

Abstractions in International Relations: on the mystification of trans, queer, and subaltern life in critical knowledge production

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Abstract

This paper identifies a common process of mystification within academic knowledge production today: the treatment of subordinated groups as mere metaphors or rhetorical figures for academic theorizing. We witness it when academics ask what trans might teach us about transnationality, when we are invited to reflect on what might be queer about modern warfare, or when nation-states are described as subaltern. Trans, queer, and subaltern populations are routinely fetishized within scholarship on the “traditional” International Relations concerns of statecraft, migration, security, and so on. This tendency serves a mystifying function by disabling scholars from examining the social relations that shape and organize their lives and histories. This paper proceeds in three parts. First, to understand the origins and logics of this self-mystifying process, this paper returns, via Stuart Hall, to Karl Marx’s methodological writings on abstraction. It contributes to the formalization of his methodology for contemporary IR scholarship by drawing a distinction between the fetishization of abstraction and the concretization of abstraction. Second, the paper explores how abstracted subject positions have been fetishized within three fields of international studies: trans studies, queer theory, and subaltern studies. Third, after elaborating a critique of this mystifying move, the paper outlines alternative approaches that instead seek to concretize the abstractions queer, trans, and subaltern by attending to their specific historical and social determinations. These strategies of demystification, we argue, carry forward a founding commitment of critical theory that is all too often abandoned within scholarly knowledge production today.

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This paper identifies a common process of mystification within academic knowledge production today: the treatment of subordinated groups as mere metaphors or rhetorical figures for academic theorizing. We witness it when academics ask what *trans* might teach us about transnationality, when we are invited to reflect on what might be *queer* about modern warfare, or when nation-states are described as *subaltern*. Trans, queer, and subaltern populations are routinely fetishized within scholarship on the “traditional” International Relations concerns of statecraft, migration, security, and so on. This tendency serves a mystifying function by disabling scholars from examining the social relations that organize their lives and histories.

The critical observation that the discipline of International Relations (IR) constitutes itself through the fetishization of abstractions is not new. In his piece “Race, Amnesia, and the Education of International Relations,” Sankaran Krishna (2001) argued that the discipline had historically been founded on fetishized abstractions such as sovereignty, anarchy, and war. His wager was that the core of IR continuously elides questions of slavery, genocide, dispossession, and exploitation through a process of fetishization that severs abstractions “from the historical contexts within which they emerged, the purposes they were meant to serve, the interests they were furthering, the specific peoples they were simultaneously dispossessing and empowering, and the acts of epistemic and physical violence that they set in motion” (Krishna, 2001: 410). Two decades since its publication, it has become a mainstay of critical scholarship in IR that the discipline has been predicated on a series of disavowals and exclusions that mystify global relations of domination.

A number of questions about IR’s self-mystification remain open. If abstraction is, as Krishna (2001) himself admits, “an inescapable analytical device that makes knowledge practices possible in the first place” (p. 403), how might we avoid reproducing the willful amnesia he describes? Is a non-fetishizing treatment of abstractions possible? How do abstractions differ from “theory?” And, are critical scholars immune from the tendency to fetishize abstractions? To address these questions, this paper returns, via Stuart Hall, to Karl Marx’s methodological writings on abstraction. It contributes to the formalization of Marx’s critical methodology for contemporary IR scholarship by drawing an important distinction between the *fetishization* of abstraction and the *concretization* of abstraction (cf. Koddenbrock, 2015). The former, we argue, serves the function of mystification, whereas the latter represents a strategy of demystification.¹

This paper explores the treatment of abstractions within three fields of international studies that are widely considered to represent its most critical frontiers: trans studies, queer theory, and subaltern studies. We find that abstracted subject positions are frequently fetishized within their respective literature. This move operates as a form of mystification by foreclosing scholars’ ability to address the specific and substantive issues of subaltern, queer, and trans people’s lives. After elaborating a critique of this

tendency, the paper outlines alternative approaches that instead seek to concretize the abstractions *queer*, *trans*, and *subaltern* by attending to their specific historical and social determinations. These strategies of demystification carry forward a founding commitment of critical theory that is all too often abandoned within scholarly knowledge production today.

Marx's method of demystification

In “Social Forces, States and World Orders,” Robert Cox (1981) writes: “Critical theory is directed to the social and political complex as a whole rather than to the separate parts” (p. 129). He explains that, although problem-solving theories take their particular object of study for granted, a critical approach “leads towards the construction of a larger picture of the whole of which the initially contemplated part is just one component.” Critical theory seeks to reveal how constituent components of the social whole come to appear as distinct and separate—that is, as mere abstractions. It illuminates the social whole by investigating the social and historical embeddedness of its abstracted components. This unearthing of the social relations within which abstractions emerge is often referred to as a process of demystification.

In search of a methodological clarification of the social function of abstractions, Stuart Hall (2021) embarks upon a preliminary excursion to the Marxist origins of critical theory. He finds in the “1857 Introduction” from the *Grundrisse* an outline of two competing methods of abstraction, namely, the fetishization and the concretization of abstraction. The former is characteristic of 18th-century political economists, and the latter is elaborated by Marx himself. Hall illustrates the stakes of this methodological dispute by discussing its application to two key abstractions—“the individual” and “the population.” Marx (1973) famously begins the introduction to the *Grundrisse* with a criticism of Adam Smith and David Ricardo’s starting point in Political Economy: “[t]he individual and isolated hunter and fisherman” (p. 83). He argues that the isolated individual of the 18th-century political economists only emerges within the “developed” social relations of capitalism, where human beings are separated from the means of production and come to the market to participate in exchange as free, equal, and atomized *individuals*. For Marx, this new sphere of human activity is the historical condition for the production of the category of “the individual.” The individual, as an abstracted expression of subjectivity, can only emerge together with the economy as a newly identifiable set of social relations. Marx explains,

[T]his eighteenth-century individual—the product on one side of the dissolution of feudal forms of society, on the other side of the new forces of production developed since the sixteenth century—appears as an ideal, whose existence [political economists] project into the past. Not as the historic result but as history’s point of departure. As the Natural Individual appropriate to their notion of human nature, not arising historically, but posited by nature. (Marx, 1973: 83)

“The individual,” Hall (2021) clarifies, “cannot be the point of departure, but only *the result*” (p. 21). Political economists naturalize the individual within bourgeois society, projecting his appearance within the given order into the past. The abstraction is

therefore rendered transhistorical and universal, capable of being extended to the origins of human life. Hall (2021) concludes: “A whole historical and ideological development, then, is already presupposed in—but hidden within—the notion of the Natural Individual.” The fetishized abstraction of the individual erases the historical development of bourgeois society.

Against this simplified, ahistorical treatment of the individual, Marx (1973) insists on beginning “with ‘socially determinate’ individuals” (p. 83). While political economists must remove all those “contingent complexities of modern life” that constitute the individual within capitalist society, Hall (2021) notes that Marx treats the individual as “the sum of many, prior, determinations” (p. 22). Within Marx’s method of abstraction, “the individual” is the *point of arrival*, a category that can only appear at a definite stage within history, rather than as a *point of departure*.

Marx identifies another such instance of fetishized abstraction within Political Economy when he turns to the concept of “population”:

It seems to be correct to begin with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition, thus to begin, in economics, with e.g. the population [. . .]. However, on closer examination this proves false. The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn are an empty phrase if I am not familiar with the elements on which they rest. E.g. wage labour, capital, etc. [. . .] Thus, if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception [*Vorstellung*] of the whole, and I would then, by means of further determination, move analytically towards ever more simple concepts [*Begriffe*], from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest determinations. From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations. (Marx, 1973: 100)

When the concept of population is taken as a point of departure, it can only provide “a chaotic conception of the whole.” Marx’s methodological procedure, on the other hand, treats “population” as a point of arrival that sums up “a rich totality of many determinations and relations” specific to capitalist society. This abstraction, Hall (2021) explains, “has to be reconstructed as contradictorily composed of the more concrete historical relations: slave-owner/slave, lord/serf, master/servant, capitalist/labourer” (p. 37). Herein lies the central innovation of Marx’s method of abstraction. It first looks beneath the surface of what appears to us as the population, decomposing the abstraction into the determinate social relations which constitute it. A “population” is shown to presuppose “classes,” which in turn presuppose the social relations of labor, wage, value form, and so on (Koddenbrock, 2015: 257). This buried content is, in turn, restored to the surface. This dual movement of decomposing an abstraction into its various determinations through a series of simpler concepts, and then reconstructing it as a complex unity, is the process through which abstractions become concretized.

Hall corrects two familiar mischaracterizations of this approach. First, Marx’s method of abstraction “is not merely a mental operation” (Hall, 2021: 27). To say that the population or the individual are abstractions is not to say that they are simply ideas or illusions. Abstractions are real social phenomena that organize spheres of activity in capitalism. As

Hall (2021) explains, Marx's is "a method which groups, not a simple 'essence' behind the different historical forms, but precisely the many determinations in which 'essential differences' are preserved." Second, to speak of "the concrete" is not to speak of "the empirical." Hall (2021) writes: "The concrete is concrete [. . .] not because it is simple and empirical, but because it exhibits a certain kind of necessary complexity" (p. 38). The concrete, rather than meaning the empirically given, is the phenomenon grasped in its historical and complex unity, and this complexity has to be reconstructed *in thought*. To recap: We begin with an observable abstraction. A decomposition and reconstruction thereof must then occur by distilling its constitutive determinations. This is how we arrive at an understanding of abstraction *in its concreteness*.

Marx (1973) maintains that abstractions are "a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within these relations" (p. 105). Crucially, Hall's shows that we cannot simply take them at face value if our aim is to fully comprehend them in their complexity. Rather, their concreteness must be reconstructed within thought. This, Marx (1973) notes, requires re-establishing the abstraction through his methodological procedure as "the concentration of many determinations" (p. 101). Without this effort to concretize an abstraction, we are left with what Hall (2021) refers to as an "aesthetic conceit" or "ideological presupposition" (p. 21). Hall is seeking to capture the process of self-mystification in capitalist society. Abstractions, as they first appear to us, are mystifying appearances that are necessary for the reproduction of the given order. They serve an obfuscatory function because they obstruct our ability to perceive the set of social relations that generate them. That is, they tend to obscure the historical specificity of the structures, relations, and organizational mechanisms through which they are constituted. As such, the social function of abstractions is to suppress a critical comprehension of the social whole. Hall (2021) therefore sums up Marx's methodology as "the critique of 'normal' types of abstraction" (p. 22).

Since Marxism itself emerges from specific social and historical relations, when Marxists fail to historicize their project, they risk producing their own fetishized abstractions (such as the figure of the white, unionized factory worker in the global North). The method of concretization therefore provides Marxism with a method for its own ongoing critique and expansion (Floyd, 2009: 31). Stuart Hall's work exemplifies the application of Marx's method of concretization beyond the historical circumstances of its articulation. Writing in the seventies context of global upheaval, Hall finds within the work of Marxist philosophers Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser the conceptual tools to demystify the widespread moral panics around race and crime in Britain at the time (Singh, 2022: 29). His famous saying that "race is the modality through which class is lived" should be understood as concretizing class relations through an analysis of the mediating function of race. Speaking of class in abstract terms, according to Hall, "[does] not adequately represent the structural differentiation of white and black labor in relation to capital" (Singh, 2022: 30). A similar deployment of Marx's method beyond its original application can be found in feminist social reproduction theory. The Marxist feminist dictum "They say it is love, we say it is unwaged work"—formulated in the same years as Hall's oft-cited line—can be understood as a concretizing effort that reveals how processes of feminization serve to mystify the reproductive labor of housewives (De'Ath, 2022; Raha, 2021).

This paper demonstrates the promise of Marx's method of concretization for contemporary critical international studies. It considers three abstractions that represent the foundation of distinct fields of inquiry—*queer*, *trans*, and *subaltern*. It finds that scholars, rather than seeking to concretize these abstractions, have overwhelmingly deployed them in ways that tend to reinforce their mystifying function. Each of the following sections homes in on the particular ways in which these abstractions are deployed. We argue that, while each abstraction operates in distinct and separate ways, all three represent instances of mystification within their respective field of research.

The mystification of trans life in international studies

Ongoing debates within trans studies have raised crucial questions about queer theory's treatment of trans people in a fetishizing way. In her book *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (2000), Viviane K. Namaste argued that queer theory has been more interested in how practices of drag or transsexuality can serve as a figurative exposition of the instability of sex/gender, as a tool with which to reveal the contingency of all identity formations, than in the precarious living conditions of trans people. Queer theorists' fetishization of *trans* as a rhetorical figure disables them from conceptualizing the specificity of violence and dispossession with which trans people, especially those who are racialized and engaged in sex work, are faced. Namaste (2000) therefore writes: "Queer theory's epistemological and methodological presuppositions authorize a political agenda that robs transgender people of dignity and integrity" (p. 23). Andrea Long Chu has been equally unrelenting in her repudiation of queer theory for its disregard for the substantive issues of trans people's quotidian lives. According to Chu and Drager (2019), *queer* "has reached a point of analytic exhaustion," (p. 105) so queer scholars have simply swapped it out for the term *trans*:

The basic idea is that transgender people, as a narrow identity group, can be a methodological stepping-stone for thinking more expansively about boundary crossings of all sorts: not just trans-gender, but also transnational, transracial, transspecies—you get the picture. And so the editors gift us with *transing*, queering's unasked-for sequel. Like most sequels, it's just *the same damn movie* with a few plot elements lightly rearranged. (Chu and Drager, 2019: 105)

Chu (2019) argues that in much critical scholarship, the word *trans* appears as little more than an "au courant garnish" (p. 111). The collection *Transgender Marxism* (2021) also contains uncompromising critiques of the mobilization of the abstraction *trans*. It seeks to refuse the treatment of trans women as "stand-ins," "allegories," or "metaphorical figures" for something other than their own lives. The editors explain in the introduction to the anthology that as the transgender woman "is brought to bear on all topics of social weight, she instrumentalises herself—trans as condition, as a way of being, as a mode of life—and is made to bear the burden of the entire gendered order" (Gleeson and O'Rourke, 2021: 11–12). They continue: "Whatever she is, the trans woman is always not herself; she is a representation of gender trouble writ large." The fetishization of the abstraction *trans* as an allegorical figure leads to an effacement of the particularities of trans histories and experiences, including the concrete ways that trans people are

differentially exposed to precarity and violence along hierarchies of race, class, and ability. In short, the social function of the allegory is mystification.

The richest contribution to the discussions around the theoretical and political usages of the category *trans* is Emma Heaney's *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory* (2017). In this book, Heaney provides a compelling account of the historical emergence of the "trans feminine allegory." She argues that sexology simplified the diversity of trans-feminine life into a single diagnostic narrative of transsexuality. The origin of the trans feminine can therefore be traced back to medical writings of the late 19th century, which identified trans women as archetypes for the redefinition of sex roles. Trans femininity, Heaney (2017) writes, became singularly defined as "the condition of 'a woman trapped in a man's body'" (p. 5). This allegory was taken up in a range of cultural representations and has been resuscitated most recently within contemporary queer theory, as a figure to explain or represent the *general* relation between the body and sexual identity. The crux of Heaney's argument is that this trans-feminine allegory re-centers cisness. There is an assumption, in her own words, 'that trans woman's very existence *means something* outside itself, something about the gender of a putatively cis general subject' (Heaney, 2017: 6). Heaney's book clarifies the stakes involved in this fetishistic deployment of the abstraction *trans*. She demonstrates that it entails not only an insensitivity to the lives of trans people but more fundamentally the recentering of cis experience and ideology.

How has the abstraction *trans* been deployed within international studies? In an agenda-setting piece entitled "Towards Trans-Gendering International Relations?," the feminist IR scholar Laura Sjoberg (2012) has asked how "trans-theorizing" can enrich existing debates within disciplinary IR. She argues that trans-theorizing should be taken seriously because it provides useful heuristic tools (like visibility, liminality, crossing, and disidentification) that may contribute to the study of world politics. Trans analytics, in Sjoberg's view, can have significant implications for the study of migration, genocide, and war. In short, this piece renders metaphors such as crossing, disidentification, and liminality definitional of trans life as such and then considers how they might be deployed as "useful tools in understanding global politics" (Sjoberg, 2012: 343). For instance, Sjoberg (2012) argues that the notion of "crossing" complicates the Self/Other binary that underpins traditional scholarship on civilization and conflict: "Seeing trans-genders, however, brings this apparently simple relationship between self and other into question and interrogates the naturalness of stagnant identification" (p. 347).

Laura Sjoberg has significantly contributed to legitimizing the study of gender and sexuality within IR, paving the way for scholars like us who seek to advance this scholarship. We argue, however, that such attempts to incorporate trans studies have unwittingly impeded the possibility of thorough engagement with the social and historical forces that structure transgender life in its diverse forms. Sjoberg fixes the abstraction *trans* in one spot, not to investigate the relations that it contains and expresses, but rather so that it can be made to facilitate further abstract IR theorizing. The movement from abstract to abstract leaves our understanding of the category *trans* un-concretized and, in fact, mystifies its embeddedness within the social whole.

The idea of crossing is frequently ascribed to the abstracted trans body in critical scholarship on migration. The anthology *Transgender Migrations* (2012) states that its

purpose is to understand how *trans* can function as “a heuristic frame to open up new lines of flight and terrains of critical thought, demarcating new concepts, investigative frontiers, and critical methods” (Cotten, 2012: 2). For the volume’s editor, *trans* can be made to mean something other than itself, namely, the “heterotopic, multidimensional mobilities whose viral flows and circuits resist teleology, linearity, and tidy, discrete borders.” Once these qualities have been ascribed to the abstracted trans body, *trans* can become a heuristic device to analyze bodies that are “undergoing transit/ions other than gender—national, cultural, economic, and geographical migrations.” Further examples of this methodological deployment of *trans* abound. In a chapter entitled *Trans-Gender, Trans-National: Crossing Binary Lines*, migration scholar Emma Bond (2018) asks how “the various manifestations of the trans-body can function as a sign of disruption, of displacement, of being ‘out of place’” (p. 76). She writes that “the journey metaphor of transition” can help us rethink categories of confinement, traveling, and home (Bond, 2018), and that the experience of gender dysphoria can be “productively extended” (p. 76) to “open up new debates around belonging and orientation” (Bond, 2018: 72). Consider also the article “Is the Trans in Transnational the Trans in Transgender?,” where Jessica Berman (2017) reads Virginia Woolf’s novel *Orlando* as a “trans text” to refine our understanding of “transnational categories of belonging” (p. 218). Rather than seeking to concretize the abstraction *trans* through analyses of the social determinations that have historically organized transgender lives, these scholars have deployed the term *trans* to ground and clarify an array of scholarly concerns within international politics.

Various human experiences—like divorce, gestation, or mourning—could be considered symbolic of generalized experiences of crossing. Why do scholars appoint trans people for this role? Jay Prosser (1995) has commented critically on the transgender subject’s “role” within critical scholarship, observing that the transgender subject’s crossing journey is understood “as a *vehicle*, one which moves us away from what are now perceived as nostalgic and confining notions of belonging—the natural body, identity, community” (p. 486). Prosser adds his voice to the ensemble of trans scholars who have considered the treatment of *trans* as a trope to be a mystifying move that undermines the specific relations of trans life. Emma Heaney (2017) has gone even further in questioning the equation of *trans* with metaphors of crossing. She argues that this equation reproduces sexology’s “diagnostic insistence that trans people are uniquely defined by alienation from the body” and by an aspiration to become “cis” (Heaney, 2017: 15). Historically, mollies, fairies, and girl-boys were not seen as “crossing” from manhood into womanhood. On the contrary, they occupied the social role of women and were “viewed as interchangeable with cis women” (Heaney, 2017: 30). Heaney’s genealogy of trans lifeworlds shows that trans femininity has never simply meant being free from, or disruptive of, sexed categories. It is therefore deeply troubling when IR scholars—in an attempt to prove that the abstracted trans body can help “us” (the putatively cis academic) illuminate experiences of border crossing, forced displacement, and national belonging—ascribe to the abstracted trans body ideas of “crossing,” “disruption,” or “displacement.” IR scholars collude with cis ideology and the mystification of trans feminine experiences, Heaney’s acute and urgent work shows, through the rendering of these metaphors as definitional of trans life.

These fetishistic tendencies erase the multiple determinations of race, social status, and other axes of difference that shape trans life. As the final section shows, the scholarship that has been more attuned to questions of race, empire, and class, most notably queer social reproduction theory and trans/queer of color critique, provides a corrective to the mystifying moves outlined above. They demonstrate what it would mean to grasp the abstraction *trans* in its concreteness.

The mystification of queerness in international studies

Those scholars trained in queer and poststructuralist schools of thought would likely want to mount a defense of their position. How, they might ask, does our critique avoid falling into the trap of representational politics that queer theory was hoping to escape in the first place? How do theorists avoid appointing themselves as the final arbiters of trans/queer life and experience? The founding texts of queer theory deliberately treat the term *queer* as something of a *non*-identity. For queer theorists, particularly those American scholars who are widely credited with having inaugurated the field in the early nineties, *queer* is not a demographic. It has instead been associated with the excesses, multiplicities, potentialities, and fissures that are subversive of “identity” as such. For many queer scholars within the Anglosphere, queer theory is a form of “subjectless critique” that positions itself as a critique of the incessant search for authenticity, for stable and fixed identities, and for systematization. This is how Michael Warner (1993) intended to be understood in his description of *queer* as “an aggressive impulse of generalization” (p. XXVI).

This “impulse of generalization” is an insistence that sexuality is central to any understanding of social life in its widest sense. It rejects the divide between the social and the sexual by attending to sexuality’s normalization across the social field (Floyd, 2009: 5–6). We also find this claim that sexuality is operative in places that appear to have nothing to do with sexuality in Eve Sedgwick’s (2008) opening to *Epistemology of the Closet*, where she asserts that “an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition” (p. 1). The term *queer* is variously described as an analytic, a perspective, a heuristic device, or a lens within critical academic writing. Seldom does it appear as an identity.

If not for an identity, for what does the abstraction *queer* stand in? *Queer* is conflated with terms like subversion, fluidity, mobility, non-normativity, and anti-identitarianism. It can subsequently be applied to an endless range of social topics. An increasing number of voices have expressed their skepticism of this operation. Kadji Amin (2016) writes that the Euro-American academy “has long celebrated *queer* as an almost infinitely mobile and mutable theoretical term that, unlike *gay* and *lesbian* or *feminist*, need not remain bound to any particular identity, historical context, politics, or object of study” (p. 175). Amin is not alone in arguing that there are reasons to be cautious of the fetishization of *queer* as the symbol of fluidity and subversion. Robyn Wiegman (2012) argues that the concept of *queer* has been “universalized as the transhistorical sign of the non-normative” (p. 335). If we do not use greater specificity when deploying the term, she

warns, it risks being consolidated into a generic framework that makes “all signs of social abjection, deviance, and counterbourgeois socialities into figural elements of a queer critical imaginary.” Surely not every social group or practice that exists outside of normative cultural and ideological formations can be referred to as *queer*. Would we call enslaved Black people who were estranged from US bourgeois familial nuclearity *queer* (Wiegman, 2012: 334–335)? As Amin (2016) argues, *queer* is “not equally capable of being applied to *anything* nonnormative and boundary crossing” (p. 173). *Queer*, he writes, “is not endlessly open-ended, polyvalent, and reattachable” (Amin, 2016: 181).

For Alan McKee (1999), the insistence that queer theory does not have a defined object of study therefore functions as a form of mystification, as a “defensive strategy” that can shield the field from historicization or critique by making it ‘impossible to begin to write histories of Queer, of accounts of the term’s usefulness, because any such project would be—inherently and inescapably—un-Queer’ (p. 236). Other scholars have added their voices to this critique. Bidy Martin (1996) has suggested that the common deployment of the term *queer* is an implicit celebration of an independent, autonomous, and fluid existence free of the dependencies, attachments, and enmeshments that characterize the “feminine” (that is, static, constraining, and private) realm. She posits the disavowal of the “feminine” domain as a requisite for the desire for *queer* to be applicable to anything. Ian Barnard (1999) goes even further, claiming that the use of the term *queer* betrays “just a new kind of Western white male imperialism, another instance of white male desire to be everywhere, talk about everything, be everything” (p. 208).

What these accounts and others suggest is that the abstraction *queer* is able to appear limitlessly adaptable, mobile, and unfettered due to its disavowal of race, femininity, non-Western contexts, transgender life, and so on. This might help us understand why, despite its purportedly anti-identitarian stance, *queer* is nevertheless implicitly coded as white, Western, homosexual, and male. Histories of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism are continuously elided within canonical queer theoretical texts. We might say that *queer*’s “aggressive impulse of generalization” in effect produces its opposite: a striking provincialism. As the abstraction *queer* is fetishized as the universal figure of non-normativity, the specific social relations from which it arises are mystified. *Queer* is converted into an allegory for abstract musings on the failures and limitations of desire, thought, and consciousness as such. For scholars like Steven Seidman (1995), Jeffrey Escoffier (1998), and David Halperin (2003), this has led to a situation where American queer scholars are more interested in sophisticated interpretations of literary and cultural texts than in the questions that preoccupy queer communities outside the academy. Scholars in the traditions of Black lesbian feminism and queer of color critique go further, interrogating the silences and exclusions that the notion of an undifferentiated “queer community” can reproduce. They demonstrate that for *queer* to appear as a universalized abstraction in the first place, it must conceal the multiple determinations of race, gender, and class that establish the conditions of queer subjectivity (Cohen, 1997; Ferguson, 2004; Khan, 2021).

When *queer* is maintained as an abstract category for the purpose of deconstructing regimes of the normal, it worryingly reiterates the logical structure of queerphobic discourse. The repression and policing of non-normative sexualities have historically been legitimized through an association of queerness with the disintegration of moral order.

Queer has been associated with an array of social ills, including disease, pedophilia, hedonism, madness, and incest. Through these associations, queerphobic discourse fetishizes *queer* as a specter that threatens the “proper” relations of (white, bourgeois) civil society. When queer scholars invert this discourse, insisting that *queer* designates a subversive power with the potential to undermine the social order, they simply adopt the fetishized abstraction *queer* for their own purposes. Queer IR theory, at its most tough-minded and radical, emerges precisely to challenge the associations between queerness and phenomena deemed threatening to international order. In *Queer International Relations*, Cynthia Weber (2016b) exposes and critiques the ascription of queerness to racialized figures such as the “underdeveloped,” the “unwanted im/migrant,” and the “terrorist.” Drawing on a rich body of existing scholarship, she argues that the regulation of the modern state system is achieved through discourses that associate the abstraction *queer* with forces that threaten international disintegration and disorder. Accordingly, Weber (2016b: 14–15) insists that her book intends instead to connect “queer to sexes, genders, and sexualities rather than to a broader understanding of queer as encompassing all things nonnormative.”

In the final chapter, Weber (2016b: 144) explores the ways the Eurovision Song Contest winner Thomas Neuwirth and his drag persona Conchita Wurst “has been taken up by some Europeans as a figuration who embodies *either* a positive *or* a negative image of an integrated ‘Europe.’” She shows how Neuwirth/Wurst was used as a talking point by political and religious leaders in Europe to garner support for their competing agendas, with some claiming that Neuwirth/Wurst’s Eurovision victory signified the decline of civilization and others mobilizing the victory as a symbol of European tolerance (Weber, 2016b: 152). Given her critique of this treatment of Neuwirth/Wurst as a mere pawn in the political battles of European leaders, it is all the more surprising when in the following pages she deploys Neuwirth/Wurst as a central linchpin for the unfolding of the book’s argument about the fundamental instability of traditional statecraft. Weber (2016b: 145) refers to Conchita Wurst as “a figure who defies traditional understandings of [European] integration across multiple axes.” For Weber (2016b: 153), the figure of Thomas Neuwirth and/as the bearded drag queen Conchita Wurst can “be called upon to serve as a queer logoi” that “calls into question the very spatial arrangements of sovereignty” (Weber, 2016b: 153–154). She concludes the final chapter of her book with the claim that “Neuwirth/Wurst makes possible a thorough rethinking of what the process of ‘European integration’ might mean and what a sovereign ‘integrated Europe’ might become” (Weber, 2016b: 143). In other words, Weber engages in the same discursive move that she had so vigorously critiqued throughout her book. She fetishizes “this pluralized Neuwirth/Wurst” as an abstracted figure that might help fellow scholars “challenge traditional vertical and horizontal imaginaries of ‘European’ integration” (Weber, 2016b: 191).

In a separate paper, Cynthia Weber (2016a) is concerned with developing “queer IR methods.” Employing what Roland Barthes refers to as the plural logic of the *and/or*, Weber’s formulation of a queer methodology for IR illustrates how the “sovereign man” of sovereign statecraft is always already plural. Weber refers to her theory as “queer” because her entry point into theorizing plural IR figurations is the queer subject (embodied, again, by the figure of Neuwirth/Wurst) who fails to signify monolithically. Weber

hence mobilizes Neuwirth/Wurst as *the* symbol of Barthes's plural logic of the *and/or* par excellence. The application of *queer* as the universal figure of plurality or fluidity across the humanities and social sciences has inspired countless publications that seek to "queer" borders, the state, peace, international law, development, the nation, and many more such concepts. The apparent stripping of queer theorizing from its grounding in the social relations that structure queer life has generated unavailing online controversies, such as an outcry against an article entitled "Drone Disorientations," in which Cara Daggett (2015) argues that drones represent a queer form of warfare that complicates familiar dichotomies of home/combat and distance/intimacy. "The queerness of killing with drones," Daggett (2015: 362) writes, lies in its disorientation and incoherence.

Although Daggett's analysis may appear shocking to readers unfamiliar with queer studies, it aligns with the field's dominant methodological approach. Lauren Wilcox (2014) characterizes that approach as a commitment to "questioning the stability of sexuality as a category in relation to shifting normative categories related to neoliberalism, the war on terror, and other contemporary global forces" (p. 613). By arguing that "certain actors in global politics can be read as queer," she argues that works in queer IR "emphasize identifications rather than identities as shifting, fluid, and sometimes contradictory." In other words, the abstraction *queer* is deployed to elucidate the fluidity, instability, and disorientation of normative categories within global politics. It is in this sense that actors or phenomena within international studies can be "read as queer." The term *queer*, then, is used to elucidate things other than queerness itself. Queerness does not refer to formations that can be historicized and embedded within their concrete set of social relations. Instead, it is fetishized as the universal symbol of fluidity, instability, and disorientation. These associations have their roots in moral panics and insidious representations of queer people "as scapegoats for the failures and impossibilities of desire itself" (Love, 2007: 22). Numerous critics have demonstrated how the decision to claim such associations and render them definitional of *queer* not only unwittingly embraces harmful discourses originating within sexology, psychiatry, and neoconservatism but also simply erects new normative binaries like fixity/fluidity (see Castiglia and Reed, 2012; Downing, 2017).

The mystification of the subaltern in international studies

The arguably most influential school of thought within postcolonial IR is that which emerged in the seventies through new approaches to South Asian historiography. The Subaltern School project originally set out to investigate "histories from below," building on the works of Marxist historians like Eric Hobsbawm and EP Thompson. Centering the Gramscian figure of the subaltern, these endeavors sought to break with the dominance of elitist, nationalist scholarship in Indian academic circles (Subrahmanyam, 2008). The so-called subaltern was initially deployed rather closely to Antonio Gramsci's meanings by considering the role of various subaltern subjectivities in peasant revolts and labor movements in British India. The figure of the subaltern was understood as the "name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" (Guha, 1982: VII).

From the nineties onward, the meanings of the subaltern became increasingly tied to poststructuralism's growing influence on the School. Here, the subaltern came to serve as the central demarcation for the organizing dyad of a colonizing West and a colonized East. In the words of Gayatri Spivak, the subaltern was "a position without identity" (Spivak, 2005: 476), whose constitution had become the "allegory of the predicament of all thought, all deliberate consciousness" (Spivak, 1988: 12). No longer a heuristic intended to intervene in a historiography largely blind to political and social mobilization from below, the subaltern had now increasingly become a fetishized figure whose primary function seemed to be to illuminate the functions of Western epistemic power. In ways similar to how we saw that the figure of the trans woman in queer scholarship seems to function to recenter cis-ness, the subaltern had under the poststructuralist project of the Subaltern School become, in the words of Robbie Shilliam (2015), "a project that was [singularly obsessed] with the modern (read colonizing European) subject" (p. 6).

These metaphorical constitutions of the Subaltern School project's deployments of the subaltern are largely carried forth in international studies. Its perhaps best-known adaptation is Mohammed Ayoob's idea of *subaltern realism*, a theoretical approach launched as a corrective to the Eurocentrism of neorealism. Ayoob (2002) operationalizes the subaltern to be largely synonymous with non-Western states, marked by their structural weakness in the international state system: "Third World states, rather than subaltern classes, form the quintessential subaltern element within the society of states, given their relative powerlessness and their position as a large majority in the international system" (p. 41). The subaltern, then, is a category seemingly wide enough to encapsulate all states located outside the Global North; indeed the "large majority," which in Ayoob's democratic impulse means that it is "their experiences that should count most" (Sharp, 2011: 271). However, it remains unclear what these experiences constitute more specifically, since the subaltern in subaltern realism rests on largely undifferentiated notions of an abstract geopolitical space located outside of the imperial core. Despite the critique of Eurocentrism fueling Ayoob's intervention, subaltern realism nevertheless reinforces these same impulses through its stated mandate, namely to "provide more comprehensive explanations for the origins of the majority of conflicts in the international system and for the behavior of most states inhabiting it" (Ayoob, 2002: 47). We see that Ayoob's intervention ends up using subalternity, the ostensible heuristic for the accumulated experiences of the global majority, as theoretical Polyfilla to amend, rather than fundamentally confront, imperial ontological assumptions in IR.

The ease with which Ayoob is able to conflate "the subaltern" with the modern state form is further revealing of its own mystifying tendency. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx (1973: 100) names the modern state as one central abstraction, alongside the individual and population, within the writings of bourgeois political economists. It, too, is an abstracted expression of the historical contingencies of bourgeois civil society. Structural realism's treatment of the modern state—which is commonly described as a "blackboxing"—is paradigmatic of a fetishizing method of abstraction. In response, a key animating feature of critical fields of IR has been the attempt to uncover the complex historical and social dimensions that are mystified by the term "state" within structural realist schools of thought. The possibility of adjoining "subaltern" and "realism" within Ayoob's work is

similarly predicated on the hollowing out of the term *subaltern*, that is, on the obfuscation of different configurations of state/society complexes that are contained within the abstraction. The stakes of this mystification of our understanding of the “global majority” could not be higher in the current political moment. Indeed, the present instantiation of the fetishization of the subaltern has particularly grave consequences at a time when postcolonial nation-states like India and Brazil are themselves advancing a highly imperialist politics toward their own national minorities (Darke and Khan, 2021; Kaul, 2021; Menon, 2022).

We find another example of the propensity for employing the subaltern as a metaphorical heuristic for Western theoretical critique in Joanne Sharp’s (2011) notion of *subaltern geopolitics*. Inserting “subaltern” into the study of geopolitics, Sharp (2011) writes, offers us an opportunity to reject conventional binary oppositions in world politics, reminding us “that political identities can be established through geographical representations that are neither fully ‘inside’ nor ‘outside’” (p. 272). Operating as a technique to elucidate the Manichean orderings of global politics, subaltern geopolitics offers a critique of “the state-security-warlike focus of Western, and especially US, policy” (Sharp, 2011: 13). Writing in the context of the War on Terror, Sharp employs the critical intervention of subaltern geopolitics to carve out “a space for ‘other voices’” (Sharp, 2011). However, the subaltern in Sharp’s logic appears not as a concretized abstraction, elucidating the constitutive histories and politics of the marginalized. Rather, the subaltern here functions as a figure of generalized critique singularly focused on the hegemonic political forces of which that figure is itself a product. In the wake of Sharp’s intervention, the concept of subaltern geopolitics has been applied to a wide range of empirical sites, such as international organizations like the Commonwealth (Craggs, 2018) or to postcolonial nation-states such as Libya and Scotland (Sidaway, 2012).

In her article *Can the Subaltern Securitize?*, Sarah Bertrand (2018) aims to address what she deems the “silence problem” within critical security studies. She does this by invoking Gayatri Spivak’s seminal questioning of the limits of representation in critical scholarship. While Spivak insists on the subaltern’s fundamental nonidentity, Bertrand (2018) asserts a “wider and more inclusive” (p. 282) understanding of it denoting marginalization and disenfranchisement. The subaltern, Bertrand (2018) maintains, “cannot securitize” because of a range of structural mechanisms of exclusion which prevents it from “completing securitizing speech acts” (p. 296).

Bertrand’s paper is driven by a commendable commitment to better incorporate marginal voices within existing scholarship. As with previous literature surveyed, however, the reader is left wondering to whom exactly those voices without the ability to “securitize” belong. Indeed, in similar ways to the work of Ayoob and Sharp, the historical, political, and material specificities of the purportedly voiceless subaltern remain unclear in Bertrand’s critique. As opposed to these authors, however, the subaltern in Bertrand’s work is not an undifferentiated spatial metaphor serving as the privileged demarcator of the Global North and the Global South in the international state system. Rather, it appears as a vector of discursive absence and nonrepresentation largely serving to highlight fundamental epistemological blind spots within the specific field of critical security studies.

These hegemonic tendencies toward the fetishization and mystification of the subaltern in international studies are, as we have seen, symptomatic of the analytical risks of certain strands of South Asian political theory. However, one need not look further than the region's contemporary scholarly debates for theoretical alternatives. Ideas of a largely undifferentiated native have come under mounting criticism from a heterogeneous tradition of scholarship broadly grouped under the umbrella of anticasteism. Building on the work of prominent Dalit and anticaste intellectual thinkers and political organizers such as Jyotirao Phule, BR Ambedkar, and Periyar, these literature studies have reached far beyond South Asia in their critique of the Subaltern School.

Caste constitutes a structure of hierarchy and difference originally enshrined in ancient Hindu texts. Today, it continues to endure as a complex system of social, political, and economic oppressions fundamentally entrenched in South Asia and beyond (Ambedkar, 1917, 2016). The 20th-century Dalit political leader and architect of the 1950 Indian constitution BR Ambedkar reminds us that the dyad of European colonizer–Indian native was of only relative consequence to the vast majority of Indians, all of whom were excluded from upper-caste privilege. For them, it was the long history of caste oppression, not British colonialism, that constituted the main determinant of their current political and social condition: “Caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster” (Ambedkar, 2016: 233).

Taking inspiration from Ambedkar, contemporary anticaste scholarship maintains that postcolonial theory's focus on understanding political contestation is overwhelmingly refracted through the colonial relationship and the all-pervasive binary of colonizer-native, serves upper-caste interests. In the words of Dwivedi et al., the focus on “white colonizers” has enabled specifically upper-caste academics to “caste themselves as subaltern voices”:

Caste divisions and oppressions vanished into the category of the native with its moral superiority within the postcolonialist dyad. In the writings of postcolonial theorists, the upper caste's lamentations about colonial humiliation alone appear before the international audience, obliterating the discursive space for lower-caste people's historical interventions and political desires. (Dwivedi et al., 2020)

The figure of the “native,” arguably here a stand-in for the subaltern, is simultaneously made monolithic as well as infused with intrinsic moral significance. The flattening of hierarchies internal to the subaltern, such as that of caste, becomes obscured in the process. The philosopher Meena Dhanda (2015) and the Marxist Aijaz Ahmad (1992) have in different ways both pointed out how Indian intellectual and academic life historically has been dominated by upper castes, which in turn have rendered scholarship partial to narratives of Western humiliation and the desire for Indian elite recuperation. In its search for an insurgent agency, the Subaltern School project, according to anticaste critics, are implicated in a project of recovery of Hindu upper-caste elites' pride whereby “the Native was used as a category for an undifferentiated brown mass of resistance, slyness and ‘aporias’” (Dwivedi et al., 2020).

Interventions from anticaste scholarship clarifies the contemporary politics of the deployment of the subaltern as a mystified figure of ostensible critique, primarily signifying the limits of colonial epistemology and the nonrepresentation of identity. Indeed, their interventions elucidate the paradox at the heart of the mobilizations of the subaltern as a critical category of intellectual intervention, namely that it obscures the relations hidden within the category of the subaltern and erases the actual material, political, and social conditions of marginalized postcolonial groups. How can the erasures referred to so far in this article be rectified and done differently within the discipline of international studies? We now turn to scholars who offer us theoretical and analytical tools of concretization and demystification.

Pluralist strategies of demystification in critical international studies

This paper began with an exposition of Marx's methodological writings on abstraction. The first section distinguished between the fetishization of abstractions, on the one hand, and the concretization of abstractions, on the other. The former is a self-mystifying process that reduces entire populations into singular metaphors for further abstract theorizing, and the latter seeks to demystify our social world by inquiring into the social and historical forces that are concealed within the abstractions that present themselves to us as objective and universal categories. Importantly, we argued that concretization should not be mistaken for empiricism. It is not a method that eschews abstractions in favor of faithfully "representing" the empirical realities of trans, subaltern, or queer life. It seeks, rather, to embed abstractions within the concrete social relations through which they are constituted. The following three sections illuminated the self-mystifying impulses that are intrinsic to much contemporary scholarship within international studies. It explored how three abstractions—*trans*, *queer*, and *subaltern*—have been deployed in a fetishizing manner within dehistoricized, abstract theorizing. This final section highlights the multiple alternative studies that have sought to concretize those abstractions by analyzing them in relation to their social and historical determinations.

In the first case study, we encountered the ways that scholars have ascribed metaphors of travel and crossing to the abstracted trans body. The work of Aren Aizura is an excellent corrective to this tendency. It argues that transitions must be theorized from their specific material contexts, otherwise scholarship will tend to reproduce abstract, representational metaphors of crossing that bear an only tentative relation to the social conditions that determine realities of transition. According to Aizura (2012), scholars "need to trace the historical emergence and circulation" (p. 141) of narratives surrounding transition "in relation to broader cultural understandings of life, embodiment and personhood." Abstract narratives of transition presuppose a white, bourgeois subject with access to self-determination and mobility. They therefore fail to account for the racialized capitalist economies and geographies that organize most gender-variant and trans subjects' experiences of transition. In other words, Aizura's analysis of the historical emergence of metaphors of crossing—commonly considered definitional of trans life within medicalizing discourses, cultural productions, and critical scholarship alike—mystify the

complex constellation of social relations that shape transitions. The function of such metaphors, the analysis reveals, is a containment and domestication of “gendered indeterminacy.” In Aizura’s (2012) words: “Transsexuality comes to be socially and culturally tolerable in a limited sense only if it conceals the possibility that gender is not binary and presents transsexuality as a one-way trip from man to woman or woman to man” (p. 145). Aizura’s method of concretization unearths the web of social relations that lie hidden within abstracted narratives of transition and demystifies the indeterminacy that is concealed when those abstractions are fetishized and equated with transgender life as such. His conclusion concurs with Emma Heaney’s argument that the ascription of metaphors of crossing to the abstracted trans body reproduces cis ideology by confirming the diagnostics of 19th-century sexological discourses.

In the final chapter of her monograph, Emma Heaney (2017) presents “Materialist Trans Feminism” as a counter-method to the mystifying deployment of the abstraction *trans* within critical knowledge production. Heaney describes Materialist Trans Feminism as an archive, an intellectual tradition, and a political formation that emerges from the vocabularies, concepts, and theories embedded in the social field of trans-feminine people’s lives. Her particular focus is on the heterogeneous texts produced within the political sphere of seventies trans liberationists—which included the New York-based Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) and the Philadelphia-based Radical Queens. Heaney (2017) explains Materialist Trans Feminism thus: “This tradition builds on the Marxist feminist theorization of woman as the social category that emerges through a historical relation to reproductive labor, noting that the category of trans woman emerges at the intersection of this reproductive material basis and an a priori association with sex work, a form of criminalized labor” (p. 20). This method concretizes the category of woman by revealing the “affinities, solidarities, antagonisms, desires, and vulnerability to gendered violence” that structure gendered life. It therefore emerges from the historical conditions of trans sociality. Against the mystifying generalization of trans life found within medical writings, popular representation, and academic knowledge production, this method seeks “the revelation of the depth of trans feminine life” (Heaney, 2017: 200). As argued earlier, an attentiveness to questions of race, empire, and class prompts a reckoning with the concrete determinations of trans life. It is no coincidence that Heaney and Aizura draw upon knowledge grounded, respectively, in the radical activism of working-class trans women of color and outside “classical Euro-American travel discourse” (Aizura, 2012: 149). These methodological starting points propel concretization.

A similar impulse animates Kadji Amin’s (2016) recent formulation of “attachment genealogy,” a method that proposes that “rather than continuing to celebrate queer mobility and lack of definition, we ground *queer* in its various contexts, histories, genealogies, and inheritances” (p. 180). In language that mirrors what we have referred to as the concretization of abstraction, Amin (2016) articulates attachment genealogy as a method that “systematizes the attentiveness to the emergence of theory and feeling alike from specific contexts and histories” (p. 186). For Amin (2016), attachment genealogy represents a possible strategy for uncovering queer theory’s historical embeddedness—that is, “to at once bring into view and multiply the historical and social conditions that shape what is possible, imaginable, and sensible under the sign of *queer*” (p. 185). This method of attachment genealogy is therefore intended as a categorical challenge to queer

theory's mystification of *queer*. Amin (2016) describes its main goal as seeking to expose "the inarticulate and opaque method that orients what objects, processes, and relations 'count' as queer within queer studies" (p. 173) (emphasis added).

Numerous works have been published within queer international studies that share a commitment to concretizing *queer*. In "Intended and Unintended Queering of States/Nations," V Spike Peterson (2013) explains how the modern state system has been predicated on the organization of biological and social reproduction within the heteronormative household and the policing of non-normative forms of gender and sexual identification and expression. Instead of bringing *queer* to bear on the question of state formation by fetishizing *queer* as a universal allegory for the performative nature of state identities (as others have done), Peterson concretizes queerness by revealing how its production and regulation have historically been entwined with processes of state-making. In *Out of Time*, Rahul Rao (2020: 136–173) investigates the historical conditions of the possibility of the emergence of homophobic moral panics in Uganda. Rao could have inverted the discourse of the moral panic, embracing the rendering of *queer* as a figure of subversion and societal disintegration. Instead, he pursues the route of concretization, probing the social relations that engendered moral panics within postcolonial contexts. Rao (2020) shows how a study of "the production of the material conditions in which homophobic moral panics thrive" (p. 140) reveals the interplay between neoliberal structural adjustments imposed by the World Bank and the transnational circulation of Pentecostal Christianity and its moral discourses around sexuality from the late eighties onwards. These are but two examples from a burgeoning scholarship that applies the method of concretization to the study of queer formations in IR (see Amar, 2013; Manchanda, 2014; Smith, 2020; Stoffel, 2022). None of these works decontextualize, homogenize, or universalize the category *queer* as an analytical lens or rhetorical figure. Neither do they consign themselves to a descriptive empirical study of queer life that claims to represent the "truth" of queer experiences. They provide insights into a wide range of social developments, but they do so through an investigation of the imperial social relations that give rise to and organize queer history and life.

Anticaste scholarship has in the last decades become increasingly consolidated as Dalit studies in the social science departments of Indian universities and beyond (Rege, 2007). Its sobering interventions remind us of how enduring dyads of social science scholarship—social/political, social-world/knower, objectivism/subjectivism, and micro/macro—remain intact even if the Dalit is included as an empirical garnish, thereby reproducing ideas of "the theoretical brahmin and the empirical *shudra* (lower caste)" (Guru, 2002: 5003). This critical field of inquiry makes few distinctions between the realm of the academy and the world outside, seeing its own scholarly pursuits as grounded in political struggle and its own constitutive history of oppression. Dalit studies, then, do not limit itself merely to "interpreting reality but changing it" (Rege, 2007: 10).

In contrast to the hegemonic position of the figure of the subaltern within the strains of scholarship discussed above, Indian political life has long offered a myriad of textured discussions on group designation and language used to claim identity and political struggle in the postcolonial age. Indeed, the "Dalit" in Dalit Studies is itself a highly contested category, both within its own traditions as well as in larger debates. Originally a word in Pali, the north Indian language of the country's oldest Buddhist texts, Dalit means "the

oppressed” or simply “broken.” Infamously, the independence leader Mohandas Gandhi referred to Dalits, rather condescendingly in the eyes of many, as *harijans*, the “children of god.” Furthermore, since the eighties, the idea of the *bahujan*, an umbrella term meaning “inclusive multitude,” emerged as an attempt by the Indian lower caste political leader Kanshi Ram to unify Dalits, *adivasis* (India’s indigenous populations), and so-called OBCs (Other Backward Castes) under one political category of oppression. In recent years, however, Hindu nationalist political formations in the country have attempted to dilute the political force of especially Dalit self-expression by themselves increasingly employing the term *bahujan* (Bairva, 2018). Despite these heterogeneous deployments of group identity markers, both Dalit and *bahujan* share little political or theoretical affinity with “the subaltern.” Furthermore, the intersectional nature of Dalit studies as a field of both intellectual inquiry and political change has come to the fore in recent years. Indeed, trans and anticaste scholars and activists such as Grace Banu and Living Smile Vidya have contributed immensely to deepening its analytical preoccupations (Camera, 2016; Vidya and Semmalar, 2018). By illuminating the interwoven nature of trans identity, caste oppression, and class relations, these thinkers concretize positions of marginality in Indian society by elucidating how “Dalit” or “trans” are not reducible to unitary experiences.

The multifaceted field of Dalit studies is rooted in material histories, political genealogies, and social struggles that have become productive of particular epistemological outlooks. This stands in stark contrast to ideas of the subaltern which, according to its anticaste critics, must be understood not so much as a category of the historically down-trodden, but rather as a category for symbolic and material restitution for a privileged substratum of Indian postcolonial society and its global diaspora. Indeed, as we have seen, from its inception in Gramscian Marxism, the subaltern in postcolonial studies gained traction primarily in scholarly discourse, without any clear referent outside of academic debate. We might say that out of the three categories discussed in this article, *subaltern* remains the designation with the greatest potential for mystification. Indeed, unlike *trans* and *queer* which exist as material and affective designations outside critical scholarship’s theoretical extrapolations, the subaltern is in its designations a distinctly *academic* category of identification. Through its propensity for mystification, the subaltern as a category of critical scholarship ends up obscuring more than it reveals, producing new exclusions in its wake.

Inspired by anticaste critique but moving closer to home in disciplinary terms, we might then ask: What would the field of postcolonial IR look like without a reliance on the subaltern as a centering analytical device? Indeed, Robbie Shilliam poses this exact question in his seminal book *The Black Pacific* (2015). In the pursuit of epistemic and political justice, Shilliam (2015) inquires what would happen if “the democratic impulse of Subaltern Studies were to be separated from the very term ‘subaltern?’” (p. 7). In this book, as well as in more recent work, Shilliam (2018, 2021) provides us with potent answers to this question, combining a decolonial approach focused on the lifeworlds of seemingly disparate colonized populations such as the Māori, RasTafari, and Ethiopians, with an acute attention to the concrete entanglements between racialized historical imperialism and the emergence of modern capitalist social relations. In a similar register, Joanne Yao’s considerations of the histories of the Rhine, the Danube, and the Congo

River in *The Ideal River* (2022) provides an instructive example for the concretization and demystification of historical imperial dynamics. While relying on extensive archival research to chart the relationship between the impulse to tame the river and the emergence of the world's first international organizations, Yao moves beyond strict empirics to allow eighteenth and nineteenth century poetics and works of fiction to complement her argument. Instructively, however, instead of understanding these merely as extensions of Western imperial imaginaries, the book demonstrates their productive aspects, linking literary work to the material machinations of imperial relations. What we call Yao's dialectical method consists in the careful moving between an analysis of literary imaginaries and the emergence of the modern international system through the interactions of European state bureaucrats, diplomats, and politicians. In this way, her work applies the method of concretization by inquiring into the social and historical relations that were productive of, and produced by, the abstract imaginaries fetishized within poetry and fiction.

In the more specific literature on South Asia, recent scholarly interventions in postcolonial international studies have challenged the dyadic epistemological simplifications to which the subaltern as a figure of mystification have helped give rise. In the words of Martin Bayly (2022), critiques of the Eurocentrism of traditional approaches in the discipline have, in an impulse toward the recuperation of subaltern agency, ended up producing "a purely oppositional picture [which] risks obscuring those aspects of 'non-European' international thought that evade simple categorisation" (p. 1). Bayly's work, as well as that of others (see Birkvad, 2020; Dilawri, in press; Thakur, 2021), has been pivotal in demonstrating the origins of power as not only emanating from the imperial center, but also from its peripheries. Further clarifying the stakes of what we call the politics of mystification, these scholars reveal how the figure of the subaltern ends up banalizing imperial relations, impairing our ability to comprehend both its origins and effects.

Conclusion

In IR, the phrase "critical theory" is frequently employed as a unifying umbrella category that seeks to capture a broad, heterogeneous, and growing ensemble of heterodox approaches to the international—first Frankfurt School-inspired approaches, world-systems analysis, and neo-Gramscianism, soon to be followed by feminism, postcolonialism, critical constructivism and poststructuralism, and queer theory—yet the category remains contested (Conway, 2021). Within ongoing debates about the polyvalent meanings of critical theory in IR, few scholars have returned to its disciplinary origins for methodological and theoretical clarification, inspiration, or provocation. In this paper, we began by arguing that two concepts that were central to the articulation of critical theory at its inception—abstraction and mystification—have yet to be reckoned with seriously within disciplinary IR. An engagement with these key terms, we argue, leads to a reappraisal of current directions within critical approaches to IR.

Three case studies demonstrated how critical scholars have sought to substantiate and confirm theoretical concepts that were in vogue at their time of writing by inscribing

them onto the abstracted bodies of subordinated populations. Central concepts from the fashionable psychoanalytical and poststructuralist currents of the nineties, such as liminality, fluidity, and instability, were ascribed to trans and queer subjects. Scholars universalized the figures *trans* and *queer* as embodiments of the founding tenets of their own theoretical frameworks. Not only did the connotations of *trans* with notions of crossing and liminality, and *queer* with ideas of fluidity and mobility, fail to reflect the substantive realities of trans and queer life, but they were often in fact unwittingly drawn from trans- and queerphobic discourses themselves. Where scholars could not find a subject to embody their abstract theoretical notions, that subject had to be invented. This was the case with the figure of the *subaltern* in international studies.

The final section of this article highlighted the diverse strategies of demystification within contemporary critical approaches to IR. The method of concretization, we showed, does not amount to a claim that the study of subordinated populations must be confined to the particularities of their everyday experiences. Instead, through a dialectical movement between abstraction and embeddedness that reveals the relations and structures that are contained within trans, queer, and subaltern formations in different historical contexts, the method of concretization connects these categories to the other constituent elements of the social whole. Abstractions become a vantage point from where we can attempt to grasp the complex global social relations in which abstractions appear. Therefore, even though individual subject positions might *appear* to us as distinct, unitary positions (as even suggested, for the purposes of analytical clarity, by the structure of this paper), a method of concretization reveals them to in fact be multiply determined—as they arise from a common set of concrete social relations and historical developments.

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