often denied to non-academic trained readers and public in general. Unlike Cottingham's video work, Carmen Mörsch's opening to *Radical Admiration* (2018) and Lydia Hamann's and Kaj Osteroth's intersectional painting practice are the most intersectional reading experiences one might gain. As a highly acclaimed art historian and cultural educator, she chose the format of a love letter to formulate an introduction to the monograph on intersectional feminist, crip,

queer, racialized, collective, class critical painting practices. Her intended inclusion was what allowed the reading public to relate and create a further discourse on the topic which was contemporary.

Eight years after Mörsch's love letter to bad painting, and knowing of the importance of camp and relational aesthetics when writing and fabulating inclusion, the question is: how to write intersectional? The following text meanders wildly between post-colonial methods, such as those asked for by Spivak in *Righting Wrongs* (2008) and collective informal or vernacular knowledge communication as applied by Salman Rushdie in *Wizard of Oz* (1992). Both texts try to immerse themselves in an intersectional writing practice which allows affect driven perception as well as a contemporary split-view on intersectional personae and practices such as artistic-based research and its applied writing methods. This acts as an invitation to share intersectional and multiple viewpoints onto matters which allow the creation of new and shared cultural and artistic spaces. Please, read the following text as an invitation.

Perception

For a child growing up in a city center, it may not feel like they are supposed to represent social margins—that their own and their parents' migration histories would bind them to non-social centered members whose existence becomes a constant focus of academic research, autoethnographic ramblings and the identitarian political playground. Children may not be aware that they would be making up the social outskirts as per definition nor would they know that their biographies would become contested grounds. Neither are children aware of how to find allies and define those areas of tension and inclusion to build imagined communities. The question then is not thinking about bubble communalities but rather on how to blow bubbles and how to burst them.

Situated within artistic research, this text adopts an essayistic and associative form that combines theory, artistic practice, and cultural observation to approach intersectionality as a relational and unstable field of lived experience and uses the metaphor of the bubble to frame intersectionality as a fragile, shifting and relational practice that is lived, stretched and sometimes bursts under pressure (Crenshaw 2008). The children themselves are marked as contested ground through their physical positioning in certain power triangles: the city centre which classifies their locality and belonging through signifiers of class and migrants is the first marker to build up a source of tension which will define political and material perspectives. On top of this, society adds more variables including their racial and sexual/gender status, their psychological, physical and material abilities, and their religious and ideological predispositions. This is what will later be called a socio-political persona which is built through intersections of fields of supposed belonging. The question we must face when stating these seemingly hereditary and socially signifying traits and parameters is that we objectify and subalternise (Spivak: 1988:67) socio-political margins, taking away supposed fundamental rights. Spivak argues (1988:91) that especially persons of multiple intersectional markers, such as colour, religion, gender, class, and origin are most often denied self-defined and non-tokenised biographies.

Let us therefore take one more step back. In 1983 Benedict Anderson wrote in *Imagined Communities* that these markers which are set in contemporary class, gender, and anti-colonial struggles emerged through “the concept born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm” (Anderson 1983:7). We thus might accept the revolutionary as fundamental for understanding settings of signifiers which are intersectional — as one may hope that these signifiers are self-assigned and not presumed as tokenised weapons. Anderson continues that they are signs of “nation’s dream of being free. The gage and emblem

of this freedom is the sovereign state” (Anderson 1983:7). One might say the sovereign subject.

How could this revolutionary tool to create inclusive and non-marginalised spaces be abandoned in a colonial discourse as well as ongoing revolutionary and reformatory social struggles? Anderson thinks that sovereignty and self-determination are governed by the social development of certain factors such as increasing importance of mass vernacular literacy, need and wish to abolish the ideas of rule by divine right and the emergence of print capitalism, particularly “the convergence of capitalism and print technology... standardization of national calendars, clocks and language was embodied in books and the publication of daily newspapers” (Anderson 1983:32). Furthermore, we must not forget that all of this coincided in Europe and its dominions and colonies with the Industrial Revolution.

Hopping in and out of timelines — one step into our contemporary subplot: we might compare this easily with what is ongoing now: vernacular power is being used by tokenised academic positions and discourses to break an existing canon, such as through artistic storytelling, social media as hyper capitalist publishing and global news flashes along with a digital era which has left. Yes, this seems to be the downside of it — on the other hand, if we accept intersectionality as a weapon, it can be used to play, communicate, and fight together against common enemies, such as petro-masculinity and identitarian fascist policies? Here, intersectionality as a “weapon” is understood as a strategic and relational tool for forming alliances and enabling collective intervention (Davis 2015).

In her 2012 video work “Between the Waves”, Tejal Shah discussed this beautifully: a surreal setting in the militarised border region of the South Asian subcontinent, between India and Pakistan, becomes a dystopian, yet hopeful, futuristic setting. Elisabette Marobotto (2013) states: “a surreal universe

where unicorn women collect plastic and communicate through a mirror within a lunar setting. The film tackles issues such as sexuality, body, kinship and productiveness while blurring boundaries and categories.” Isn’t this what we expect when discussing intersectional possibilities?

Tejal Shah pointedly, campy and full of queer humour addresses exactly what the power of intersectionality is: The power of what Sara Ahmed (2023) would call being a feminist killjoy (Ahmed 2023). Contrarily, Ahmed explores the basic idea behind the fundamental intersectional discourse: breaking white academic privileged feminist teaching through including it in a more inclusive and hands-on movement, such as in Black Lives Matter in the US or Pink Sarees in India. Shah, conversely, demonstrates the power of artistic discourse by including not merely vernacular storytelling as one communication tool but also queer fabulations. To understand this more specifically, let us again look over our chronological shoulder and, along with Kimberle Crenshaw, make amends and create awareness about why formerly privileged white feminism became rigid and exclusive and why an inclusive and intersectional position was more than needed: in the second feminist wave, voices, especially Black Voices, were heard in the West, demanding entry and equality from their sisters. The question posed was — are colour and racism the only signifiers to fight against? The answer which many forget when still insisting on an identitarian and unilateral discourse is — yes. Sadly, they should look more closely: the realisation which the working-class movement had already found out at the beginning of the 20th century: South Asia’s fight for independence and the Irish and North English mill workers’ protest could be united and strengthened through standing together: colonised and working class regardless of gender, colour, or race. Remember the romantic press coverage around 1909’s round table conferences in London? MK Gandhi shaking hands with Manchester’s working poor. Neil Lazarus (2004:4) would label the media spectacle a network of traces (Lazarus 2004: 4).

Traces, when combined, create a univocal understanding bridging differences and creating a triangle of tension that tackles privileges. We are all aware that the alliances broke shortly after, but at least it was possible to create a climate of reforms and changes to bring down historic colonialism. Thus, we may realise that not every intersection is a stable moment and the bubble which defines our allies and biographies might be stretched and burst open. While looking at Kimberle Crenshaw and voices from the queer realm such as Judith Butler (1989) or Jack Halberstam (2018) —all speaking from a North-Western global perspective and taking into regard the eco-political and social stances biographies and practices bound to intersectional definitions in the margins might face — we must not forget that intersectionality is practiced and understood often quite differently and with different requirements in other regions of the world as well as depending on community settings, such as diasporas or clearly defined groups through governmentality.

As said before — the clearer cut these descriptions become inclusive. Jack Halberstam thus, from a trans* and perspective, urges all of us to always stay in the liquid form of intersectional interlocks: combining situations and discourse fields to show how different forms of oppression, such as racism, homophobia and transphobia, have relational effects (Halberstam 2018), and how power relations work in specific situations. Jack Halberstam advocates a trans* approach (with an asterisk) that breaks down the rigid meaning of identity categories and resists categorical codification.

Exemplification

The situations described by Jack Halberstam are obviously set in a queer time and place (2005) and fabulates beautiful possibilities which we all hope to achieve as a society together, enlarging the bubble to a sphere beyond the margins. Artists and cultural workers and thinkers such as Roshini Kempadoo even enriched these fabulations and blended in a diasporic, Caribbean, and South Asian understanding of what intersectionality means, especially her work “Virtual Exiles” (2000) which demonstrates the power of intersectionality and that such a practice must always be centred and borne from a communal understanding, a collective. Roshini Kempadoo states that it is necessary to tell collectively. Her artwork thus reflects on how media and artistic research enable us not only to illustrate possibilities of living intersectionally, but also that these stories are much larger and naturally go beyond what one might assume to be marginalised knowledge and everyday lives: “Stories, of digitally contributing our own version of what it means to step between two spaces at once. Two cultures, two senses of belonging, two countries we are familiar with. To visually describe this difference becomes an important inscription to everyday encounters and our writing of the past...” (2000).

Roshini Kempadoo thus exemplifies what Austrian trans-artist Hans Ashley Scheirl demonstrates in their work as well: by defining the margins as in-between spaces, such as Gayatri Spivak did in the 1980s; this might merely create new niches but not power. It enlarges knowledge within social pouches and pools but doesn’t allow those assigned to the margins to enter the mainstream social realm yet. Hans Ashley Scheirl therefore needs the public to accept their multitude of references, painterly fragments which refer to sex, gender, and economics. One of their latest work cycles, on display at Vienna’s financial hot spot, is titled “Libidinal Economy”, referring to Jean-François Lyotard. Hans Ashley Scheirl, just as Roshini Kempadoo, plays with the

hybridity and fluidity of the intersection they see themselves at. A critique towards eco-social governance which tries to paternalize gender politics and neo-liberal economics.

What we may learn from the abstracted take on intersectionality of Ashley Scheirl can also be seen as true in the discussion between Ritu Birla and Gayatri Spivak (2010) where both describe the abstract and fluid state as the state of in-between. Similarly, Zarina Bhimji in her video work “Out of Blue” (2002) also demonstrates the same possibility when elaborating on the intertwined interests of diasporic origin, refugee state, artistic attendance on a subject; simultaneously, on the other hand, focusing on the causes which led to her media discourse on the South Asian genocide in Uganda in 1972. “Out of blue” is an abstract yet very palpable enlightenment on how the matrix of domination works which tries to suppress intersectional empowerment: blind and one-eyed identitarian fascist violence which does not deal with the larger picture and considers all variables which enabled material greed and dominance in the first place. Even though more than twenty years old, the work sparks contemporary significance in the urgency created through totalitarian regimes worldwide. We may also learn from positions such as *Prickly Paper*, published by anarchists Chen Yifei and Ou Feihong who use techniques of fabulation and the intersectionality of actual and artistic languages in their publications and performances to demonstrate a chronological need for freedom, liberation, and intersectional social engagement while intensely and intelligently using the showcasing on the one hand of their various collectives. The spaces they have made accessible in galleries, living rooms, educational institutions, and in public always allow a multitude of voices and discourses. Thus, their work is not merely an answer to (Black) male dominated and white feminist discourses but offers an innate understanding about how collectivism and individual positions as economic and socio-political identities result in a specific kind of exclusion and privilege.

My absolute favourite is the narration of Chen Yifei which masterfully unfolds how modernism, anarchy and the production of knowledge accumulate in utter liberation. He uses police documentation on anarchists at the beginning of the 20th century in East and Southeast Asia, as well as Europe to unfold graphically but also as imagined gossip and fabulated realities. His wood block printed covers and risograph interior aesthetic of the artist zines further expands to contemporary dissident stories, be it in Iran, China, or Palestine. His fearless and sharp curious approach is what I would see as the true power against the abuse within the intersectional discourse which can only culminate in boring oppression olympics which we witness today in the downfall of many grass root and community movements in Europe, especially in the art world. By giving in to the temptation of strengthening one stress point within the tension triangle which sets up real intersectionality, identitarian weakness ends up supporting only misogynist, conservative and capitalist regimes.

Want a favourite popular late sample which is just as clever as Chen Yifei? Look at the Super Bowl show by Bad Bunny, with his ally Lady Gaga, which later went viral by South Asians linking into the beats and rhythm by Bhangra moves. Bad Bunny invited the major global population in by calling out the largely memed *Latino Belt* (2020). No, we don't have to love bomb as an easy way out and cozy ourselves into unity. Bad Bunny, just as Siddharta Lokhandi from Hopscotch Reading Room (Berlin), sees intersectionality as something very much linked to inclusion and civil disobedience. Siddharta Lokhandi thus describes his work with Hopscotch Reading Room as creating "a space for dissent. It's a space for minoritarian discourse, which is ultimately what *Wasafiri* is within the larger literary culture of England" (2026). We must take this note from Siddharta Lokhandi with a big queer diasporic twinkling eye: as he loves, administers and is a dealer in vernacular knowledge, a canon which is built on multiple authorships and breaks linguistic political rules to open new shared spaces such as the use of the phrase vernacular.

He no longer uses it as a derogatory term as in the 19th century arts and crafts movement to downplay ethnic and indigenous knowledge and aesthetics to eclectic artisanal practices. No, Siddharta Lokhandi uses the phrase to highlight the beauty to make voices heard, including the Asian underground (Singh: 1997).

Jumping through queer and diverse timely loopholes, we might conclude that intersectionality as such is an artistic practice, a research tool, and a lived everyday which creates a fairer society, considering an individual or communal reality, rather than focusing on a single characteristic strain, allowing richness to bloom. It builds allyships without falsely assuming annexation of cultural spheres on the one hand and on the other allowing diverse co-authorship to create an anti-capitalist and appreciative, respectful social structure which no longer requires the definition of ostracized margins or squeezed in in-betweens but invites multifarious spatial arrangements to be visited and shared equally. Yes, it is a utopian imagination, but with supporting witnesses and active allies such as informal gardeners in public urban spaces, eco-feminists who practice civil disobedience by supporting queer pride participants through cycle blockades, universities harbouring refugees and artists using ornaments for strengthening democratic rights — I still believe in the utopia of intersectionality to happen right at my doorstep tomorrow, soap bubbles passing by in all colours my tired brain can imagine.

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Contributors

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Visual Artist and Researcher

Born in Cebu City (PHL), Stephanie Misa is a visual artist and researcher whose work centers on decolonizing methodologies which materialize through her various installations and performances. Her practice connects multicultural collaboration, curating, and feminist criticism. She graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, and is a Doctoral Researcher at the University of Arts, Helsinki. Her work has been shown at the Asian Triennial Manchester (2025), Heidelberg Kunstverein (2025), RMIT Gallery, Melbourne (2023), Depo Istanbul (2023), Vienna Secession (2022), KW Institute of Contemporary Art, Berlin (2021), and the ninth Bucharest Biennale (2021). Her upcoming shows include Independent Curator's International, *Remittance* (2026-2030), as well as *Feminist Futures Forever*, Belvedere21 Vienna (2026).

Misa was awarded the Art Foundation Merita Prize for Artistic Research (2021).

Parimah Avani

Artist and Writer

Parimah Avani is a nomadic Iranian-born artist and writer based in Toronto and Turin. Holding a PhD in Contemporary Art History from Sapienza University of Rome, she is recognized as a key voice in Persian Hermetic literature. Her work challenges oppressive hierarchical systems through decolonial, biomimetic, and ecological approaches, engaging with questions of more-than-human justice. By unveiling erased histories and stories, Avani employs transparency to make the invisible visible, positioning defiance as a site of post human resistance. Her visual and literary practice has been exhibited across Europe, Africa, Australia, and the Americas, earning international honors and prestigious publications.

Usman Ahmed

Journalist, Podcaster, and Interdisciplinary Researcher

Usman Ahmed is a journalist, podcaster, and interdisciplinary researcher whose work explores the intersections of culture, history, politics, and creative inquiry across South Asia. He is the founder and host of the Indus Voices Podcast, where he engages scholars, artists, and public intellectuals in conversations on identity, memory, literature, and contemporary society. His research interests include cosmology, Urdu poetry, epistemology, and transdisciplinary methods of knowledge-making. His recent work examines the relationship between scientific imagination and literary thought through creative and performative forms of inquiry.

Dr. Tahira Pirzada

Research Scholar in Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering

Dr. Tahira Pirzada wears many hats. She is co-founder, president and CEO of Soteria Formulations- a North Carolina based agtech startup, commercializing agricultural formulations to reduce use of toxic pesticides while extending their field performance. She also works as a Research Scholar in Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, USA. She holds a Ph.D. in Chemistry from Quaid-i-Azam University, Pakistan and has spent decades in academia and sustainable materials research and design with 36 peer reviewed articles published in highly respected science and engineering journals. Her research and professional interests focus on biomaterials, reducing use of toxic chemicals, sustainable technologies, and bio-based agricultural delivery systems. Beyond her scientific and entrepreneurial work, she enjoys reading, traveling, and exploring diverse cultures and perspectives.

Faisal Rehman

Concept and Visual Development Artist

Faisal Rehman is a Concept and Visual Development Artist, working primarily in game art and 2D animation, with a parallel practice as an educator based in Faisalabad, Pakistan. He lectures in the Bachelor of Animation and Multimedia Design programme at the National Textile University, where his teaching and creative work grow from the same root — an abiding curiosity about what Pakistani visual culture can look like inside a digital world. His practice translates the textures, folklore, and spatial rhythms of Punjabi urban and rural life into game characters and environments, pushing back against the pull of globalised aesthetic defaults. He holds a Master of Multimedia Arts from the National College of Arts, Lahore.

Aun Raza

French-Pakistani Documentary Photographer

Aun Raza is a French-Pakistani documentary photographer working across photography, film, and long-form visual storytelling. He has developed projects in Pakistan, Cuba, Uzbekistan, Myanmar, Austria, Mongolia, and beyond. His work is held in the permanent collections of the Quai Branly Museum, Paris, and the Tbilisi Museum of Photography, Georgia, and has received international awards and been exhibited widely. He recently completed his first feature documentary, *Asylum Notes*, exploring the role of music and poetry within a psychiatric hospital. Aun is currently researching indigenous climate adaptation practices in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, while continuing long-term projects on urban transformation, environmental change, and collective memory.

Mahnoor Zahid

Architect and Cultural Heritage Strategist

Mahnoor Zahid is an architect and cultural heritage strategist focused on the digital transformation of Pakistan's cultural heritage. She has led the digitisation and restoration of key heritage sites across Islamabad, including Mai Qamro Mosque, Muqarrab Khan Tomb, and Shah Allah Ditta Caves, and co-designed Islamabad Museum's gallery, set to be constructed in 2027. This work led her to research the gamification of cultural heritage, specifically, turning static archives into playable reconstructions. She is currently developing two digital platforms: one that archives Pakistan's intangible cultural heritage, and another that examines everyday cultural life to explore questions of identity, memory, and belonging.

Nilra Zoraloglu

Architect, Artist and Researcher

Nilra Zoraloglu is a Berlin-based architect, artist, and researcher working at the intersection of architecture and ecology. Her practice investigates urban soil as a relational medium through drawing, cartography, and soil chromatography, tracing how extraction, logistics, and urban greening inscribe themselves into the ground. She holds an M.Sc. from the COOP Design Research Program and a B.Arch from Middle East Technical University. Her recent projects span Johannesburg, Berlin, and Copenhagen, with exhibitions in Germany, South Africa, and Brazil.

Nazia Akram

Visual artist, Photographer, and Educator

Nazia Akram is a visual artist, photographer, and educator with over 20 years of experience working across photography, video art, painting, and documentary filmmaking. She holds an MFA from Central Saint Martins, UAL, and currently teaches photography and videography at the National College of Arts (NCA), Rawalpindi. Her artistic practice and research interests are informed by Sufism, ritual, devotion, and contemporary visual culture. Her recent exhibitions include *Shadows of Belonging* at the Beijing Peace Museum (2026) and *Mantiq-Al-Tayr*, a solo painting exhibition at Khaas Gallery Islamabad (2025). Alongside teaching, she continues to exhibit interdisciplinary visual art projects locally and internationally.

Mehrta Shirzadian

Artist, Performer, and Artistic Researcher

Mehrta Shirzadian is a Vienna based artist, performer, and artistic researcher working at the intersection of art, science, and technology. Trained in molecular biology, computer science, and mathematics, she is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Art & Science at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. Through performance, moving image, installation, and biological research, she explores embodiment, complex systems, microbial ecologies, and the entanglement of human and nonhuman bodies. Her work investigates how biological, social, political, religious, and capitalist structures shape individual and collective experience, examining questions of agency, interdependence, power, and the ways knowledge and living systems are produced, regulated, and transformed.

Abiodun Ayomide Oyewole

Archaeological and Anthropological Researcher

Affiliated with the University of Ibadan, The British Museum, the Museum of West African Art (MOWAA), and the National Commission for Monuments and Museums (NCMM), Abiodun Ayomide Oyewole serves as a Graduate Teaching Assistant in the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Ibadan. His research interests include digital humanities, museums and collections, material culture and conservation management, public engagement, archaeology, heritage preservation, and European/colonial history. He is currently curating legacy collections, coordinating a ceramic analysis project led by Prof. Akin Ogundiran of Northwestern University and advancing a community focused initiative through the AL Global Community to bridge institutional walls and showcase interdisciplinary research to a global audience.

Dr. Ruby Sircar

Artist, Performer, and Artistic Researcher

Archiving and documenting and thus empowering feminist and decolonial artistic research practices are what drive Ruby's work: whether in an educational setting such as teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, within feminist artist collectives such as FO/GO Lab or when chairing the Austrian Artist Union. Her artistic work includes curatorial practices, performance in public space and sound work which are included in Austrian publicly accessible collections, such as Blickle Archive and were shown in India, North America, and Europe.

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