



Pi

Empowerment

Issue 723



photography by dione sarantinou

empowerment

It's probably quite obvious why we chose this theme – watch the news for long enough, and you may well want to take empowerment into your own hands. Though it's hardly easy to trust in our future right now, we know that writing about it remains vital in working towards a better world.

In this issue, we hear many different perspectives on the theme of empowerment. Some writers address pressing issues facing our generation, from tackling climate change to the power of representation. Others discuss supporting mental health, and ensuring that developing countries are given the platform that they deserve. We also take a look at how UCL is contributing towards these efforts.

Fundamentally, our writers consider how we might empower ourselves and our communities. Together, we hope they speak to today and look to the future.

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Editors-in-Chief, Pi Magazine

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cover art by Kezhu Wang

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UCLFC: towards better mental health

So far, UCLFC have raised over £17,500 for the Movember Foundation in memory of Louis Carr

words by mia lui, photography by UCLFC, art by ashley broom

On November 23rd 2018, Louis Carr, a first year student and member of the UCL Men's Football Club (UCLFC), tragically took his own life. At the start of the month, Louis had set up a fundraising page for the Movember foundation, explaining that he had been struggling with anxiety and depression for several years and hoped to help those experiencing similar issues. Since then, UCLFC have dedicated efforts to raising awareness of mental health issues in memory of Louis. Their Movember page has to date received over £17,500 in donations.

“Overcoming negative thoughts is easier when others know what you are going through”

The club held a mental health week fundraiser in January, which consisted of a pub quiz and football tournament, raising over £1,000. They also hosted an evening of speakers in collaboration with the UCL Men's Hockey Club, including Louis Allwood from the Centre for Mental Health, a charity that provides research and policy influence on mental health. Members of several UCL sports teams also shared their experiences with mental health difficulties.

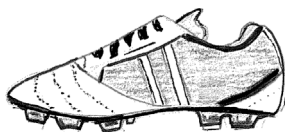
The president of UCLFC, Max Tyson, described his own experiences with anxiety and discussed the importance of having



support from family and friends. The process of overcoming negative thoughts, he said, becomes easier when others know what you are going through. The president of the UCL Women's Football Club, Zura Wafir, also spoke bravely and candidly of her struggles with anxiety and grief, describing feelings of being “numb and incredibly hopeless”.

However, encouraged by her friends and family members, she decided to seek help. She described how this was the best thing she had ever done, acknowledging that “opening up is hard but important”. Seem Rahman, a member of the UCL Women's Hockey Club, also detailed her struggles with mental illness, and stressed the importance of not comparing other peoples' experiences with your own.

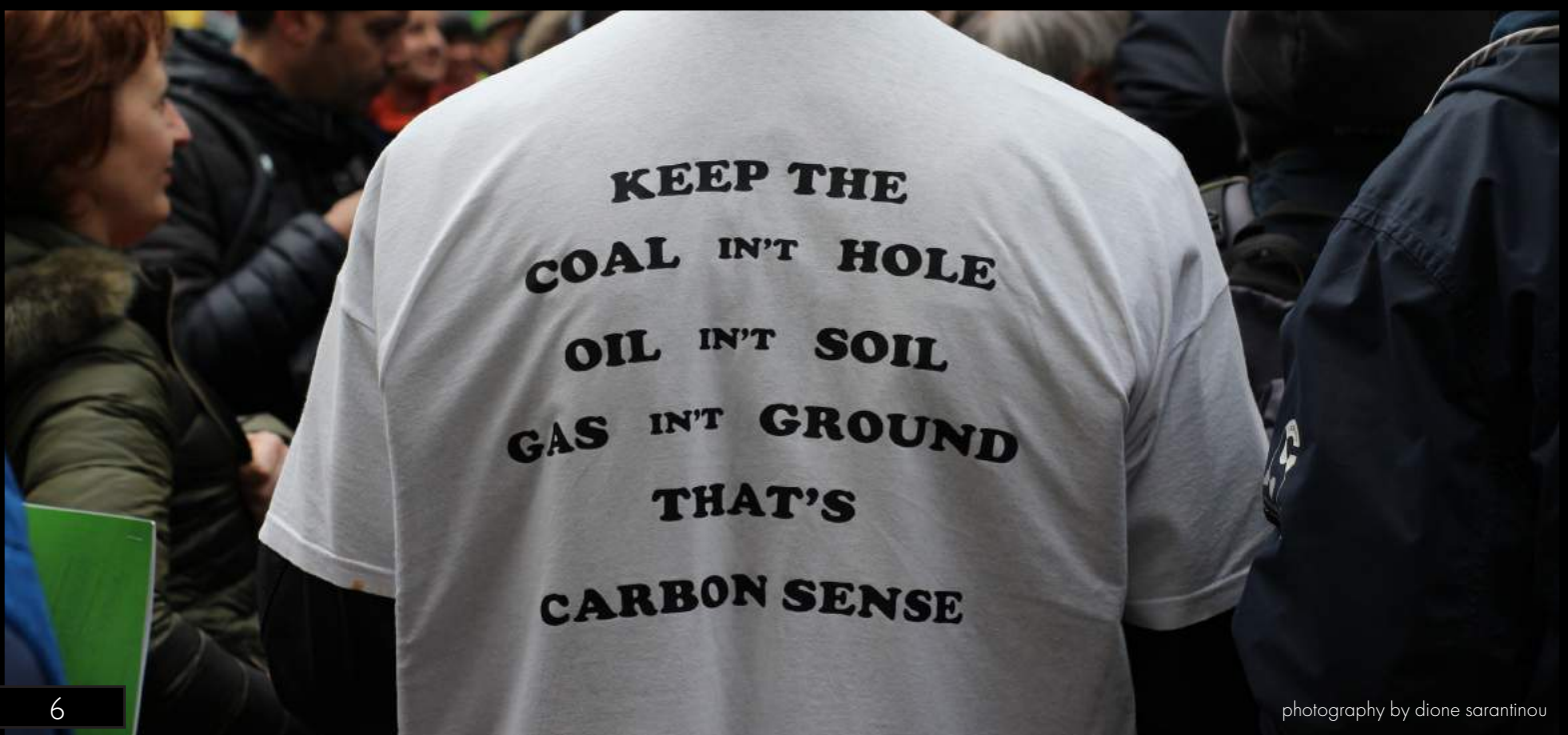
Allwood reaffirmed the message conveyed by previous speakers that for those suffering, reaching out for help is crucial: if one in four are experiencing mental health difficulties, “three out of four can help others around them”. He discussed the challenges of mental illness, where symptoms often remain invisible and can be kept well hidden by those suffering. The final speaker also read out a letter on behalf of Sam Carr, Louis' mother. The words were powerful, reminding the audience that “sometimes you need to check on those who seem the strongest...the greatest lies we tell are the smiles that we wear.”



The death of Louis and UCLFC's initiatives highlight the urgency of taking mental health seriously. Speaking to Pi Media, Tyson said, “there is always more you can do, and what happened with Louis is an example of that”, further explaining his efforts to create the “right environment” to help those who are struggling. He also stressed the importance of having a “culture of inclusivity”, praising the work of the welfare secretary and the rest of the committee in reaching out to members, in particular first year students, to check up on their wellbeing.

“Events like UCLFC's enable honest conversation and transparency”

UCLFC's efforts stand as an example of how to take action in addressing and confronting mental health issues. Opening up to an audience of fellow students about strikingly personal struggles is no easy task, demanding not only strength but also a willingness to be vulnerable. But it is precisely events like these that enable honest conversation and the transparency that is so vital in the fight for mental health. Knowing that we are not alone might just be the very thing that keeps us afloat.



The individual vs. climate change

Climate change is one of the most important issues facing our generation, but how do we tackle it?

words by cathy meyer-funnell

We are all aware that the impending threat of climate change is one of the most important issues facing our generation. However, the impact of individual action has recently been called into question in the face of the astronomical consumption of fossil fuels by big corporations. Around the world, 71% of emissions are produced by 100 companies alone, suggesting that our attempts to curb our own carbon footprints are ultimately hopeless if these businesses continue to pollute our atmosphere unchecked.

“Small steps will add up to something much bigger”

This domination of the market at the hands of big gas-guzzling businesses stems from a Thatcherite policy of economic neoliberalism, which prioritises the needs of the individual and the consumer above those of society as a whole. With government backing, these companies have been able to exercise total control over the market while their environmental policies remain largely uncontrolled and often neglected. The privatisation of industries such as railways and utilities, as well as undermining the power of trade unions, have ignited an ideological war against collective action. A cultural shift is needed, one which will empower society to work together to force corporations to take environmental issues seriously.

While cycling to uni and drinking from reusable coffee cups is no bad thing, this is

virtually ineffective in comparison to the action that needs to be taken by these business heavyweights. This does not mean that we should disregard our personal and community efforts entirely. UCL and fellow London universities Imperial and King's have recently pledged their support to the 50by2020 campaign, aiming to make 50% of the food consumed on campus vegan by 2020. It may seem like a small step in comparison to the extensive amount of pollution London produces, but reducing the amount of meat we eat even by just 25% would save 2,000 tonnes of carbon emissions each year. If every institution was to make changes like this, these supposedly small steps would add up to something much bigger in the long-term.

We must practise what we preach. One of the aims of UCL's Environmental Sustainability Vision is to “enable and support UCL staff and students, through action, to address UCL's environmental impacts”, while also setting targets on their main objectives, such as reducing pollution and minimising waste. If the individual contributions of every UCL student to tackle climate change were considered pointless, then these goals would never be met. An environmental conscience has become necessary in facing up to the very real threat of catastrophic change for our planet and, as such, it has become something we must follow through with in every aspect of our lives.

The need for educated consumerism has forced us to adapt our shopping habits, whether that is through buying more ethically sourced produce, or making even simpler changes. For instance, the introduction of the 5p charge on plastic shopping bags has saved 15 billion plastic bags from usage, preventing extra carbon dioxide emissions, curbing the prevalence of

single use plastic, and stopping more plastic from destroying our natural spaces. The fact that the government is now planning to raise the amount to 10p, and to also roll the charge out across all shops rather than just the big retailers, is proof that combining each individual effort can create a much bigger change.

“Acting together gives a sense of empowerment”

Of course, it is still true that a mass cut of industrial fossil fuel consumption should be a top priority. By adopting a more environmentally friendly stance that permeates every aspect of our lives, however small, we are on the way to helping create a society that cares. Making these slight adjustments will not solve all our problems, but they represent the beginning of a fundamental change that needs to take place in our culture. By disregarding the importance of the communal impact, we are encouraging the kind of self-centredness that originally helped to create this problem.

If we are to deal with the problem of individualism, a more positive attitude needs to pervade the collective psyche. Acting together creates a sense of empowerment, no matter how big or small the cause may be. As the generation who will suffer far more from the consequences of climate change than those at the helm of big business, it is essential that we recognise this, both for the benefit of ourselves and future generations to come.

between moral marketing and woke washing



Is corporate activism empowering consumers or undermining causes?

words by jennifer osei-mensah, art by lauren faulkner

Watching the rise of the #metoo movement has been joyous, overwhelming, and frightening. What started out as a celebrity-backed hashtag has led to thousands of victims of sexual harassment and abuse crying out in support of each other and calling out their aggressors, as well as millions of dollars raised towards legal fees of sexual harassment court cases (the Time's Up campaign, #MeToo's big sister, is the most successful GoFundMe ever). By way of Twitter and the red carpet, the movement swept through 2018, clobbering giants such as Harvey Weinstein and Philip Green, and bringing about concrete policy change such as the new upskirting law in the UK.

The taboo of talking about sexual harassment is being torn up, and with it, outdated and sexist cultural norms are too. But like all good things, the #MeToo movement has

a negative flipside, often in the form of sensitive men who cannot fathom their authority being challenged. Business media company Bloomberg has coined the term the 'Pence Effect', for example, to reference businessmen who, afraid of being seen as harassers, have chosen to avoid women altogether. So it will be interesting to observe the movement grow during 2019, and as it turns over more and more antiquated stones, to watch the sexist bugs crawl out from underneath them.

The first 'scandal' of 2019 (if it can even be called that) was the new Gillette advert. Gillette made a bold statement to rebrand their potentially polemic slogan 'The Best a Man Can Get' to 'The Best a Man Can Be', and it riled up a swathe of sensitive meninists. This caused the BBC and other news sources to report more heavily on the backlash than on the actual advert. Piers Morgan has weighed in, of course,

slating the advert as "man-hating". Personally, I got goosebumps watching it. It is a powerful and touching piece. But Gillette aren't just making short films in the name of activism – they are selling products, and as consumers we need to be conscious of this new trend of brands using cultural and social movements as advertising fodder, and of what it means.

The Gillette advert can be read in one of two ways. It can be understood as a positive sign of changing times, when companies are supporting worthy causes which their customers and employees care about, and using income to promote them. On the other hand, Gillette may simply be jumping on the #MeToo bandwagon without really committing to the cause, something which has been given the neat title of 'woke washing'.

A recent example of misguided bandwagon psychology in advertising is Pepsi's marketing of

2017. Remember when Kendall Jenner ended racism with a can of soda? The outrage from the public was so strong that the ad was taken down in twenty-four hours. PepsiCo recycled imagery and ham-handedly mistranslated identity politics from the Black Lives Matter movement when it was at its peak, trivialising the iconic image of LeShia Evans approaching riot police. Watching it back now is excruciating. It completely wallpapered over the issues at the heart of the protests, and instead chooses to flaunt banners for 'world peace'. Instead of promoting their product, Pepsi seriously damaged their image. Maybe if Pepsi had shown outright support for the Black Lives Matter movement, rather than pussy-footing around it, it would have been a different story.

The line between appropriation and solidarity is slim. It's important that companies be held accountable for the views that they profess in order to shift products – they can't sell us the cake and eat it too. Let's consider the Chick-fil-A scandals. The fast food chain has been branded homophobic after CEO Dan Cathy publicly stated his opposition to same-sex marriage, and the charitable organisation under the Chick-fil-A name was found to have given billions of dollars to anti-LGBT+ organisations. Although the backlash on social media was huge, and many Americans still boycott the company as a result, their sales actually increased by 12%

in the period directly following the scandal, according to the Huffington Post. They have since attempted to move away from politics, but Cathy has not retracted his belief in the "biblical definition of the family unit". The company continues to grow.

"the line between appropriation and solidarity is slim"

In a way, what Chick-fil-A and Gillette have done isn't that dissimilar. Say what you want about a lack of progressiveness and the isolation of their target market, but by openly stating the beliefs behind the corporation, Chick-fil-A have found solidarity with customers whose beliefs do align with their own. Besides, I don't think I'm alone in saying that I wouldn't want to spend my money on a company that donates to these charities – I'm glad they are open about their spending, because it enables me to make a conscious decision to get my fried chicken somewhere else.

Is financial backing the deciding factor between moral marketing and woke washing? Gillette gave \$3 million to charities such as the Boys and Girls Club of America, an organisation providing after-school clubs for children. An excellent cause I'm sure, but not one that

really tackles the issues at the heart of #MeToo, not to mention that these donations won't have made a particularly significant dent in Gillette's annual profits. Besides, many women will testify that Gillette's razors for women, which are pink and have names like Venus and Miss Soleil, are more expensive than their men's razors. Surely if they were truly active in the #MeToo debate, they would also be working on diminishing the pink tax?

Encouragingly, sincerity and dedication to a cause seem to be the best ways to keep consumers coming back. Studies show that if brands want to successfully use corporate activism to promote a product, they have to be willing to commit. They cannot change their image if the public don't believe they mean it. Which is good news for us, as consumers, and great news for the causes on which they choose to piggy-back their marketing.

What we can definitely understand from the Gillette ad is that the #MeToo movement is going strong. If a corporate giant like Procter & Gamble deems #MeToo fashionable enough to be profitable, we are doing something right. And in a time when social issues are widespread and mainstream, we can't be surprised that companies are looking to supply our demand for the products we believe in. Big corporations have the responsibility to align themselves with causes that their management genuinely believes in, and to be prepared to back them in order to garner our support and resulting investment. Our responsibility, as consumers, is to use our purchasing power in an ethical way. Boycott companies you don't agree with, and spend your money on companies that support your beliefs. Whether we like it or not, corporate activism is happening, and we can either whine about it or use it against companies who try – and fail – to exploit us.

"they can't sell us the cake and eat it too"



I have become increasingly disillusioned with the brand of female power projected through TV adverts, movies, and interviews. There is no escape from the discourse surrounding successful women, which constantly frames them as 'strong', 'independent' and 'fierce', as if these are the definitive attributes of female empowerment. As a result of this incessant characterisation, I found myself asking: could a woman not alternatively be demure, or dependent on friends, partners and family, and still be successful and 'powerful'? Enter Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

In the last few months, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ginsburg's public recognition has soared, largely due to the advent of two biopic films and recent health scares. After Ginsburg took a fall in D.C. last year, liberals throughout the country sent letters offering their own ribs to help her get back to the Court. Interest in her health amongst liberals in the U.S. is only natural, given the likely shift to the right that the Supreme Court would take if she were to vacate it.

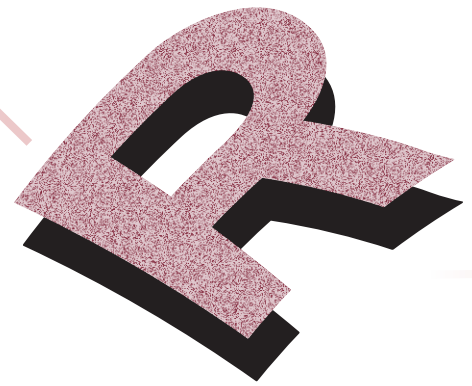
Nicknamed the 'Notorious R.B.G.' by enthusiasts, Ginsburg has made historic progress in the realm of gender equality in U.S. law. After attaining her bachelor's degree at Cornell, she was one of only nine women in a class of over 500 men at Harvard Law School, where she was famously asked by the Dean, "Why are you here, taking the place of a man?"

Whilst at Harvard, Ginsburg was the mother of a 14-month old daughter. Her husband Martin 'Marty' Ginsburg, who also studied at Harvard Law School, was suffering from cancer. Whilst she did her work, looked after their child, nursed Marty and even did much of his work for him, she managed to also become one of the first ever women to edit the Harvard Law Review. When Marty eventually recovered and work called him to New York, Ginsburg transferred to Columbia Law School to complete her degree.

Her career is very well covered in biographies and interviews. She soon made her mark on a national scale, winning landmark sex discrimination cases where she spoke before the Supreme Court. Appointed by President Clinton to the Supreme Court in 1993, Ginsburg became the second woman to sit on the highest federal court, and her liberal position has been instrumental in key decisions that have affected the very fabric of the US – from upholding Obamacare, to promoting equal pay and the legalisation of same-sex marriage.

No one can look at Ginsburg's record and say she has not been a successful woman. She is labelled a 'badass', a 'warrior', a 'superhero'. Her nickname is a reference to her apparently 'gangster style' of female empowerment. A Google search brings up memes revealing a sassy and cheeky loud-mouth. But the buzz that surrounds her name misses much of the point.

the misinterpreted



Ginsburg is a superhero, yes, but not for the reasons which are popularly portrayed. The reality of her empowerment is so far from what is projected by movies and memes.

Much of her strength came from her best friend and equal partner. While she worked all night on her cases with the ACLU, Marty appealed to her to come home for dinner. In a time when a woman's place was at home, Marty was chief cook and homemaker alongside his own career in taxation law. One of the greatest things Ginsburg reveals in the recent Oscar-nominated documentary on her life, *RBG*, is this realisation upon finding a partner who saw in her an equal:

"One of the sadnesses about the brilliant girls who attended Cornell is that they kind of suppressed how smart they were. But Marty was so confident of his own ability, so comfortable with himself, that he never regarded me as any kind of a threat."

Ginsburg's mother, always the greatest encouragement to her education, was one of the leading influences in her life. The advice imparted on her at an early age seems to have stuck. To be empowered, her mother said, was to be independent in one's career. This was something Ginsburg certainly endeavoured to apply to her work, but there is equally much to be said for the quiet interdependence of her relationship with Marty. Without being totally sure of his ability to take care of their children and home, Ginsburg would certainly not have been as successful as she has. This is an underrated and underappreciated aspect of gender dynamics in contemporary projections of female power. There is nothing weak and typically 'dependent' about this woman, but that is because dependency is not inherently a weak trait.

Furthermore, projections of Ginsburg in popular culture illustrate a verbose put-down of anyone standing in her way. Again, this could not be further from the truth. Ginsburg's character can be best described as intelligently reticent. Her opinions, whether in the majority or not, are eloquent and to the point, but her style is generally typified by a lack of anger or

"the buzz that surrounds her name misses much of the point"

antagonism, reflecting her late mother's advice to always carry oneself this way.

When seeing Kate McKinnon playing her in a recurring comedy sketch on *Saturday Night Live*, Ginsburg laughed and whispered, "that's nothing like me". Of course, there is nothing wrong with a comic exaggeration of a character, but it seems the exaggeration has taken on a life of its own, with many people seeing it as a true representation of their beloved Justice.

Recent biopic *On the Basis of Sex*, starring Felicity Jones, suggests a stylised version of Ginsburg. The film features scenes of a wide-eyed Ruth entering rooms crowded with men and raising her chin in defiance. The audience is encouraged to feel righteous outrage at the bigotry, but this was not the path Ginsburg herself took in response. Her reaction was to study harder and for longer, finishing joint top of her class by her final year.

Sure, you can label her a 'quiet warrior'. Or you could stop leaning on words used to describe successful men to indicate success in a woman, rather than just calling it as it is. Ginsburg is an incredibly smart woman. She is also an exceptionally quiet woman for the career she decided to pursue. If these are the characteristics that make up her wonderful personality, why can they not be celebrated rather than adding another (somewhat imposed) edge to create a more idealised, masses-friendly package of female empowerment?

An 'inconsistency' many of her fans point out is her friendship with the late Associate Justice Scalia, one of the Court's most conservative Justices in recent times, which was based on a mutual love for the opera. But this suggestion is

B Q

Ruth Bader Ginsburg is widely considered an icon of female empowerment, but is her popular persona true to life?

words by india crawley

art by natalie wooding

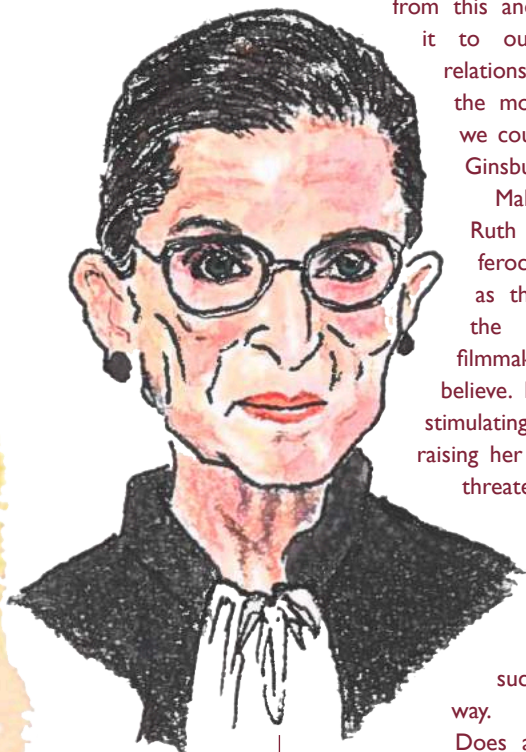
as outrageous as it is absurd.

Rather than to suggest this is a flaw of her otherwise flawless character, we should see this as something that will be one of her greatest legacies: the ability to cultivate relationships based on mutual respect and passions, rather than contradictory convictions. Learning from this and attempting to apply it to our own outlook on relationships will be one of the most empowering things we could possibly learn from Ginsburg going forward.

Make no mistake that Ruth Bader Ginsburg is as ferocious and determined as they come, just not in the way contemporary filmmakers would have you believe. It is far more visually stimulating to portray a girl raising her chin at the men who threaten to undermine her, rather than turning her chin the other way, downwards, towards a book – the way in which many successful people get their way.

Does a strong woman have to 'act like a man' when she is not treated as an equal? R.B.G. says no. A strong woman knuckles down; she does not let the hard moments sway her trajectory. She also falls down. But she is so inspirational that

people will literally offer to send her their ribs to help her get back up. This is the brand of empowerment we should aspire to, rather than the commodified female power laid out by Hollywood and popular culture.



"Ruth Bader Ginsburg is as ferocious and determined as they come, just not in the way contemporary filmmakers would have you believe"

THE TINDER

Black Panther is the highest grossing superhero movie of all time. It raked in a staggering \$897 million worldwide and has recently received six Academy Award nominations, including for Best Picture, a feat even *The Dark Knight* did not achieve. The political impact of *Black Panther* has been tumultuous, and the continued success of the film in the subsequent year has visibly empowered the international black community. My favourite example of this is a video of two young boys pointing to the movie poster and identifying themselves with the different characters. The empowerment of the black community is inspirational proof of the power of representation.

So, when it was announced in 2018 that Kamala Khan's Ms Marvel, a female, Pakistani Muslim superhero, would be featured in the *Marvel* cinematic universe, it is no surprise that the Pakistani community erupted with excitement. Being a female, Pakistani Muslim myself, I felt this euphoria and was thrilled that my eight-year-old sister would have a character which embodies herself. Finally, our community would be shown in a positive, powerful light.

We could argue that we are currently in the age of empowerment: looking to the future, to create an environment that reflects the diversity of the human race. Empowerment through representation is a vital element of this process, especially as the white, straight male has often been framed as the ideal formula of power and success. It is only through exploration that we can find people who defy this framework, but this requires independent motivation, something that is not stimulated until much later in life. The role of the media and pop culture is undeniably influential in the way we perceive power and success, as can be seen in the impact of films like *Black Panther*, *Crazy Rich Asians*, and *Love, Simon*. Representation is a key debate in the current political environment, but what is its importance, and how can it lead to the empowerment of the next generation?

The whole concept of empowerment seems to be underplayed and patronised by people like Piers Morgan, who believe that representation is not a key aspect. I disagree. I see representation as a legitimisation of one's identity: to see yourself reflected in the achievements of others bolsters self-belief. A lack of representation passively enforces insecurity in our own identity, subtly restricting us in ways we may not even be conscious of.

The role of representation is vitally important for the empowerment of the next generation, and for the normalisation of diversity in our society. But if you think about it, representation in terms of policy-making

serves a common sensible purpose: to voice the demands of minorities that the majority of white legislators might not consider. I'm not talking about outrageous requests, but the basic rights of minorities.

"I SEE REPRESENTATION AS A LEGITIMISATION OF ONE'S IDENTITY: TO SEE YOURSELF REFLECTED IN THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF OTHERS BOLSTERS SELF-BELIEF."

The debate on birth control has fuelled a huge debate in a America, where Trump's changes to Obama's Affordable Care Act have made it considerably harder to access and afford contraception. The lack of female representation in policymaking has led to the demise of policies that cater to women – no one in the room can understand the health requirements of women. Policies are made in the interests of those who make them, instead of the people they are supposed to help. The debate encompasses issues faced by many minorities, not just the matter of women's rights. Consider the lack of progress made in the Black Lives Matter movement, or how long it took for gay marriage to be legalised. There were no legislators who were truly emotionally invested in these issues. Even if some were, they would have been overpowered by those whose collective attention was diverted away from the issues of minorities.

"A LACK OF REPRESENTATION PASSIVELY ENFORCES INSECURITY IN OUR OWN IDENTITY, SUBTLY RESTRICTING US IN WAYS WE MAY NOT EVEN BE CONSCIOUS OF."

Of course, a lack of representation cannot be used as an excuse for passivity; the people we call role models broke boundaries and forged social change without the presence of representatives. But the fire inside those people had to be ignited by someone. The point of empowerment through representation is to provide a tinderbox for that change.

In short, empowering representation can legitimise the dreams of kids who lie outside the socially constructed identity of 'success.' In diversifying the characters kids look up to, they see their own identity in those who achieve great things, daring them to not only believe it

can be done, but that they can do it in the face of the overwhelmingly white majority.

Now, if you are paying attention to American politics (and if you are not, I really would not blame you because the situation is infuriating), you followed the mid-term elections. The results were historic, because this congress is the most diverse in all of US history: the first black, LGBTQ+, Native American and Muslim women have been elected to the House, and 112 women have made their way to Congress – the highest number of female representatives ever. Photos of the newly elected congress are truly astounding, and are a total deviation away from the sea of white faces we would expect. The results tell us a lot about America, reflecting the confusion of their political identity in the juxtaposition of both Trump's administration and the newly elected Congress. Truly, this is a milestone in global politics. We wait to see what these trailblazers will do not only for the US, but also how this avalanche of representation will empower future generations. This really is what we've been waiting for. But there is danger here too, and it's danger we have experienced before.

We, the electorate, tend to take social achievements for granted. We unconsciously put ourselves in danger of believing that once we have reached a milestone, the fight has been won. When Obama was elected President in 2008, it came with an overwhelming sense of social achievement. Racism is gone! We've done it! We've achieved Martin Luther King's Dream. Well done America. Problem solved. Right? Wrong.

After the 2016 elections, the success of Trump was described as a 'white lash': revenge from those who emulate America's deep-rooted hatred of diversity. Regardless of your views on Trump, you cannot deny that his election, directly after Obama's term, demonstrated a leap backwards for America's progress in accepting diversity.

The trap has another layer to it: when minorities are empowered, and find success as a result of empowerment, their success is often belittled to be exclusively due to that minority characteristic. In the 2016 elections, Trump referred to Clinton as playing the 'woman card', implying the only credential people could base

TINDERBOX AND THE TRAP

words by kinzah khan
art by natalie wooding

From politics to pop culture, Kinzah Khan discusses how representation can forge empowerment



their vote for her on was the diversity appeal. The 'card' criticism, whether it be the race or gender card at hand, is often used to patronise the success of minorities, in turn simulating the controversy around affirmative action. I think this works as a form of reverse psychology. By implying the reason you are voting for someone is based on a personal characteristic, you are less likely to engage with that person, unless you are critical enough in your own decisions to securely place that vote. This is why empowerment and representation is so vitally important in our society: diversity needs to be normalised so the doubt that may arise is virtually non-existent.

The point is this: the steps we take for diversity are a key part of our civic engagement. We need to engage in politics to alter the course of our global representation. But when those steps lead to achievement, we cannot sit back and believe the war has been won. Furthermore, diversity and the acceptance of different races, genders and sexualities need to become normalised. They should not even be considered a factor when judging someone, good or bad. Never forget the civil rights movement is only about 60 years old, five colleges at Oxford University only began admitting female students in 1979, and the first black ensemble cast to win an Oscar did so only two years back. Steps for representation are being taken, but so far we have only reached checkpoints. The final destination is still far away. This task needs to be passed from generation to generation: each needs to be empowered by the one before, so their progress may exceed ours.

Change in our society is coming, and empowerment is the most valuable method to stimulate a whole generation to rise up, to provide a tinderbox for change. We have to show them progress is not only achievable, but that it can be achieved by them.

“A country can't be free unless the women are free.”

These are the guiding words of Abdullah Öcalan, and a fundamental principle of the revolution in Rojava. Rojava, a region in northern Syria that declared autonomy from Bashar al-Assad in 2013, is now on the brink of defeating the Islamic State inside its territory. Despite being jailed on a Turkish island since 1999, Öcalan has successfully shifted his party, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (otherwise known as PKK), from a national liberation group to a wider project focused on Democratic Confederalism and women's liberation.

A SYSTEM FOR EMPOWERMENT

Democratic Confederalism is a political theory first developed by the anarchist Murray Bookchin, which now forms the basis of the democratic experiment in Rojava. In a Middle East ravaged by civil war, authoritarianism, and Western imperialism, Rojava has created neighbourhood assemblies and councils that assist not only in the struggle for political autonomy but also in creating a possibility of peace and stability in the region. The structure is split into three categories: neighbourhood assemblies, commissions and councils, and the popular militia. The assemblies are the most basic level of administration, and commissions discuss specific issues such as the role of women and environmentalism in the movement. Meanwhile, councils constitute the main legislative and executive body.

Any property previously belonging to the internationally condemned regime of al-Assad has been converted to workers' co-operatives; heavy industry, mostly oil, has been taken into

public ownership too. While some might claim that this replaces state bureaucracy with a similar culture of too many meetings, it is important to realise that each assembly is only established in regions when needed, and the delegate structures do not require full attendance at every level. Indeed, far from being a closed nationalist project like most revolutions before it, this is a movement that is both anti-state and anti-authoritarian. Rojava replaces the representative democracy we use in the West with consensus-based popular assemblies, while local disputes are largely settled through smaller councils rather than the national police. This transparently progressive, empowering system is woven into the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of ordinary citizens: they make decisions in face-to-face assemblies, which elect recallable delegates to administer their decisions.

All of this change comes in spite of attacks by the Islamic State and Turkey's continued oppression of the Kurdish people, which has taken steps to ban their language and culture, and instigate genocides, chemical weapon attacks, political imprisonment, and torture. This is far from a new phenomenon. Following the controversial dissolution of the Ottoman Empire by British and French imperial powers and subsequently Turkey's first President, Kemal Ataturk, Turkish nationalists have repeatedly ignored and violently repressed Kurdish self-determination as a threat to their own state. For example, Turkish security forces burnt down more than 3,000 Kurdish villages in the 1990s, with the façade of combating militant members of the PKK, which NATO classifies as a terrorist group. However, these attacks did not dismantle the PKK and only attempted to destroy Kurdish culture and identity. To this day, Turkey continues to jail those who speak out

WH CAN LEA FR ROJA

words by jack kershaw,

As the region looks to
Jack Kershaw gives

THIS IS A MOVEMENT THAT IS BOTH ANTI-STATE AND ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN



A T WE R N O M AVA?

shaw, art by james tiffin

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ROJAVA OFFERS US A GENUINE ALTERNATIVE TO CAPITALIST REALISM

against or report on the regime. In addition, the upkeep of social and economic embargoes by all neighbouring states has left Rojava economically dependent on others. One could say that this deep history of oppression has actually assisted in pushing the Kurdish people to form real, working systems that fundamentally challenge these power structures.

A WOMEN'S REVOLUTION

Alongside these structural changes, a women's revolution is underway in Rojava. The Western media (and unfortunately much of the left) has fetishised the YPJ, the all-female Women's Protection Unit, reducing them to the status of pin-ups only to be taken at face value – a problematic attempt to diminish their achievements and distract from other elements of the revolution.

A much deeper challenge to patriarchy is being forged by women. Legislative change has been achieved in key areas, such as banning forced marriage and legalising abortion, while at the grassroots level education programmes, women's councils and centres, newspapers, radios and TV stations empower women. Re-education programmes also rehabilitate men who engage in harassment or other problematic behaviour. In all democratic structures, a 40% quota of women is required, with women's participation actually estimated at 50-70%. Viewed in light of the conservative society (what my Kurdish friend refers to as "the birthplace of patriarchy") from which this revolution has emerged, with strict separation of gender roles and often gendered violence, these moves are nothing short of remarkable. Contrary to more liberal western ideas of feminism, such as 'boss feminism' (in which elite women are encouraged in a structurally patriarchal system), women in Rojava are, in Öcalan's words, "determining their own democratic aim, and instituting the organisation and effort to realise it".

LESSONS FROM ROJAVA

But what relevance does all of this have to us studying in London? Firstly, while the threat of the Islamic State has far from vanished, the Kurdish YPG and YPJ have dramatically reduced their hold on the region. As a consequence, global terror attacks have declined for the past three years. It is undeniable that the world owes a huge debt to those who have fought against fascism. We must also acknowledge, in the age of Trump, Brexit and a series of collective crises too long to list here, that liberal democracy is failing. Achieving popular sovereignty under our current system is impossible. Far from repeating the same mistakes of former communist states, notably authoritarianism and repression, Rojava offers us a genuine alternative to capitalist realism – what Öcalan calls "democratic modernity".

So we too must realise the UK government's complicity in the current threat to Rojava: Turkey. Turkey, as a key NATO ally, has detained tens of thousands of teachers, lawyers, students, judges and other officials amid a crackdown on dissent by the government of President Erdogan after the failed coup of 2016. There are now more prisons than universities in Turkey (381 and 180 respectively), and Erdogan has openly said Kurdish militants in Syria "will be buried in their ditches when the time comes". This could be an approaching genocide – a reconstruction of the Ottoman Empire. It is undeniable that UK companies will provide and service the military equipment used, making our own government and industry complicit in these war crimes. Our government is willingly assisting in the destruction of an exercise in empowerment in Rojava, and that needs to stop.

The popular assemblies of Rojava offer hope for us to empower our own democracies, and more immediately, our university. The principal form of this is the General Assembly, which SUUCL describes on its website as "where all students come together to discuss important issues to students, education and wider society." Far from student politics being a small group of communists, anarchists or bureaucrats deciding the actions of our Student Union, general assemblies should offer a place for students to collectively decide and organise what our university's future will look like. We can aspire to more than a veiled bureaucracy that narrowly agrees to replacing broken microwaves.

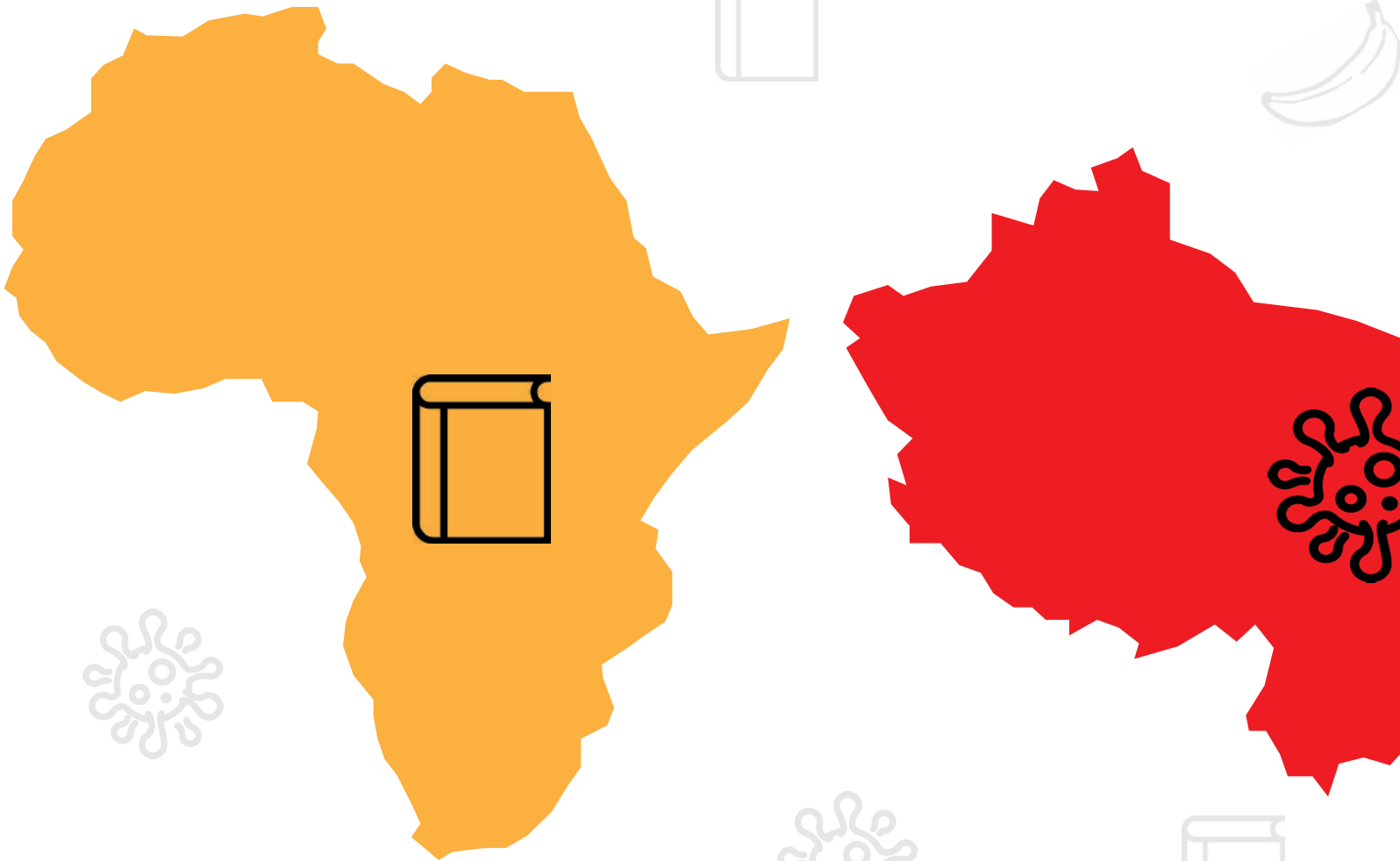
We must remember that the breakdown of general assemblies and collective action on our campus is a reflection of the pervasiveness of neoliberalism in wider society: a system that has assisted in creating a culture of atomisation and individualism. Students today are the first to grow up poorer than their parents, while failing to see the power our common goals and position could have in shaping collective action. At UCL, we have seen years of students striking against excessive rent hikes, occupying over fee rises, demanding an end to UCL's unethical investments, and fighting for better mental health funding. However, all too often, these protests are small or, when they gain mass appeal as Mark Fisher noted, "the euphoric outbursts of dissent are followed by depressive collapse." We desperately need to learn from Rojava, and redevelop a culture of general assemblies which empower our universities and our societies to take collective action. We already have proof that it could work. As they say in Rojava, Biji Berxwedan – long live the resistance!

For those wishing to learn more about the Kurdish Freedom Movement, check out the UCL Kurdish Society, the more active SOAS Kurdish Society or the London Kurdistan Solidarity, a group recently set up to raise awareness of, provide education on, and campaign in practical solidarity with the Kurdish Freedom Movement.

MINDING

A shift towards a more inclusive

words by shail bhatt



"Science in developing countries has typically been seen as a 'lost' science"

90% of all scientists who have ever lived are alive today, according to Eric Gastfriend, CEO of DynamiCare Health. This is an eye-opening statistic, and it exists because scientific research and development has been growing exponentially since the start of the 20th century. Global spending in these fields in

2017 totalled an astounding two trillion dollars – that's roughly the same amount of money that the entire continent of Africa generates in a year. But in this surge of scientific knowledge and progress, disparities have been widespread. Africa may constitute 12.5% of the world's entire population, but it contributes less than 1% of the world's global research output. North America and other countries in Europe, on the other hand, contributed 80% of all publications

produced in 2015, putting them far ahead of the rest of the world.

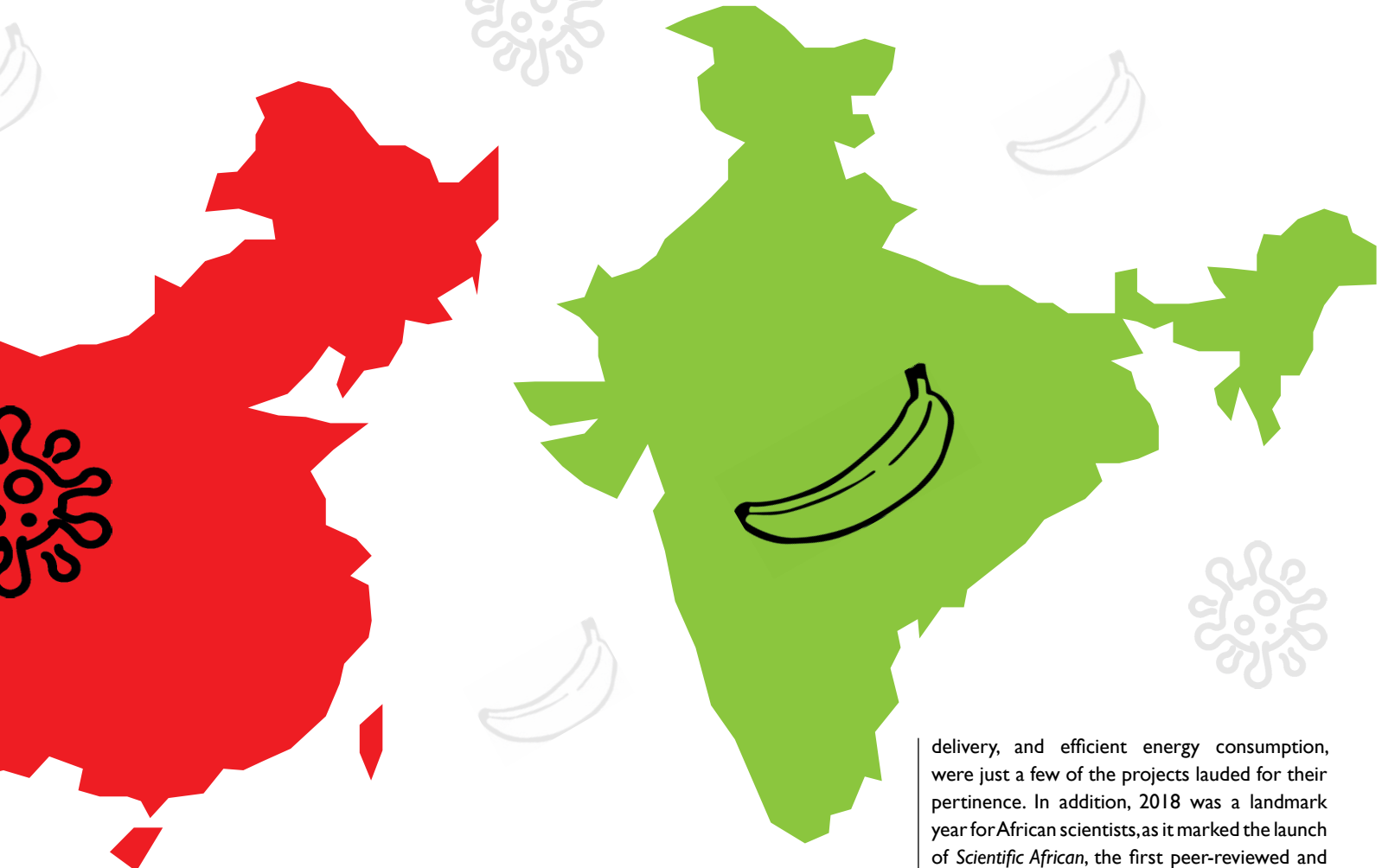
But today, the gap is closing. Developing countries are making leaps and bounds in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) at almost double the rate of more developed nations. 2018 was a monumental year for developing nations and for science as a whole. In terms of breakthroughs and discoveries, China and India made headlines with their advances in gene-editing, for example by using CRISPR/Cas9. In India, scientists were able to edit the genome of bananas, one of

THE GAP

ive scientific community has begun

tt art by laura riggall

“However, with thanks to hard work, significant advances have pushed these countries into the limelight”



our most popular fruits that was in danger of succumbing to disease. With the aim of making staple foods more nutritious and pathogen-resistant, scientists were able to understand the potential of gene-editing on saving the banana from potential extinction.

In the neighbouring country of China, where science has been booming at a supersonic rate, researchers (controversially) took the capabilities of CRISPR/Cas9 technology to the next level, by modifying humans to make them resistant to HIV. By cutting out the CCR5 gene, a type of co-receptor used by the virus to enter the cell, scientists aimed to stop the virus in its tracks. While this raised many ethical concerns, particularly about disrupting natural

order, putting embryos at risk, and the potential of designer babies, there is no doubt that this undertaking was revolutionary, even if it was morally questionable.

Science in developing countries has traditionally been seen as 'lost' science, and researchers in these countries often feel neglected. But with thanks to hard work, significant advances have pushed these nations into the limelight, not just in terms of research, but also in the scientific community. For example, the Organization for Women in Science for the Developing World (OWSD) now acknowledges some outstanding contributions from these nations.

In 2018, the OWSD recognised researchers from Bangladesh, Guyana, Indonesia, Cameroon, and Ecuador for their work on a wide range of issues; Tsunami simulations, improved water quality for vulnerable communities, the usage of molecular magnets for drug synthesis and

delivery, and efficient energy consumption, were just a few of the projects lauded for their pertinence. In addition, 2018 was a landmark year for African scientists, as it marked the launch of *Scientific African*, the first peer-reviewed and open-access scientific journal available in Africa. Having the capacity to publish, collaborate, and build academic networks across the continent would no doubt be the first step towards increasing the scope of research in Africa. The first issue was released in November, tackling issues like food security, pollution, and fungal infections.

It's wonderful to see countries finally gaining momentum in working towards their scientific potential, but there is still much to be done to equip less developed countries with the capability to engage in research. Our nation and its fellows need to help in every way possible: from creating research collaborations to student exchange programs, to help these upcoming contributors to flourish. These are sometimes arduous tasks, but we're already en route to a higher summit of scientific potential – the empowerment of scientists across the world is more vital than ever.

Revealing the hidden stories preserved in our genes

What can research at the UCL Genetics Institute tell us about ourselves? Here, Dan Jacobson reveals

words by dan jacobson, photography by nina goldfuß



According to oral history, the Kuba Kingdom, a flourishing kingdom based in the South East region of what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo, was created by the foreign trader Shyaam a-Mbul a Ngoong. Formed in around 1625, Shyaam sought to conglomerate around 19 individual, independent chiefdoms, consisting of various ethnic groups, under his centralised control. Over time, based on Shyaam's research of the surrounding empires, the Kuba Kingdom expanded rapidly and grew into an advanced state, with a well-defined, established culture and set of customs. This included a governmental system based on merit and democracy, a legal system including the concept of trial by jury, and even a capital city.

The kingdom thrived until the late 19th century, when Belgian colonisers arrived in the region during the era of exploration. At the time, the Kuba Kingdom had developed so far beyond the surrounding groups that the Europeans naturally assumed that Western contact had already been established prior to their arrival. Due to its isolation, it was less affected by factors such as the slave trade, which decimated the more coastal kingdoms. However, that didn't prevent the subsequent plundering and pillaging. The Kuba Kingdom still exists today, but its numbers are significantly reduced.

The Kuba Kingdom has been of considerable

interest to historians and anthropologists, who have associated its innovative structure with both the greatest ancient kingdoms and modern-day states. Unfortunately, little written documentation exists, suggesting that an alternative method is required to allow us to learn more about this comparatively mysterious time. Novel techniques in genetics and genomics are now being utilised in an attempt to reclaim this lost story.

“Novel techniques in
genetics are
being used to reclaim
lost stories”

As part of recent research based at the UCL Genetics Institute, geneticists and historians have come together in order to identify the genetic changes which could have arisen as a result of the state centralisation catalysed by Shyaam, known as a 'genetic legacy'. Using data obtained from current Kuba people, as well as surrounding individuals who did not descend from the Kuba Kingdom, researchers found that descendants displayed significantly



higher genetic diversity than individuals from surrounding groups, implying a greater level of intermixing and integration in line with the oral history described. In this way, it has been demonstrated that genetics preserves the stories which many sought to destroy and suggests that we, in fact, could be an essential historical source in the continued investigation of our collective history.

The idea of using genetics to discern information concerning our ancestry has become increasingly prevalent. Biotechnology companies such as 23andMe now offer DNA testing specifically for the purpose of determining your ancestry. Customers provide a saliva sample that undergoes single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) genotyping, a technique used to measure the variation across a population of SNPs. These are single base changes at specific positions in the genome that account for a significant proportion of variation in characteristics observed throughout the species. The genome of the customer is then compared to complete genomes of individuals from regions throughout the world, and a computational algorithm is used to match specific regions of the customer's DNA to given reference genomes. If your results describe you as 11% Iberian, for example, this means that 11% of your genome was most closely matched to what is known of the genome of the Iberian population living today (according to the company conducting the analyses). It is these tests which were used to determine the genetic diversities of the Kuba people and their neighbours.

In reality, these tests don't determine your ancestry per se, but use comparisons to living individuals as a proxy for where your ancestors may have dwelled. Additionally, companies such as this have had to struggle with a variety of ethical concerns. 23andMe initially provided DNA tests in order to identify mutations in the genome which may alter the customer's risk of

developing certain diseases, a service which is now being offered to healthy patients by the NHS. However, a customer intended to learn more about their ancestry may not want to be made aware of this kind of information.

“We now have
the tools to tell
everyone's
story”

Questions have also arisen regarding the ability for 23andMe to obtain informed consent, as the company is able to capture additional information via the online browsing habits of its customers. And the holiday season, a particularly busy year for the company, offered many tabloid snippets, from the realisation of adoption following testing to UKIP supporters finding out that they have European ancestry. However, the motivation for individuals to submit these tests is driven by the empowerment they acquire by having better knowledge of who they are and where they come from. With a more effective, universal technique of describing an individual's history, surely this can be extended to that of a population?

Recently, this concept has been embraced in order to investigate the history of Native Australians. The Aboriginal Heritage Project, a group of researchers based at the University of Adelaide, have been analysing DNA from an extensive collection of hair samples to piece together the dynamics of the native human population following initial migration to the island approximately 50,000 years ago. They have found that the first Aborigines colonised the entirety of the coastal region of Australia

very rapidly following their arrival, creating a pattern which was effectively maintained until the colonisation of Australia in 1788. Professor Alan Cooper, Director of the Australian Centre for Ancient DNA, said that he hoped the project would lead to a “rewriting of the history textbooks”, and hopes that it could provide a grounding for the wider population to understand the bond between Australia and the Aboriginal population.

Undeniably, one important, and in my opinion noble, reason for seeking to add to the current historical record centres around the concept of ‘knowledge for knowledge's sake’. It is human nature to consolidate what we currently know and investigate what we don't. However, the key motivation behind research of this kind stems from the realisation that the human story is not told equally, wherein the histories of some groups are presented as richer.

As a biology student, it is interesting and refreshing to consider a scientific concept for which the overarching goal is not as tangible as increasing crop production or finding a cure for cancer. Indeed, population genetics, and understanding the past migrations of our species, do offer potential for future work. It could help us understand how populations in Ethiopia, Tibet and the Andes have independently evolved to enable life at high altitude, or why populations in countries such as Finland are more prone to genetic disorders. However, whilst it is understood that everyone's story is worth telling, we now have the tools to allow this to happen. In a video for the genealogy company Ancestry.com, one volunteer argued that tests like this should be compulsory, claiming that “there would be no such thing as extremism in the world if people knew their heritage.” A statement as bold as this may be naïve, but the power of a shared ancestry may be underestimated and could offer the opportunity for an entirely new demographic to be proud of their roots.

when did women get fit?

Female fitness has undergone a huge transition over recent years

words by olivia ward jackson

A revolution in female fitness has been mounting over the past half-century - one that has played an important role in the development of feminism as we know it today. This fitness revolution has encouraged women to take pride in, and ownership of, their bodies. It has also helped break down a 'separate spheres' mentality which still lingered in the mid twentieth century, confining women to the domestic sphere as the so-called delicate, childbearing sex. By tracing the history of women's exercise from the 1950s to the present day, we can see how it has contributed to female empowerment.

In the 1950s, the 'weaker sex' were confined to the home, where their main source of exercise was doing household chores. In a world before labour-saving devices such as the dishwasher, it is possible that such a workout was quite strenuous - a patriarchal HIIT class if you like.

Whilst Marilyn Monroe certainly wasn't a domestic goddess, she was the sex icon of the decade, and in 1952 gave a health and exercise exclusive to *Pageant* magazine, where she spoke about the ten minute bust-firming routine that she carried out next to her bed in the morning. She also stressed her dislike for outdoor sports, which she thought should be left to men.

In the 1960s, the *Debbie Drake Show* was the first exercise show led by a woman. But the ideals propagated by the show were still geared towards pleasing men rather than improving individual fitness, as illustrated by Debbie's album *How to Keep Your Husband Happy: Look Slim! Keep Trim*.

The explosion of aerobics in the 1980s saw women venturing together outside the home for energetic aerobics classes. This emphasis on fun, female fitness was certainly empowering, and in 1982, aerobics queen Jane Fonda sold 17 million copies of her first fitness video.

Although aerobics encouraged a healthy, liberated lifestyle, it also prioritised achieving an

ideal body image over getting fit. It promoted the perfect 36-24-36 hourglass figure, 'buns of steel', and sexy instructors in skimpy leotards and neon legwarmers. Furthermore, aerobics was still a female-only exercise class, and was not an activity by which women could prove their physical prowess compared to men.

"An important transition occurred: a new emphasis on strength rather than beauty."

In the past thirty years, much has changed. A culture orientated around fitness has become the norm, where women exercise alongside men in gyms, parks, and studio classes. In 2018, over 40,000 people ran the London Marathon, and 45% of these runners were women. However, the fact that women can physically exert themselves in public should not be taken for granted. Instead, this should be seen as a product of a long, hard fight for equality. Today, women who run marathons are not constrained, as their predecessors were, by ideals of femininity and delicacy, or by an ideology that suggests that they should be confined to the domestic sphere. Women have proved themselves strong, both physically and intellectually, and more than capable of competing and succeeding in the public arena.

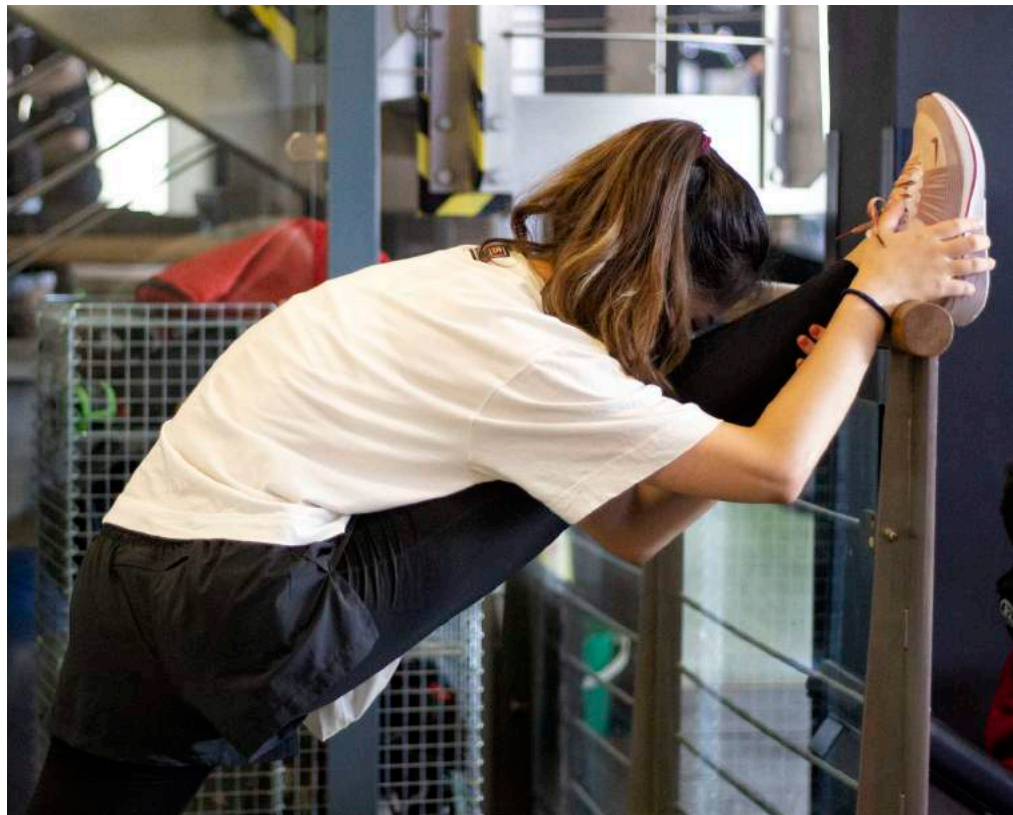
The accessibility of exercise to women has also been an important recent development. In the 1990s, Princess Diana symbolised the

start of a new gym culture, when she famously worked out at the exclusive Harbour Club in Chelsea. Nowadays, however, fitness is not just reserved for those with the money and time, but the rise of low cost gyms and of flexible membership makes it easier for more women to work out whenever they want, fitting exercise around careers and childcare.

The turn of the century saw another important transition in female fitness, which was a new emphasis on strength rather than beauty, on athletics rather than aesthetics. Madonna's muscular ashtanga arms were widely praised in 1998, the year she made yoga hot in the western world. Later, in her 2015 photoshoot for *New York*, Serena Williams posed as a paragon of female strength - a far cry from Marilyn Monroe languishing in her bikini with a couple of dumbbells.

The approach taken by many sports brands in promoting their clothes also illustrates an increasing appreciation of the strong female body in all its forms, rather than advocating one particular beauty ideal. The Instagram account *nikewomen* features powerful women of all builds, whilst Beyoncé's Ivy Park line was created to "support and inspire women". Moreover, *Sweaty Betty* encourages a balanced, active lifestyle that includes "having that piece of cake". Why have these athleisure brands put strength and sisterhood at the top of their advertising agendas? Because that's what modern day women want. It is strength, not dress size, that is selling in the sports industry, reflecting a current trend of female empowerment through sport.

The exercise industry is booming, and it reflects huge strides in feminism since the 1950s. When female UCL students go to a gym class, or on a run, or even put on some comfortable sports leggings with no intention of doing either, they are enjoying the spoils of a battle for equality and empowerment.



photography by isabella tjälve



TOKYO 2020: DISCOVER

With the continuous advancements in sport prosthetic technology that has catapulted disabled athletes into an era of revolutionary gains, there is a danger of leaving behind a whole other group of competitors: disabled athletes who do not rely on these devices.

Artificial body parts, which are increasingly refined, have an important role in empowering disability in sports, enabling top athletes to not only participate in their chosen sport but to also excel in international competitions such as the Paralympic Games. However, precisely within the context of the upcoming Tokyo 2020 Paralympics, there manifests a double standard with respect to disabled athletes without prosthetics, who suffer unfair discrimination. This clearly contradicts the purpose and nature of the Games, and it certainly plays against the inclusive nature of empowerment. For example, let us consider the case of athletics.

“Recent findings indicate that the use of prosthetic device(s) may provide a performance advantage in Track Events”. This is what is stated in the new Rules and Regulations 2018-2019 by World Para Athletics, which has accordingly recognised a new category for those athletes who have a disability below the knee but who do not use prosthetics. Unfortunately, this remains a written rule that does not translate to anything concrete: these athletes still have to compete alongside prosthetics users, whilst remaining the only official category excluded from the Athletics schedule of Tokyo 2020. This means that if they want to compete at the Paralympics, they will have to do so within the same category as prosthetics users.

Effectively, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) demonstrates a rather inconsistent stance: as soon as a performance advantage is acknowledged for prosthetics users, it is incoherent and wrong to let them compete with others. As a result of this contradiction, many athletes will certainly struggle to even qualify for their categories.

Why are some Paralympians still p

words by davide locatelli

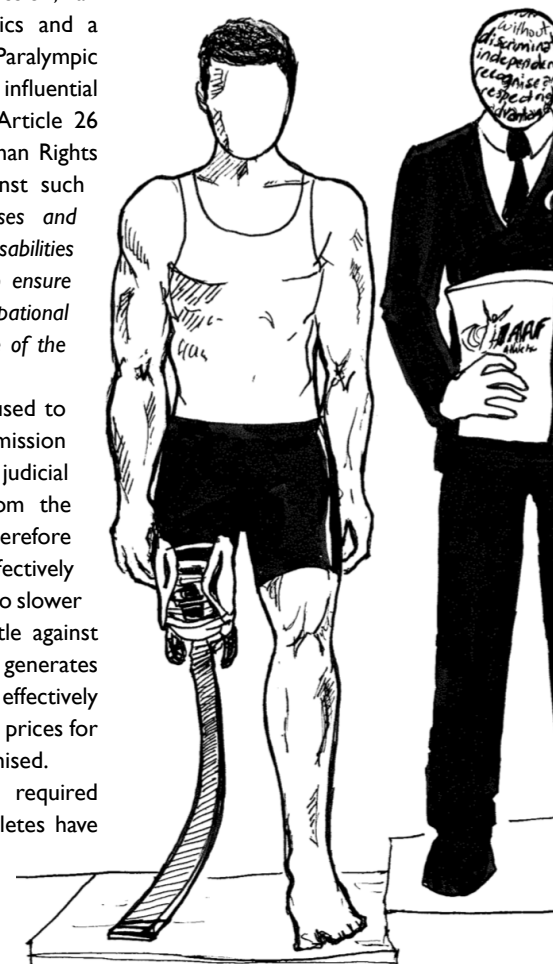
Such a performance advantage undoubtedly makes the entry requirements less attainable for them, unfairly raising the standards.

Recently, the European Commission, an official supporter of the Paralympics and a financial backer of the European Paralympic Committee, has started using its influential position to tackle this. Specifically, Article 26 of the Charter of Fundamental Human Rights by the EU supports the case against such discrimination: *“The Union recognises and respects the right of persons with disabilities to benefit from measures designed to ensure their independence, social and occupational integration and participation in the life of the community”.*

Unfortunately, this has not been used to its full potential. The European Commission has merely pointed to national judicial appeals for people who suffer from the discrimination of such rules, therefore arguably missing an opportunity to effectively intervene itself: by delegating the job to slower and less influential powers, the battle against injustice is compromised. This only generates further inequality, as legal action will effectively require that affected citizens pay high prices for their fundamental rights to be recognised.

Despite the significant expenses required to start the legal process, many athletes have indeed united and are now running a race against time: there is a serious lack of any form of immediate response from the IAAF. This harms the opportunities of many whose hard, daily training regimes could be devalued by a unilateral decision taken lightly.

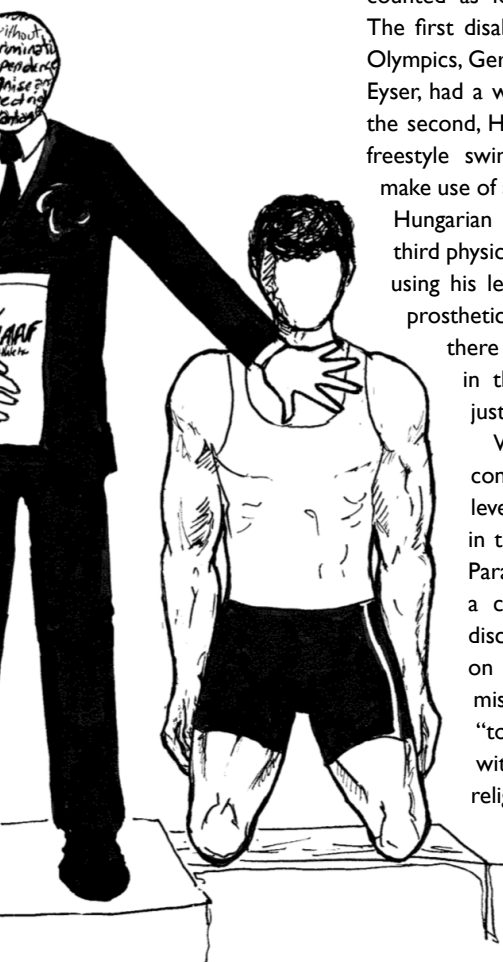
The harsh discrimination and indifference of the IAAF is not only a serious injustice but also, and more importantly, a deep contradiction of the nature of the Paralympic Games in multiple ways. Historically, there is no such



ER DOUBLE STANDARDS

ill placed at an unfair disadvantage?

art by natalie wooding



preferential treatment in the history of the Games. Both prosthetics users and disabled athletes without prosthetic devices are counted as forerunners of the Paralympics. The first disabled athlete to compete in the Olympics, German American gymnast George Eyser, had a wooden prosthesis for a left leg; the second, Hungarian water polo player and freestyle swimmer Olivér Halassy, did not make use of a prosthesis for his lost left foot; Hungarian shooter Károly Takács was the third physically disabled athlete to compete, using his left hand instead of relying on a prosthetic device for his right one. Hence, there is no preferential component in the history of the Games that justifies such a double standard.

We can also identify contradictions on a conceptual level. According to what is stated in the Charter of the International Paralympic Committee, there is a clear rejection of all forms of discrimination, including, crucially, on the basis of disability. The mission of the Paralympics is “to promote Paralympic sport without discrimination for political, religious, economic, disability, gender, sexual orientation, or race reasons”, so how is it acceptable that such favouritism is allowed, especially within the context of these Games?

The third contradictory element is ideological. The empowering role played by sports prosthetics dictates a rejection of the current silence of the IAAF. The process of empowerment requires a commitment to create equal opportunities

and representation for marginalised groups of people, and to systematically thwart any attempt of discrimination. The equality principle is fundamental. Crucially, this means that empowering one group of marginalised people cannot be achieved at the expense of leaving another behind. An absurd analogy to this kind of position would be to allow feminism to be applied only to rich white women. It should be straightforward that this idea of feminism is to be abhorred.

The further absurdity is that the very guarantors of the rights of disabled people, like the EU, consider an acceptable solution to be that discriminated individuals can initiate legal action after having recognised the injustice. A better solution would see the guarantor itself proceed to the legal action. With important powers including both its juridical apparatus – the European Court of Human Rights and the European Court of Justice – and the enormous impact on the European Paralympic Committee, which itself is part of the International Paralympic Committee, the EU could make a meaningful contribution. It is inconceivable that it is required of individual citizens whose human rights are violated to be responsible for the recognition of those rights. The lack of a serious commitment from above is an accessory to the indifference of the IAAF with regards to this group of athletes left behind.

The case of athletics is just one of many that demonstrate the presence of double standards with regards to disabled people in the context of sport. The enormous achievements of technological advancements in sports prosthetics, in furthering the empowerment of physically disabled competitors, are sabotaged by this unfairness. The interesting aspect is that, in this case, there is no lack of appreciation of the differences within the realm of disability. Instead, there is a clear recognition of the diversity. The problem simply lies in the actualisation of the measures to guarantee equal opportunities in light of it. It is perhaps the relative simplicity of the step required to end the injustice that makes this situation all the more frustrating.

Being Overseas Indian

Priya Patel interviews two British-Indian siblings about their conflicting testimonies on identity and empowerment. Parul, the older of the two, was born in Uganda, and her brother Akshay was born in the UK

words by priya patel, art by hannah bruton

Parul:

What does empowerment mean to you?

Empowerment for me comes from my freedom. I feel strong and confident in the knowledge that I have the freedom to choose what I want. As a woman, it's definitely easier to feel empowered in England, especially as an educated woman: I have more freedom than I would have back in India, unless I lived in one of the main cities.

Why did you move so much as a child?

We had no money. We relied on aid from the council, and it was hard to establish ourselves. English was my second language, so I struggled early on in school. It affected my education up to the age of 16, even 18. I got better and better as I started my career.

Would you say that you feel more British than you do Indian?

Now, definitely. If you had asked me when I was 20, before I was married, then I would have said no. That's when my confidence grew. I feel that I have assimilated into society better, purely because my husband is more in touch with British culture. I can't imagine myself being any other way. I think the way I am has helped my children, big time. I never wanted them to experience what I felt at school. I feel like I am stronger from having come from two cultures.

What was it like the first time you went to India?

I was 27. My parents were born in Africa, so they didn't have as strong a connection to India as my husband and his family. He was born there, so he identifies with his roots much more than I do. The first time I went gave me such a comforting feeling. It was a revelation because I felt like I was really in touch with my ancestry. I loved being able to hop in a taxi and talk to the driver in our own language. It was amazing to visit the village our family came from, and to remember where we've all ended up, you know.

America, England, Africa...

You mean other people from your village?

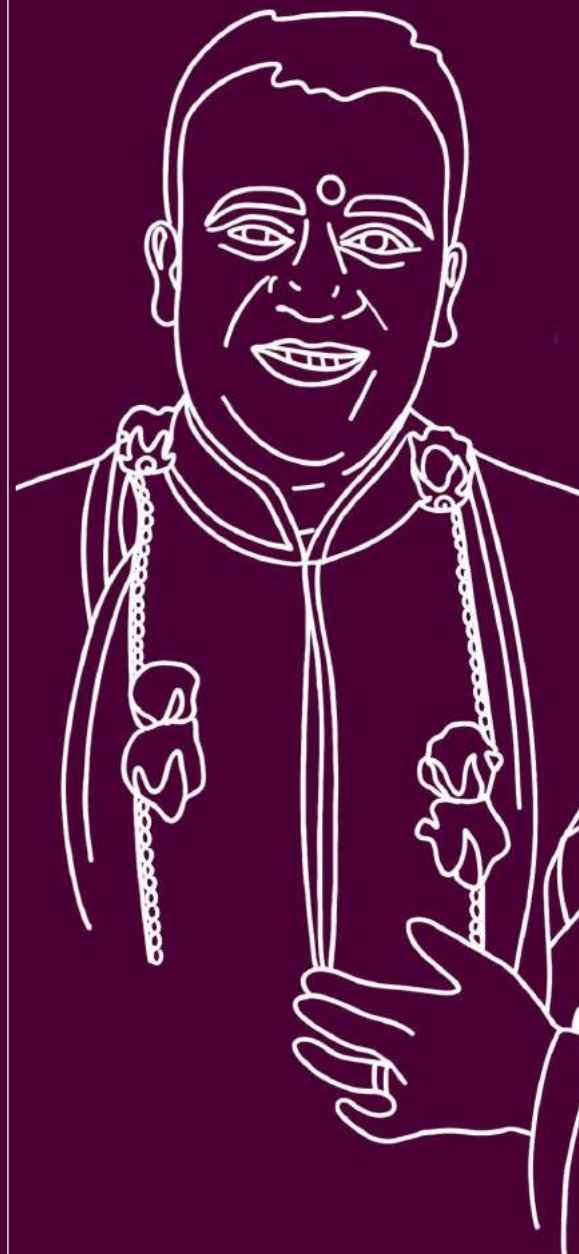
Many of the people in the village had the same experience as me. Lots of the younger generations saw opportunities overseas, purely because 50 years ago India was a very poor country. People did well in school and hopped on a boat: those seeking opportunity and who were prepared to take a risk for themselves and their family. You'd get a better life abroad.

Do you feel like a tourist in India?

No. No. I definitely feel like it's another home. I'm definitely not a local, but not a tourist either. When we are in Dharmaj, the village where my husband is from, I feel like I am making a change. I help local children make a change in their lives. We're sponsoring two children through school. One boy is becoming a chartered accountant like me. When we met him, he was a shy 15 year-old who couldn't make eye contact. His mum cleaned houses and his dad was an alcoholic. Now he's been auditing all over India. It gives me a sense of empowerment to know that my husband and I can give other children the opportunity our parents gave us by moving to England.

What is their perception of overseas Indian tourists?

There's jealousy but also pride. But India now is a force to be reckoned with. Especially in the bigger cities like Mumbai, there's wealth and intelligence. When we go to India, we are learning about our heritage, our culture. We are learning about our ancestors and their lives. There's a sense of pride for me, learning about the beautiful country I'm from. But, you know, I can wear the local clothes, think I look like a local and speak the language, but when I walk into a shop and say one word they know I'm from overseas. Immediately, the prices are inflated, and the products being showed to us are different. The local people simply can't



ans

"It was hard to feel empowered when there was a conflict of identity"



"Empowerment for me comes from my freedom"

afford the finer fabrics, so we are given them instead. You're treated nicely. Differently.

But then again, I think they like white English tourists more. Going through security at the airport, white tourists are treated differently. Indian women are given so much hassle. Europeans are given better treatment compared to a British-Indian or an Indian. They still treat me as an Indian, but not one of their own. When they want to, I'll be treated as a foreigner, so they can sell their expensive products. But sometimes I'm treated as a local and thrown in with the hordes of local Indians at the airport returning to the country. Sometimes it benefits me and sometimes it doesn't. It's conflicting and confusing. But in general, I feel like an Indian woman returning to a home away from home.

Akshay:

Has your upbringing had an effect on the way you culturally identify yourself?

My dad probably didn't give a fair representation of being Indian. He was always quite negative about India when we were growing up: dusty, dirty etc. There was no celebration of heritage. Having said that, we knew we were Indian. We experienced racism.

What was it like growing up?

I got placed in a special class for those who didn't speak English at home, the Chinese kid and the three Indian kids: it was assumed that we were going to need help because of our skin colour. I had a different upbringing from Parul. She was five years older than me, and had traditional Indian friends, whereas my friends were all British kids. I spoke English with them, grew up with them and was surrounded by their culture. It affects how we see ourselves now. It was hard to feel empowered about anything when there was an internal conflict of identity. I knew I wasn't one or the other, British or Indian: there was just a void. Sometimes I didn't feel Indian and sometimes I didn't feel British.

Did going to India change the way you had previously imagined the country?

The thing is, I kind of shed my dad's way of thinking when I began to travel, because it opened my eyes. I could see that people living in these countries weren't 'backward': they had a certain freedom to their lives that we will never have. Their lives are less orchestrated. I guess they have a sense of empowerment that we don't have.

When you travel, do you feel a deeper connection to India than anywhere else?

I don't feel any kind of deep-rooted connection. I think it's a shame that I have less of an emotional tie to the country: my dad probably influenced me a lot. My formative years as a child weren't spent thinking that India was my homeland. I don't feel empowered when I go there, because people behave differently, and culturally there is a massive difference. Naturally I'm more Anglo-Saxon minded, I can't help it. I can't relate to a lot of the cultural ethos.

Do you speak Gujarati?

I can speak it but it's very broken. I have to use gestures, such as indicating towards a bottle when I'm asking for a drink. I love going to rural places where people live simpler lives much closer to the land because I'm forced to speak the language, but it's definitely not second nature to me.

How do you think they feel about Indians overseas?

I think that 30-40 years ago they saw us as fellow Indians. Now, their identity has changed from being an underdeveloped county to a country with economic strength and empowerment. Their attitude towards us years ago is different to now. I think people in the UK and the States think that the Indians in India see overseas Indians as superior, but realistically, now cities like Mumbai have such a successfully educated population that there's no real comparison to make other than cultural differences. I work with Indian immigrants who are intelligent and forward thinking. I don't feel a sense of superiority or privilege. In the UK, your perception of freedom is readjusted: education and a stable career can give you financial freedom which, here, we think is a privilege, but with this privilege comes baggage. In India, for the majority, the lifestyle is more relaxed, and to some extent that's an advantage that we don't have.

Does going to India give you a sense of empowerment?

It's a shame. When I went to Dhurmaj, I got used to speaking Gujarati, but then I travelled to Mumbai, which is in a different state and speaks a different language. I was aware of this but had forgotten, so at first I attempted to get by in Gujarati to little success. They immediately saw that I wasn't a local. It was as if one of the strongest connections that I had with the country had gone. It's a completely different world to the one I'm used to living in, but I find it fascinating to learn about how people live and the humbleness of their lives. It's something I can't relate to anymore, but it doesn't stop me from wanting to explore the country further.

Solo travel can be incredibly rewarding,
but women often face discouragement

a world of

With cheap overseas travel on the rise, the appeal of setting off on a solo adventure has become more popular than ever. Since reaching adulthood, I have found the travel bug especially contagious, and now spend most of the academic year dreaming about my future plans abroad and excitedly searching for cheap and accessible holidays. Whilst solo-travel certainly isn't for everyone, I find the idea of embarking on a month of interrail, or spending weeks exploring different corners of the world by myself, incredibly alluring.

It seems I am not alone in this impulse; not only have studies shown that 80% of millennial travellers embark on their journeys alone, they also indicate that the number of women travelling solo is on the rise as well. Google searches for "solo female travel" increased by 52% between 2016 and 2017 – and in turn, hopefully those travellers' sense of independence. American women have been globally ranked as the most likely to travel alone, contradicting the common misconception that doing so is too dangerous for women, and introducing a new perspective on female empowerment.

With solo travel there will inevitably come difficulties and reservations, and as women these doubts are even more apparent. Female travellers are often met with skepticism and eye rolls, and constantly warned of the dangers of setting off alone. Whilst tiring, these responses are understandable, with cases such as that of Grace Millane's murder abroad so fresh in everyone's minds. I found myself avoiding mentioning my plans altogether, as I already knew, before all else, that I would be forced to justify why I would ever put myself in the face of such jeopardy. I began to doubt myself and wondered if I should ask a friend or a family member to join me, or perhaps even call off the trip altogether.



Despite all of this, I went – and I went alone. Spending three weeks island-hopping in Greece and visiting gorgeous sights in Italy, I had never felt more confident or invigorated. I was joined later in my journey by a friend from home, which was definitely welcomed, but no more so than the fortnight spent in my own company. I love the company of others, and going two weeks without chatting to my friends back in England (especially as I had left in the middle of *Love Island* season) made me a bit stir-crazy, but later I found myself missing the spontaneity and self-reflection that came from being alone.

I became so used to going to restaurants by myself that it was tricky replacing my absent-minded people-watching with conversations over dinner. I read more in those two weeks at the start of my travels than in my entire first year of university, reminding me of my love for books that I thought was lost forever. Normally quite reserved, I would at first force myself to make small-talk with locals or fellow travellers, but then fell into a habit of easy conversation.

I would wake up in the morning with a loose plan for the day, but more often than not would wander around wherever seemed appealing at that particular moment. One entire day was spent next to a beach in Syros, when I had originally intended to see the local museum and art gallery, just because I had come across a cat with her kittens. I decided that's where I really wanted to be. It was a rare occasion where I had nobody else to please except for myself. On my first day in Italy, I channeled my inner Tom Haverford and decided to treat myself, resulting in the most delicious food coma on a patio in Salerno, watching the Amalfi sunset, and happily evaluating this small victory for self-growth.

Whilst my safety was definitely a number one priority, and not every day was as fulfilling as my time in Salerno, I felt that most of the well-wishers who constantly advised me on how to avoid danger seriously undervalued my common sense. I had people giving me advice as if I were a child, completely disregarding any sense of self-preservation I had acquired over

words by jessica badgery,
art by rhianna belts



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one's own

19 years and a cross-country move to England's capital city. Being told not to wander off with strangers, not to walk around abandoned alleyways at dark, and to let at least one person know where I was at all times seemed incredibly patronising.

The double standard between the treatment of men and women becomes much more apparent in instances like this – the underlying idea sometimes being that a woman cannot take care of herself. Every raised eyebrow, doubtful remark, and condescending question makes women doubt their own potential, spreading unease throughout what should be an exciting and fulfilling process. While discussion about women's safety abroad is timely and necessary, the way we go about it should be scrutinised. My experiences are of course not reflective of every woman, but in my opinion, this constant rhetoric can often unintentionally undermine our confidence.

Months before I left for my trip, I began compiling a comprehensive itinerary of everywhere I was planning to visit, detailing the contact information for all of my hostels, the specific trains that I was taking at certain times, and maps with local police stations. It became a 50-page document which I printed off for everyone I was close to, as well as keeping a copy for myself. By the second day I was already resenting this meticulous record of my every movement, as it restricted the spontaneity which underlined the original inspiration for my trip.

By Italy, the itinerary had been abandoned altogether. I found myself skipping certain cities to pursue what I knew I wanted deep down, whether that was to return to the Amalfi coast when I should have been journeying to Rome, or even heading home a few days earlier than planned. I found myself learning that, no matter how safe and secure the itinerary made me feel, in order to properly enjoy a trip like this, I couldn't strategise my every move and still feel that I was expanding my comfort zone.

I have found the same experience of intensive, detailed planning mirrored in the stories of many female travellers I met while

abroad, or even when coming home and sharing my experiences. However, what strikes me most is my conversations with male travelers. A moment that really highlighted the double standard of gendered travelling for me was hearing my brother's own travel plans: to start off somewhere in Europe and go wherever he wanted. At first, I couldn't wrap my head around the haphazardness of this method, but then realised that he had not endured the same warnings that I did. No one questioned his capability, and he could be spontaneous without the pressing questions or unwelcome advice. The same rules did not apply to him, and whilst I do recognise that there may be more of a threat to me as a woman than him as a man, I resent the implication that I am less able simply because of my gender.

Not once on my travels did I feel unsafe or regret my decision. At some points I did feel the loneliness kick in, but I look back on the entire experience fondly and am already planning a similar journey for this coming summer. I would recommend to anyone, male or female, to spend some time exploring somewhere completely alone if they are able to. Learning to love your own company and become your own best friend is such a rewarding experience. Mine has shown me the juxtaposition of attitudes towards male and female travellers. We must challenge this bias and learn to encourage, rather than tear down, the aspirations of women searching for self-fulfillment and independence.

"Learning to love your own company and become your own best friend is such a rewarding experience."

Mine has shown me the juxtaposition of attitudes towards male and female travellers."



“My relationship with disability was one of contradiction. To me, disability was a powerful frustration, a clash between physical reality and performative fantasy, and it affronted me every moment of every day.”

words by adam selvey
photography by isabella tjalve



my disability is not

Growing up, there was a particularly prominent occurrence in my life, one which became so common that I considered it as inherent a part of my daily routine as showering or cleaning my teeth. It would always begin in the same way. An individual, often a complete stranger, would approach me to ask the same question:

“What’s wrong with your hand?”

“Broken,” I would reply.

I cannot pinpoint exactly when it was that I determined to lie about my arm – to lie about myself – but I do know that this acted as a blueprint for all such exchanges thereafter. During my teenage years, these interactions with strangers, mostly other pupils at my school, occurred with such cyclic regularity that my never-changing response acquired a corresponding triviality. My ‘broken-arm’ falsity became second nature to me, and I was consumed by it.

Of course, my arm was not and never has been broken. I have a disability. Specifically, Hemiplegia, a form of Cerebral Palsy (CP) which prohibits motor function in the right side of my body. Though all areas of my right side are affected, it chiefly affects my arm. I cannot move my right wrist at all, and my fingers and thumbs are functionally useless. I live a near-exclusively one-handed life. In order to manage my CP, I must perform 30 minutes of daily stretches and occupational therapy, and I do everything – eating, dressing, typing, even driving – with the use of one hand. Physically, my CP is absolute and permanent, and therefore inescapable.

It is with this absoluteness in mind that my fixed response to strangers’ questions should leap out as a critical problem. My relationship with disability was one of contradiction. To me, disability was a powerful frustration, a clash between physical reality and performative fantasy, and it affronted me every moment of every day. On the one hand, I resolved to assimilate into my perceived notion of able-bodied normalcy, and on the other, I was prevented from doing so by my own body.

This internal struggle has been more debilitating than my CP has ever been – a great irony that

should illustrate the crisis that exists at the point in which physical and mental disabilities intersect.

The research on this intersection is unfortunately exiguous, but the studies we do have indicate the same conclusion, that there is an overwhelming correlation between physical disability and poor mental health, and between physical disability and suicide. Given my own turbulence when it comes to reconciling my CP with both myself and the world around me, this does not surprise me. I suspect that many individuals, especially other young people, have experienced that same internal fracture. In a world dominated by Instagram and the idealised images of body and form, the desire to hide away from the realities of disability is surely skyrocketing.

“The solution is to engineer familiarity with disability in as stark and open a way as possible.”

Change, then, is vital, and I believe this begins with familiarity. The irony of being the only physically disabled person in my family is that, of all my relatives who live with me, I am the most in the dark about what my CP actually looks like. Up to my mid-teens, I was the only disabled person I knew, and I rarely saw people with Hemiplegic CP in TV or film. Accordingly, I was as unfamiliar with my disability as anyone might be. As a result of this, I developed a warped sense of who I actually was, and any glimpse I caught of my own disability horrified me. I remember very distinctly grimacing at a clip of myself performing the choreography to *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious* in a school musical – with determined grit, but limited accuracy! Henceforth, I decided never to look at myself on camera, or even fully in a mirror, again. This was a mistake. In refusing to look at the reality of my existence, I was refusing to acknowledge my existence full-stop, and the resulting mental strain followed near instantaneously.

The solution is to engineer familiarity with disability in as stark and open a way as possible.

If we acknowledge disability with frankness and care, then we hold hope to normalise it, and to provide disabled people with greater security to accept and embrace themselves fully.

The question about my arm, formerly a staple of my teenage years, is no longer a common feature of my day-to-day life. Indeed, it is my experience that this enquiry has been altogether abandoned and replaced with total silence. One time last year, whilst living in student halls, I brought up my CP in group conversation. One of my friends stayed quiet through its duration, and later told me that they had realised upon meeting me that there was something wrong with my arm, but that they did not want to make me uncomfortable in asking me about it. They decided to leave it unacknowledged. This was done with noble intentions, but ultimately it is this line of thinking that exacerbates the problem, blocking the familiarity that is key to extinguishing the issue of self-acceptance in the disabled community.

I would urge all able-bodied people with disabled friends to seek them out and ask questions about their physicality and experiences. There’s a collective sense that doing so is unacceptable or rude, but I think you might find that we are incredibly eager to share our stories with anyone who might be curious. My disability is not going away. For the people around me to accustom themselves to it completely seems far more appropriate than sweeping awkward questions under the rug. And to other disabled people, I would encourage you to open up not just to others but to yourselves about your own experiences with disability. The battle between physical disability and mental health is multi-faceted, and victory will not occur overnight. But it is a process that we all, able-bodied and disabled alike, have a responsibility to cultivate.

Sharing his personal experience, Adam Selvey details the intersection between physical disability and mental wellbeing

going away

from our sleeves to their pockets:

branding empowerment

By 2025, it is estimated that Millennials and Gen Z consumers will account for 45% of the global luxury goods market – and brands are now scrambling to cater to them. A study conducted by the management consulting firm Bain & Company has revealed that Generation Y and Z are responsible for generating 85% of the luxury market's growth in 2017 alone. The most successful brands capture their share by incorporating changes that suit shifting preferences and engender loyalty, and the rise of brand activism in recent months is testament to this; fashion houses continue to take an increasingly vocal stance on social and political movements, which cater to the rise in consumer consciousness.

The new millennial mindset has succeeded in permeating traditional fashion houses such as Balenciaga, which unveiled an unexpected collaboration with the United Nations World Food Programme in their Autumn/Winter 18 collection. In a runway line-up that consisted of neon-coloured, oversized windbreakers, faux fur leopard print coats and multi-layered parkas, the eye-catching element was a subversive take on brand activism. Hoodies, caps, belt bags and T-shirts prominently emblazoned with the programme's logo adorned models as they marched down the runway. The brand pledged to donate 10% of each branded item to the World Food Programme in addition to the \$250,000 USD donation Balenciaga had already pledged. The merchandise, with its distinctively streetwear flair and ironic 'free corporate merchandise' slant, appeals to the aesthetic as well as marking a new sartorial direction for the brand.

In the fast-changing fashion market,
ethics is good business

words by mier foo
photography by nina goldfuß

"sustainability and social consciousness may well be the new emblems of status"

The steady infiltration of streetwear within high fashion could also contribute to its sustainability practices. Established fashion brands are now releasing streetwear collections in finite 'drops', which enhance their resale value and decrease the likelihood of excess product. This follows criticism of fashion houses which destroy unsold goods, in an effort to preserve the exclusivity and value of their products – in 2017 alone, Burberry burned more than \$36.8 million worth of its own merchandise. In response, millennials took to social media to express their desire to boycott the brand, and Burberry has since announced that they will no longer be destroying excess product, touting its commitment to sustainability. Under the helm of new chief creative officer Riccardo Tisci, the brand has also since embraced the 'instant drop' model.

The backlash from consumers towards this long-established industry practice marks a shift in consumer culture. A report entitled 'The New Luxury' published by online lifestyle platform Highsnobiety found that 85% of respondents believed what their clothes represented was as important as quality and design. Younger consumers are more likely to view luxury purchases as a form of self-expression rather than a status symbol – sustainability and social consciousness may well be the new emblems of status.

The integration of social activism into a brand's aesthetic, then, allows it to align with the values of its younger consumers and their passion for social justice causes. This year, millennial favourite Gucci announced a donation of \$500,000 to March for Our Lives in support for stricter gun control, and in turn a demonstrative push towards 'inspirational' rather than 'aspirational' branding. Put simply, younger consumers are more likely to purchase goods from brands that resonate with them. Brands have traditionally avoided taking vocal stances on such controversial issues under the guise of corporate neutrality, but in an evolving market,

brands which actively advocate their values are the most successful in engaging consumers. In a report published by Cone Communications, 87% of American consumers stated they would purchase a product based on values, or because its producer advocated for an issue they cared about.

Social media has become the most effective way for brands to disseminate their collections as well as communicate with their customers. Within seconds of Balenciaga's aberrant World Food Bank capsule debut, the collection was live-streamed and plastered all over Instagram, piquing consumers' interest. What may have begun as a fashion experiment is now an industry-wide phenomenon. Brands are now compelled to imbue their clothing with meaning to gain social currency and capitalise on the lucrative 'hype' it generates. It has become fashionable to literally wear your opinion on your sleeve. Furthermore, with the volatility of the current political landscape, more and more consumers are looking towards brands, celebrities, and other influencers to take a stance on important social issues. Can fashion be a harbinger of change?

Millennials also exhibit a lower sense of brand loyalty than previous generations, favouring brands that are innovative and disruptive to the status quo. Against the backdrop of an evolving consumer market, brands simply cannot afford to stay silent. It is imperative that they maintain a sense of authenticity when engaging in such

showcases of activism instead of simply jumping onto the bandwagon. Opportunistic attempts to leverage social justice causes only result in reducing such causes to mere slogans and a thinly veiled backdrop against which to increase sales.

Brands that openly engage in activism also open themselves up to scrutiny from critics and consumers alike. Dior's 'We Should All Be Feminists' shirt was the most Instagrammed look of 2017 Paris Fashion Week, with its visibility enhanced by the likes of Natalie Portman and Rihanna. Critics, however, have challenged the validity of wearing a mass-produced T shirt (marked up to \$710) that proclaims solidarity, when its production relied on low-paid female labour. Consistency is key for brands seeking to outwardly embrace their core values as well as to ensure their commitment to social causes – and this extends beyond this season's trends. Fashion houses are redefining corporate social responsibility. Brands can no longer just stand for something, they must now stand up for something.

"brands are now compelled to imbue their clothing with meaning to gain social currency and capitalise on the lucrative 'hype' it generates"

Princess Nokia: Empowering audiences



Destiny Frasqueri empowers both herself and her fans through her music and lyrics. Here, Alix Moussy delves into her ethos

words by alix moussy, art by kezhu wang

Growing up in New York, Destiny Frasqueri, known by her stage name Princess Nokia, went through some tough times, spending time in foster care as well as suffering abuse from her guardians. She recounts her childhood in songs and interviews, because this is what shaped who she is today. Experiences of isolation laid the foundation for her work: a place of creative exploration as well as liberation from hardships and exclusion.

In the nineties and early noughties, New York was home to a variety of music scenes, which Frasqueri explored in order to escape – punk rock, ska music, hip hop, and house. She talks about the varied influences on her music: gothic clothes, the queer underground music scene, and voguing. This early dialogue between herself and various creative environments led to her making music. She creates positive and compelling messages through her lyrics, which reflect on her life and delve into themes of self-acceptance, peace, and general empowerment in different forms. At her concerts, she creates an energetic yet safe space for her audience.

Her personal empowerment finds its roots in the decisions she has made throughout her early career. In 2012, when her song *Bitch I'm Posh* went viral, she was flown out to Europe by record labels – but rather than taking the deals, she decided to follow her own rhythm in her art. Doing otherwise, she felt, would hinder her creativity and leave her exploited for money. Over five years she turned down five labels, before finally signing to independent music label Rough Trade. These choices affect her personality as well as her music. On the one hand, it enabled her to determine the course of her career and life. On the other, Frasqueri respects and preserves music as a fantasy world that people escape to, an especially pertinent idea given the commoditisation of so much talent that continues today.

Many other artists do choose to follow the money and opportunities presented to them, and that probably also feels empowering. Take Cardi B, who in her massively successful *I Like It* declares, “I like million dollar deals, where’s my pen, bitch I’m signing”. However, Princess Nokia went in a different direction, because the rapper wanted to replicate the positive environment of the music scenes she had been a part of earlier in her life. Her lyrics in *1992*, a mix-tape that she originally launched on Soundcloud, showcase this. This was later expanded and re-released as a studio album, *1992 Deluxe*. The picture she paints isn’t perfect, but rather beautifully flawed. “Eczema so bad I’m bleeding, but I smile and keep it cheesing” rolls off the beat in *Bart Simpson*, followed later by “I really like Marvel ‘cause characters look just like me, and women don’t have roles that

make them look too sexually”. In *Brujas*, her words glorify her Puerto-Rican origins: “I’m that Black a-Rican bruja straight out from the Yoruba”. She explores her femininity and beauty, and her acceptance of them, when she chants “My little titties and my phat belly” in *Tomboy*. All of this builds up a positive image of herself. It is flaunted for others to see, understand, and replicate.

What she’s doing in her lyrics, she also does live at her concerts. It’s so much more than creating music for sales. She calls women to the front in her shows, and explains that they can feel safe in the space she creates. She talks with her audience and treats her fans as individual human beings. She defeats the endless pursuit of profit and puts value back into music and what it can achieve. For Princess Nokia, a message of positivity goes beyond the stage; she hosts events and radio show *Smart Girl Club*, and delivers talks at universities. She talks about intersectional feminism, about her experiences and those of other women, about art and what



it means. Together with her shows and lyrics, she demonstrates that difference and originality are valued, and attempts to reflect on the imperfection of the world. Everyone is empowered in their own way: it’s up to individuals to decide what they do with this experience. This isn’t to say she’s all sweetness, since she’s had her fair share of scandal – from throwing soup at a racist on the subway to attacking an abusive audience member at a gig in Cambridge. She certainly stands up for what she believes in. Even if some people don’t like her songs, there’s still an important lesson to learn from her journey. The message of empowerment she represents and spreads isn’t limited to her music, it touches all aspects of her life.

Empowerment is agency. So many factors can get in the way of that – financial issues, mental illness, natural disasters, to name but a few. We crave perfection and stability but the world seems to give us just the opposite. We feel bad, so we need an escape in the form of drugs, gambling, TV, parties. Escapes are spaces and activities that take up our time and money, and they divert attention away from what’s

not going so well. They also come in varying forms. Drugs give you a chemical high and let you avoid reality, but the psychological risk and economic cost is high. Art is the opposite. We all have some sort of connection with art, whether it’s feeling the rush of energy flowing from your headphones when you tread through grey London, or sharing your grandpa’s nostalgia as he plays you an old favourite song. If what artists create is honest and positive, then our escape is too – art can’t make you addicted or overdose, rather, it prepares you to take on reality.

There’s a catch, though. Selling art can transform it from an escape to a money-making machine. Making music is like cooking: when the ingredients are good, the cook is talented, and the focus is the taste and the experience of the food. The result is delicious. However, commoditisation shifts the focus away from these things, and from the creation of something truly valuable to something which is purely a product to be sold. This leaves the audience with an experience which isn’t as rich as it should be.

Princess Nokia avoided this shift. She empowered herself and made art that empowers others. Her music shows pain, loss, hardship, difficulty to cope, but also honesty, beauty, care, hard work, and positivity. People can relate to it and come back being more aware of the beauty in their own lives too.

Our ability to better our own lives depends partly on our ability to relate to the world peacefully, and that includes knowing how to escape healthily, in a constructive manner, when we feel cornered by worries and negativity. Art can be a healthy route to doing so – the direction in which we take our lives can be influenced by our interaction with it. All this matters because, constantly around us, there are serious issues at hand and immense suffering that we need to deal with. Tackling these issues also requires positive ways of escaping this same reality that we have to work on. That’s when we breathe as individuals and explore what we want from life. Everyone will have their own ways of coping, and music is an escape route for many.

Unfortunately, the never-ending thirst for high returns does exist in the music industry, and it has a huge impact on the art that is created. It makes it, and therefore us, subjected to false ideas, to constructs of perfection and violence. This actually makes us weaker in our lives. It takes away our breathing space; the space we need to reflect on our lives before acting. Princess Nokia is a strong countercurrent to this. She reminds society that certain things are more important than money and immediate gratification: care, love, self-acceptance, honesty, and bravery all form her as an individual, and they all shape her music.

Hindi cinema's fight for caste empowerment

Hindi cinema has played an increasingly important role in the empowerment of persecuted individuals

words by ivan nagar, art by carol bartlett



Since time immemorial in India, there has existed a social practice that has only grown increasingly corrupt over the past few thousand years. What began as a job-assignment system based on the merits and qualities of every different individual, eventually turned into a hereditary caste system that brought centuries of misery, despair, and an avalanche of social injustices upon those at the very bottom of the pile. They have been given many names through the centuries.

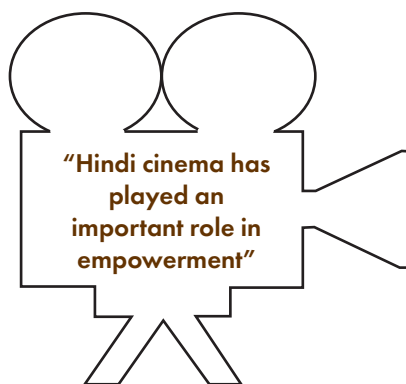
The Hindu 'varna' system classified them as 'Shudras', Mahatma Gandhi gave them the name Harijans (children of god) and B. R. Ambedkar, the man who drafted the constitution of India, called them (what is most commonly used today) Dalit, which in Sanskrit means 'one who is scattered or broken'. It is a sad irony, then, that the lower castes have broken away from Hinduism to seek refuge in Christianity, Sikhism and Islam, only to have found that these other religions also impose upon them the same foul practice of 'untouchability' – intolerance based

on the notion that the Dalits are somehow 'unclean'. Human rights abuses against them today are legion.

Hindi cinema has, however, played an important role in the empowerment of these persecuted people. From its inception, it focused heavily on films concerned with social issues, which makes perfect sense, I suppose, in a country that was under the thumb of British rule for almost two centuries.

The Early Years: 1930s - 1940s

Perhaps the most important film of the 1930s was *Achhut Kanya* (1936, 'The Untouchable Girl'). The film, which had a class/caste clash at its centre in the form of a high-caste Brahmin man and a Dalit woman who fall in love, pioneered the criticism of caste in Indian cinema. Indeed, the film was produced by the lead actress Devika Rani who herself belonged to an upper caste landlord family of Bengal, but nevertheless dared to be self-critical of her own privileges and the system that awarded them to her.



The 1940s was a more robust decade for Hindi cinema; it had gained technical momentum, and film output became more prolific. At the premiere of the anti-discriminatory *Achhut* (1940), Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (who would later go on to become the first deputy prime minister of independent India) stated that this film could help rid India of the curse that is untouchability, and went on to make the then bold claim that it was one of the biggest

obstacles on the road to India's true freedom.

Arguably, the most politically charged year in the history of Indian cinema was 1946, just a year before the Partition. It arrived with not one but three landmark films with socially-conscious statements to make about discrimination, which included *Neecha Nagar* ('Lowly City') the first and only Indian film ever to win the Palme d'Or at Cannes. But the groundbreaking 1950s were still to come.

Neo-Realism in Bollywood: 1950s - 1960s

After the end of the Second World War, Europe was in shambles. Destruction had been wrought, and the burgeoning Italian Neo-Realism movement built on raw human stories in turn. Many great Indian filmmakers like Satyajit Ray and Bimal Roy introduced this cinematic style to Indian audiences, creating groundbreaking films like 1953's *Do Beegha Zameen* ('Two Acres of Land') which told the tale of a poor lower class villager, who travels to the city to provide for his family after being tricked by his rich landlord. Roy's other film was, in my opinion, the single most efficient takedown of caste discrimination in the history of Indian cinema, and that was *Sujata* (1959), in which a lower caste orphaned infant is taken in by an upper caste family, but is never truly 'accepted' by the mother; she grows up always being reminded of her 'lowliness' and inherent inferiority.

It is no coincidence that the socially conscious cinema of the 1950s is also commonly considered the golden age of Bollywood. Caste-conscious films were tremendous commercial successes that could actually hope to influence society on a tangible level. One of the biggest successes was *Shree 420* (1955), a love letter of sorts to communism; political preferences aside, it is hard to deny that communism has some very applicable ideals to teach Indian society. Another masterpiece, without which the mention of 1950s Bollywood would be incomplete, is *Pyasa* (1957, 'The Parched Man'), depicting with the bleakest cynicism how the state had failed its citizens after independence.

The 1960s offered fewer films with the critique of the caste system at their heart, but

plenty of mainstream titles were still hostile towards the class divide. Some pointed at the exploitative nature of the upper class and corruption; others argued that not even lower class yet upper-caste peasants are safe from such exploitation. But ultimately, the 60s ended on a high and secular note with *Saat Hindustani* (1969, 'Seven Indians') which went beyond the class, caste and even religious divides to offer a much-needed message of universal inclusivity.

Collective Disillusionment: 1970s

The 1970s went all out with frustration at the establishment. Several filmmakers (most notably the screenwriter duo of Salim-Javed) captured the disillusionment amongst the young and unemployed in particular. There were numerous potboilers, undoubtedly now in line with popular tastes, pushing the message of religious inclusivity and reduction of class disparity, the most prominent ones being *Amar Akbar Anthony* and *Parvarish* (both released in 1977) and *Muqaddar Ka Sikandar* (1978). Even 'nationalist' filmmakers like Manoj Kumar were critical of the struggles faced by the nation's youth in films like *Roti, Kapda Aur Makaan* (1974, 'Bread, Garb and a Shelter'). There were also titles like *Bobby* (1973) that addressed socio-economic disparity, but with a gentle overarching theme of juvenile romanticism. But there is one crucial omission inherent in most of these films, and that is a direct and passionate confrontation of the caste system.

Decline: 1980s - 1990s

There is near-universal acceptance of the claim, among film academics as well as industry insiders, that the 1980s brought a sharp decline in the quality of mainstream Hindi cinema.

Its main trigger was the introduction of VHS which drastically reduced cinema footfall, and a decline in quality reflected strongly in the selection of scripts being produced. The general focus shifted from producing 'issue-based' films to B-grade exploitative cinema, which could be churned out quickly with less burden of return on investment.



This gap, however, was filled magnificently by Hindi arthouse cinema, for which the move to home media was almost a boon as they no longer needed to compete with the mainstream for screen time. Films such as *Chameli Ki Shaadi* (1986, 'Chameli's Wedding') and *Aakrosh* (1980, 'Cry of the Wounded') directly critiqued the caste system after cinema had long hit pause on the issue. It would, however, be unfair to reduce the contribution of the mainstream to nil, as some displayed criticism of social evils. The year 1985 specifically stands out for its socially conscious films. *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* ('Rama Your Ganges is Impure') brilliantly pointed out the hypocrisy of a society with high moral values but little to no self-awareness, followed by *Arjun*, which took the baton from the angst-youth films of the likes of *Deewar* and *Ghulam*

('Slave') by attacking the landlord-peasant divide in rural India.

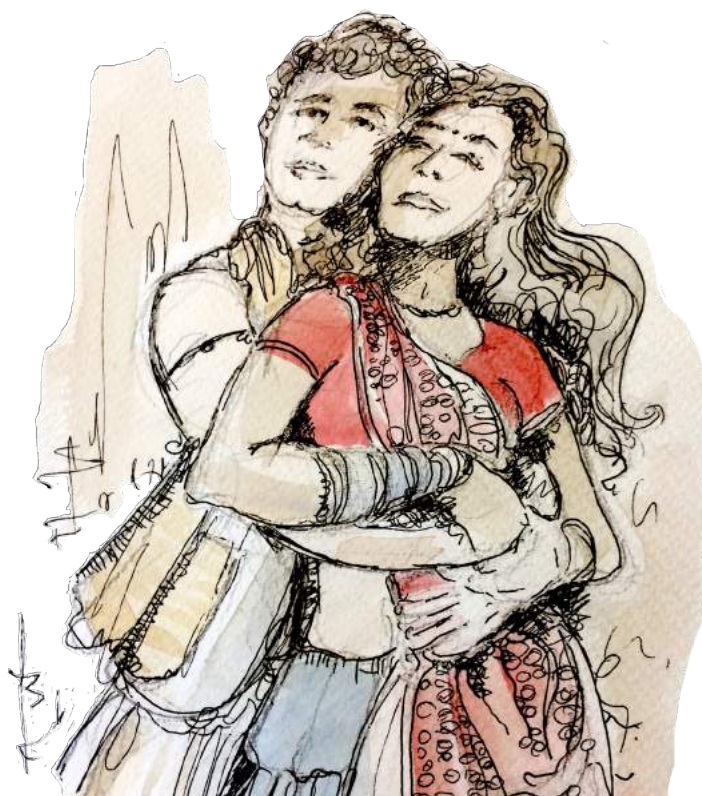
Post-1991, due to changes in government regulations regarding foreign investments, there was a major influx of American pop culture, reflected in glossier, more materialistic cinema that also started pandering to an emerging new audience: the non-residential Indians living in America and Britain. This NRI-pandering is generally seen as a low phase in Indian cinema because the focus shifted from any domestic issues to simply telling escapist stories that depicted an abundance of happy upper-class people who never seemed to have or need jobs.

Revival: 2000s - 2010s

The 2000s sparked a slow progression towards what is, in my opinion, the second golden age of Hindi cinema. The biggest hit was probably *Lagaan* (2001), despite only its subplot honing in on caste injustice, by depicting how untouchables are forced to live on the village boundaries and forbidden to assimilate with the general residents. A huge box-office success, its message managed to reach out to a much larger diaspora, unlike the documentaries or state-produced films that beat the same drum, while in 2006, Shakespeare's *Othello* was adapted into a rural north Indian setting, where race was replaced with caste.

All this has culminated in the present decade, perhaps the most socially conscious era in Hindi cinema's history since the 50s. Great voices have emerged from all over the country, including that of Nagraj Manjule, who directed two Marathi language films that dealt with caste. And even in new-age Bollywood, films like *Masaan* (2015, 'Crematorium') again showcase an astute understanding of caste-politics in India. Although the latter may be classed as 'Indie', there have also been a fair share of star-studded films like *Aarakshan* (2011, 'Reservation/Affirmative Action') that tackle caste-based discrimination head-on, and most recently of all *Mukkabaaz* (2017, 'The Brawler') that addressed the rampant casteism in northern India.

The future looks somewhat bright for social issue films in India. It's been over 80 years since an inter-caste love story in the 1930s first addressed the injustice of untouchability. Although untouchability was abolished in the 1950 Indian constitution, even today caste repression is still a living reality, present in nearly every sphere of life. Cinema is a key ally of emancipation for all in India, but we still have a long way to go. As Hindi cinema's history has shown, this is an ongoing, hard-fought battle that not just film, but other modes of Hindi culture must continue to fight. The empowerment of India's oppressed communities is like a dwindling lamp at the moment, one which needs to be refilled with the oil of our collective conscience as a nation.



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symphony i

*You sing highly in praise,
to the coloured abyss of sky above, there will be
someone
who hears you, there might
even be someone who listens, darling, girl,
woman.*

*Humans are hollow
creatures, we will
never understand how one day,
that very sky will rip in
half and swallow
us whole, yet we sing, we*

*sing boldly
with hairs on our arms rising like soprano voices, and
somewhere a man will look up from his
binding duties, his
sworn oaths and pledged allegiances; like hollow men, like us
they fill themselves with
hope, not acceptance, he will
follow
your sweet melody
to
his death.
He is no hero.
He is not a Good Man.*

*Sing as though you
are embedded in the sets of
Faust's opera, like swallows in
apple trees.
We will fall from grace like
these tumbling apples,
like these crumbling pillars.*

*We will swell our lungs with air until
these songs bring
gods to their knees and men
to their demise,
until eternity echoes with our
voices,
we have voices,
stand and sing. For every woman who has
fallen and for
every woman who has not been heard.*

By Neha Mohanty

