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THE WORKS

LETTER FROM MANAGING EDITOR, SHEROOG MOHAMED KUBUR

Who gives media its power? How do people challenge this power, on and offline? And, the question most important to the Motley, what does it take to answer these questions? Media is rapidly evolving, bringing to light new questions of what it means to produce, consume, and engage with media. Despite the uncertainty of the future, communications has always been a discipline that thrives on creative and critical inquiry, taking the everyday messages we take for granted and questioning what constitutes normal and who has the power to define it. The Motley Undergraduate Journal of Communications has proudly served as a vehicle to bring these questions to the forefront, highlighting the undergraduates who have taken on the challenge of questioning the status quo. This issue asks questions of how media is used to perpetuate covert colonial imaginaries, but also represent how intimately politics intertwines with the domestic sphere, and how citizens use the media available to them to chronicle and challenge political corruption.

The Motley is a place of celebration for undergraduate research and its process, from the initial submission to the review, to the editing, until the publication. A journal is only as memorable as its contributors, and the Motley has had the privilege of working with a diverse collective of scholars to put out incredible work. It is this level of curiosity and care that has allowed us to plant our roots firmly within undergraduate research.

The community of lifelong scholars of the Motley Undergraduate Journal are situated in Moh'kinstis and the traditional Treaty 7 territory and the Blackfoot confederacy, which is composed of the Siksika, Kainai, and Piikani. We also acknowledge the Îyâxe Nakoda, which includes the Bearspaw, Chiniki, and Goodstoney First Nations, as well as the Tsuut'ina nations. The City of Calgary is also home to Métis Nation within Alberta (Nose Hill Métis District 5 and Elbow Métis District 6). As settlers on this land, we must acknowledge those who built this region and will continue to see it thrive.

The Motley Undergraduate Journal would not be possible without the Department of Communications, Media, and Film at the University of Calgary giving the journal the soil needed to grow. A special thank you is owed to Dr. Maria Bakardjieva, professor, Chair of Communications and Media Studies at the University of Calgary, and the Editor-in-Chief of the Motley. Another special thank you is owed to Dr. Maria Victoria Guglietti, who continues to support the journal through nominating the most submissions and providing insightful reviews and guidance. Finally, thank you to Melissa Morris, who planted the seeds to allow the journal to blossom into the intellectual hub it is today.

A distinct and special thank you is warranted to all authors, past and present, of the Motley Journal. It is their work that gives the journal its structure, enriching each issue with unique and innovative research and providing a strong foundation with which communications and film research can thrive.
Thank you to the faculty who have generously granted their time to partake in the review and nomination process, ensuring each submission is given the care required to create an exceptional line up for every issue.

This issue carries a strong interdisciplinary edge that we are proud to present, with papers sponsored by Dr. Motilola Akinfemisoye-Adejare in the Archaeology and Anthropology department, Craig Fortier of the Gender and Social Justice department at Waterloo University, and Dr. Pablo Policzer of the Political Science department. Thank you to the nominations across departments across Canada.
Research only goes so far as its readers, so a final thank you to the readers of the Motley Journal. Your interest and engagement with communications research is the sunlight giving the journal life, shining a warm light onto the scholarship we seek to promote.

In my short time at the Motley, I have had the pleasure of engaging with inspiring works and incredible authors and volunteers. I look forward to see what Abbi Johnson, the new managing editor, will cultivate during her time with the journal working with the community of scholars the Motley so proudly fosters. Good luck, Abbi!

Sheroog Kubur
Managing Editor

THE EDITORIAL TEAM

MARIA BAKARDJIEVA
Editor in Chief

Dr. Maria Bakardjieva (she/her), Professor and Chair in Communication and Media Studies at the University of Calgary. Her research examines the social construction of communication technologies and the use of digital media in various cultural and practical contexts with a focus on user agency, critical reflexivity and emancipation. She has numerous publications in leading journals and influential anthologies.

The books she has authored and co-edited include Internet Society: The Internet in Everyday Life (2005), Socialbots and Their Friends: Digital Media and the Automation of (Sociality (2017), Digital Media and the Dynamics of Civil Society: Retooling Citizenship in New European Democracies (2021), and How Canadians Communicate (2004 and 2007). Between 2010 and 2013, she served as the editor-in-chief of the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication. Her current projects investigate the role digital media plays in citizen engagement and democratic participation. Dr. Bakardjieva teaches courses in communication theory and research methodology, communication technology and society, digital media and democracy. She works to promote undergraduate research activities in Communication and Media Studies and engages in knowledge mobilization and community outreach intended to advance the public understanding of issues related to Communication and Media Studies.

SHEROOG KUBUR
Managing Editor

Sheroog Kubur is the Managing Editor of the Motley Undergraduate Journal of Communications. She is in her final year as a political science and communications student, with a background in journalism and community-focused volunteer work.

She has become a longtime supporter and volunteer to the journal, looking forward to bringing her editorial and research experience together in this new role. Sheroog's journey into undergraduate research started after publishing her first article with the Motley into journalism studies and local practices, *Clowning around in journalism: Exploring local journalistic practices by yyc.clowns*. Since then, she has worked to combine her two disciplines in her studies, writing her honours thesis on digitally-mediated social movements and developing a PURE project looking into the social media practices of global right-wing leaders. This year she was also the recipient of the Best Undergraduate Paper in Political Science, writing about the ways in which digital technologies are used as tools of simplification for states.

ABBI JOHNSON
Junior Managing Editor

Abbigail Johnson is a third-year Communications and Media Studies major and second-year Film Studies student at the University of Calgary. Her academic interests include transnational cinema, cultural imaginaries, and investigative journalism, with a particular focus on the intersection of media, politics, and representation. Alongside her studies, she has contributed to a range of student and cultural initiatives, including volunteer work with the Calgary Underground Film Festival and UCalgary Racing Team. She also previously worked with Global Affairs Canada during the 2025 G7 Leaders' Summit. Outside of her studies, Abbigail enjoys spending time outdoors and watching far too many films.

NATASHA BODNARCHUCK
Peer Reviewer

Natasha Bodnarchuck (she/her) is an author, peer reviewer, and copyeditor for the Motley Journal. She recently graduated from the University of Calgary with a BA in Communications and Media Studies with Honours. When she's not reading essays that critically examine how people and stories are framed in the media, she can be found mountain biking, skiing, or spending time with her friends. She looks forward to reading the other undergraduates work!

ISMAYIL IMANLI
Peer Reviewer

Ismayil (He/Him) is a 4th-year student in Political Science and Sociology at the University of Calgary. Ismayil is part of a very active student life at UofC: Co-Creator and 1st President of the Azerbaijani Students' Association (2025-26), Director of Photography at the FASA (2024-25), Peer-reviewer at the Insight Undergrad Journal in PoliSci (2025-present). Apart from his work within Campus, Ismayil is also a Junior Grant Writer for the "All Smiles Learning" Non-Profit, where he hopes to help the organization with its agenda of child development. Ismayil loves studying IR, Comparative Politics and Sovietology. His favourite work is "The Enemy is Everywhere: Stalinism in the Caucasus" by Jorg Baberowski.

SHAE KUBUR
Peer Reviewer

Shae Kubur is a Sudanese-Canadian actor and filmmaker based in Calgary, Alberta. She graduated from the University of Calgary with a Bachelors of Arts and a degree in Film Studies in 2024.

She has also published with the Motley Journal in 2024. Kubur finds inspiration in investigating the extraordinary within the mundane. In her piece “An Aesthete Thinks About Herself for Too Long”, Kubur uses autotheory to interrogate why we, as individuals, are drawn to certain personal aesthetics, and makes a case for why aesthetics are a major factor in constructing our personal identity. Kubur aims to bring this ideology into her filmmaking as well. She is interested in themes of race and femininity, and how those two factors affect how an individual operates in the world. Shae Kubur hopes to continue telling creative stories regarding her identity, with elements of surrealism.

MATTHEW JOHNSON
Peer Reviewer

Matthew Johnson is a fourth year Political Science and Communications & Media Studies student at the University of Calgary. He shares a deep passion for politics and the exploration of the intersection between new media and the world of political events and campaigns. Johnson with a deep passion for writing, is now pursuing a career in journalism and communications, they currently serve as the Editor-in-Chief at the Gauntlet.

DAMAN PREET SINGH
Peer Reviewer

Daman (they/them) is a third-year communications student with a strong interest in journalism and the visual arts. Their research interests lie where communications and culture theory intersect with identity, pop culture and subcultures, while also learning how to communicate their findings through art mediums. Currently, Daman works as a freelance photographer, a regular contributor to the *Reverie*, and is keen on learning how communication theory can affect their work, in both journalism and photography.

FIONA PAUL
Peer Reviewer

THE AUTHORS

SKYE BAXTER

When Silence is Loud: Omission, Affect, and Memory in Cría cuervos

Skye Baxter (she/her) is in her final year of degrees in Communication and Media Studies with a minor in Statistics, as well as Political Science with a minor in Global Development. Having previous worked as the Managing Editor, she instead takes on an authorial role for this issue. Her time with the journal has been defined by a deep commitment to fostering community, mentorship, and accessible platforms for undergraduate research and creative expression. A recipient of the PURE Research Award and a Chancellor's Scholar, Skye's academic work explores the intersections of communication, global development, and social justice, particularly how discourse shapes our understanding of sustainability and decolonization. Beyond academia, Skye can often be found reading in a corner with her dog or performing a monologue on the nuances of Hamlet, a text she believes is never quite finished revealing itself. She hopes to pursue graduate research and eventually teach at the university level, continuing to champion storytelling as a form of collective inquiry and change.

BRONWYN ELLERBY

I Just Ride
White Femininity, Melancholia, and the Settler Colonial Aesthetic in Lana Del Rey's America

Bronwyn Ellerby graduated in 2026 with her BA in Gender and Social Justice (with a minor in English Literature) from the University of Waterloo. Her research interests include reproductive policy, access to care, and representation within literature. Inspired by her love for music, Bronwyn first wrote her paper on Lana Del Rey for a Social Justice & Pop Culture class in 2024. Bronwyn hopes to pursue her Master of Arts in the near future and is currently working as a Research Assistant for both the Politics of Reproduction Research Group, and the Ontario Public Service. In her free time, Bronwyn loves to read, go on walks and hang out with her beloved dog Luna.

IMAN PANCHAN

Whose Ballot?
How Tanzanian Youth Confront Corruption During Election Cycles

Iman Panchan is a fourth-year student majoring in Communications and Media with a minor in African studies. Iman has a strong research interest in analyzing how racial discourse and colonialism relate to social media trends. As a Tanzanian-Canadian, her submission to the Motley was inspired by the liberation of African youth during Tanzania's independence, including her grandmother, who advocated for the emancipation of Tanzanians during independence. Her submission analyzes how that anti-colonial spirit from independence is currently being reflected by youth today on social media. This research has motivated Iman to further pursue academic writing as a career, researching other topics intersecting African Studies and Communications.

When Silence is Loud

Omission, Affect, and Memory in *Cría cuervos*

Skye Baxter

Abstract

This paper explores how *Cría cuervos* (1976) portrays authoritarianism not only as a political regime but as something lived and felt within the intimate space of the family. Through the perspective of Ana, a child navigating grief and confusion in late-Franco Spain, the film reveals how power operates quietly through everyday communication: through silence, emotional restraint, and the authority to decide what is true. Drawing on discourse theory and affect theory, I argue that authoritarian control seeps into the household, shaping not only what can be said, but what can be remembered and understood. Silence in the film is not empty; it is structured and atmospheric, producing fear and uncertainty. At the same time, the film's nonlinear structure resists the regime's desire for narrative closure. By blending memory, imagination, and present experience, Ana creates a space where the past refuses to stay contained. Ultimately, *Cría cuervos* suggests that while authoritarianism disciplines everyday life, it can also be quietly unsettled through alternative ways of speaking, remembering, and imagining.

Keywords

Discourse Theory, Affect Theory, Latin America, Visual Media, Memory

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INTRODUCTION

While the common adage, the personal is political , may be an appropriate rebuke to those who like to smugly claim that they just aren't into politics, it inadequately addresses the full scope and nuance of this relationship. In fact, it is perhaps most accurate in its inverse: the political is personal. The natural consequences, power dynamics, and affective discourses of the political realm are often most acutely felt in the intimate sphere. This paper argues that the 1976 film *Cría cuervos* presents authoritarianism through a child's perspective, which functions as a uniquely revealing lens.

Since Ana has not yet fully absorbed the social norms and political assumptions that shape adult interpretations, her perspective strips away many learned filters, thereby exposing underlying structures of power, fear, and control more candidly. The film presents the family household as a microcosm of Francisco Franco's regime through its communicative control in which silence, emotional restraint, and authority dictate what can be expressed and how. This demonstrates how authoritarian power persists interpersonally through communicative norms rather than solely through formal political mechanisms.

Furthermore, the film's nonlinear structure, as shaped by Ana's memories, imagination, and the fusion of past and present, challenges authoritarian narrative logic. Such logic traditionally relies upon linear timelines, historical closure, and the establishment of one 'official truth'. Drawing from communications' discourse theory, affect transmission, narrative epistemology, and political theories of authoritarian social control, I contend that the film reveals how power governs both how people speak and how they remember. Ana's imagined ongoing dialogue with her mother functions simultaneously as a counter-discourse and a counter-timeline, restoring open communication and alternate and playful timelines. Through this deliberate disruption of discourse and time, *Cría cuervos* demonstrates that while authoritarianism may trickle down into the personal sphere of everyday communication and historical narration, it can be similarly undermined through counter-practices that keep ethical and political knowledge from being sealed into the past. Smith (2007) condenses this idea neatly, noting that "the past is not past."

THEORY

Film as a Political Knowledge Medium

Film can produce political knowledge by subliminally structuring audience perception in the place of overt claims; as such, this investigation treats film as a means of knowledge-production rather than a simple illustration of existing scholarship. One of the most effective and illuminating means of grasping the consequences of political actors and decisions is by investigating the personal realm; it establishes the foundation upon which the construction of meaning can take place. When films investigate the intimate, we engage in a meaning-making practice that sets the stage for a deeper understanding of the true scope of authoritarian regimes. Bordwell (1989) discusses this, noting that "Meanings are not found but made" (p. 3), thereby supporting the analysis of silence, relationship dynamics, and structure in *Cría cuervos*. Since the film is centred upon the perspective of a child, viewer inference and interpretation become crucial. The viewer is asked to decode the hegemonies at play, since they are beyond Ana's understanding; we see the dregs of authoritarian rule in family life rather than through overt displays of power. As a result, the communicative control and temporal structure must be read formally.

Interpretive Restraint

A disciplined reading of political film must resist reducing images to fixed symbolic meanings and instead analyze how form produces experience. Sontag (2015) discusses how content "is the habit of approaching works of art in order to interpret them that sustains the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art" (p. 3). In context, this text warns against over-interpretation; we are simply analyzing structures of experience rather than decoding any supposed underlying symbols. For example, film allows us to experience living in Ana's house without having to code the structure as a stand-in for Spain itself. This said, an anti-allegorical approach should not be conflated with an anti-political one—it is simply a different filter by which we can analyze. Thus, this investigation follows an experiential reading over symbolic mapping; this is one of the many doors that films open in the place of strict political theory and interpretation.

Authoritarianism as Social Control

Authoritarian rule operates not only through state institutions but through struggles over social control that regulate everyday life. Márquez (2017) notes that, "Totalitarian regimes attempted to thoroughly control and transform society in pursuit of ideologically defined goals; the state was meant to be[…] total" (p. 40). This distinction is made for the purpose of

identifying the scope of this control model, rather than any concrete classifications on regime type. This form of control, exhibited in Franco's Spain, translates to the micro-scale; households may, consciously or not, come to reproduce these top-down discourses. This often presents itself by means of limits on communicative norms and emotional regulation—placing unspoken restrictions on both dialogue and behaviour. Brennan (2004) defines the transmission of affect as "a process that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect… They come via an interaction with other people and an environment. But they have a physiological impact" (p. 2); in essence, one's surroundings shape their affect, which can spread further in turn. This suggests that top-down governmental control operates not only discursively, but also affectively. Affect is not metaphorical here; it is embodied. This phenomenon is easily understood through the medium of film, as you are effectively in the shoes of someone facing these unspoken constraints; the resulting emotion, fear, and uneasiness is better understood within this framework.

Temporal Authority & Refusal of Closure

Authoritarian regimes often rely on a fixed account of the past without room for question or interpretation; any previous repression is to be understood as having passed without any crossover into today. In Franco's Spain, this practice was common enough as to be understood as an unspoken and unwritten policy. This is substantiated by Encarnación's (2010) discussion of *la desmemoria,* which describes "liberation from past traumas as well as a refusal to face them" (pp. 78–79). Within this framework, forgetting is conflated with healing. The problem lies in the fact that what you do not examine, you cannot question; it is thus an effective tool of control within authoritarian regimes. *Cría cuervos* resists this structure through Ana's counter-timeline, thereby playing with chronology and accuracy of events. When told through the perspective of a child, especially one who finds so much comfort in her memories, the viewer can never be wholly certain which events are real, imagined, a memory, or some combination of the three. No element of the story is rooted entirely in the past or present, thereby acting as a counter-narrative to the discourse promoted by the authoritarian regime. This framework plays alongside a similar counter-structure: communicative restriction and liberation inside the household.

From Regime Control to Household Control

Authoritarian control is most studied at the state or international level, but it may be argued that the resulting effects of these regimes are most strongly felt on the personal level;

Cría cuervos focuses on making the invisible disciplinary strings visible at the level of the household. The film displays control through patterns of speech and emotional expression or repression. Márquez (2017) discusses how the scope of these was all-encompassing; they displayed "an unheard-of capacity for large-scale repression and terroristic control over their populations" (pp. 39–40). Within the context of the film, we can observe how these mechanisms of social control can operate at the interpersonal level; they establish a social environment in which unspoken, but widely felt discourse rules shape what can be said and treated as true. Moving forward, this concept will be referred to as a communicative micro-regime. Ana's household follows this structure through silence rules, interpretive authority, and emotional restriction—the most consistent of which is silence.

Silence as Structured Control

Silence in the film operates as a communicative constraint on its inhabitants: the result of "trickle-down control." It acts as a recurring pattern of interactions that signal which topics, emotions, and actions are off-limits for those living in Franco's Spain. The absence of dialogue serves not as a lack of information, but instead follows Bordwell's (1989) account of meaning-making, in which "understanding is mediated by transformative acts…" (p. 3). That which goes unsaid can say just as much, if not more, than the spoken word; nuance hides in silence. Omission becomes evidence of repression. For Ana, this produces emotional instability in addition to informational gaps, since events cannot be named, and as a result, processed within these social constraints. In the early post-death household scenes, Ana is surrounded by controlled adult speech and withheld explanation, demonstrating how silence functions as a communicative boundary rather than a neutral pause. Even in saying her final goodbye to her father, military members surrounding the casket give an air of control and restraint to what should be an emotional moment for Ana; this atmosphere likely scares her, explaining why she instead chose to hide. Silence, therefore, operates affectively as well as discursively. As Brennan (2004) writes, the "'atmosphere' or the environment literally gets into the individual" (p. 1), and here the silence establishes an atmosphere characterized by barely suppressed tension. In this way, silence regulates feeling as much as speech.

Discursive Dismissal & Interpretive Authority

Adult discursive dismissal can be understood as the convention of adult characters overriding, minimizing, or replacing a child's perspective. This practice within Ana's house

establishes an arbitrary hierarchy of authority on which experiences are considered the most legitimate. Only those with such authority, the adults, are allowed to dictate what is real or meaningful. Sontag (2015) warns that such restrictions on interpretation of experience can be a harmful practice, noting that "the modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys…" (p. 4). From this, we can conclude that such a practice runs the risk of superposing a sterile experience over the more open-minded perspective of a child. When Ana asks direct questions and receives dismissive or partial responses, adult authority replaces her interpretation rather than expanding it, illustrating discursive dismissal in practice. This is highlighted in her aunt Paulina's determination that Ana and her sisters be seen, but not heard. It is further enforced when Ana mentions having seen another woman in her father's bed when he died and was promptly shut down and told not to lie about such things; her experience is considered unworthy of consideration. Within an authoritarian context, such a narrow interpretation of whose experience is considered valid is expected; any alternative understanding of events is to be immediately disqualified. This aligns with Márquez's (2017) observation that ideology shapes "what can and cannot be said in almost every social setting" (p. 40). It then follows that discursive dismissal and interpretive authority become forms of control within the communicative realm of the family.

Internalization of Communicative Control

Together, these communicative constraints work together to shape how Ana interprets authority and truth. Over time, external discourse rules become internalized, subconsciously influencing how perceptions are evaluated and understood, even when the external authority is no longer present. Kinder (1979) notes that Carlos Saura's films tend to place a strong emphasis on one's inner psychological state and their corresponding memory structures, thereby centering consciousness as a focal point (pp. 17–18). It then follows that the limits placed on her speech, behaviour, and explanation shape what Ana knows and how she evaluates what she knows. Nussbaum (2001) describes how "emotions… have a history" (p. 175), meaning that emotional responses are not produced in isolation, but are instead the result of experience and knowledge. Furthermore, when Ana (as an adult) turns to her own imagined or remembered explanations from childhood, communicative control can be seen moving from external rule to internal interpretive habit; she is seen rationalizing from the same framework of control and restraint as exhibited by the adults in her life when she was a child. These conclusions work together to

suggest that communicative restriction helps structure emotional judgment, linking discourse limits to moral interpretation. Yet this internalization is not only discursive, but also atmospheric.

Atmosphere as Governance

Cría cuervos effectively demonstrates how authoritarian governance structures may persist at the household level not only through rules and discourse, but also through an affective atmosphere that governs behaviour even in the absence of explicit instruction. Building on Brennan's (2004) description of affective transmission as a social process with tangible outcomes on one's physiology, it is also worth noting that "the origin of transmitted affects is social in that these affects do not only arise within a particular person but also come from without" (p. 2). This highlights how an emotional state can move between people and environments without any direct means of communication. It then follows that authority can be felt before it is articulated. Within the household, mood can regulate behaviour before a single word is spoken, shaping what is safe to ask or express. In shared household spaces such as meal or sitting-room scenes, tension is communicated primarily through posture, pacing, and silence, showing atmosphere regulating behavior before any rule is spoken. Even before Paulina corrects the girls' table manners, there exists an unspoken tension: one that seems to be the result of their ignorance of what unspoken rules are expected of them. This concept reinforces previously-discussed communicative controls; silence and dismissal of experience are rarely neutral omissions, but instead emotionally charged states. Brennan (2004) adds to this, noting that "'atmosphere' or the environment literally gets into the individual" (p. 1), which helps explain how household tension becomes an embodied experience for Ana. The viewer never receives a direct explanation of the powers at play, but is able to deduce them through atmosphere and patterns of interaction. In this way, the atmosphere itself becomes an unspoken, but equally effective means of governance.

Emotional Transmission & Fear as Judgment

This affective governance operates through a kind of emotional contagion, in which adult tension transfers into children's bodily and emotional responses without explicit explanation. Brennan's (2004) account of the social transmission of fear and tension via atmosphere works well in the exploration of Saura's work, which often discusses such topics as childhood consciousness, trauma, and memory, highlighting the interplay between "inner life and outer events" (Kinder, 1979, p. 17). Ana's cautious movement and observational stillness in tense household moments illustrate how children may calibrate behaviour to affective atmosphere

rather than explicit instruction. This supports reading Ana's emotional responses as structured by her environment. Nussbaum (2001) discusses how an adult's emotions derive from their childhood experiences (p. 178); it can therefore be claimed that emotions are evaluative responses, shaped by experience. It then follows that Ana's fear is not random or irrational, but a telling response to a deeply constrained communicative world. Read this way, fear becomes interpretive. It shapes affective discipline via unspoken authority and an atmosphere of repression.

Affect and Emotion as Political Evidence

Emotional experience in the film, therefore, functions as political evidence of a much larger system of control and governance. Encarnación (2010) describes the Spanish post-authoritarian culture as one that encouraged forgetting, producing what he describes as "the years of great silence and of no memory" (pp. 78–79). When discourse is restricted and memory is repressed, affect and atmosphere often convey what speech cannot. The film demonstrates what the affective aftermath can look like by keeping emotional knowledge open rather than closed off. This aligns with Smith's (2007) framing claim about *Cría cuervos*: "The Past Is Not Past." The persistence of fear, grief, and unease demonstrates how political history remains present and embodied, even when official narratives push toward closure. Affect thus operates as both an enforcer of the authoritarian afterlife and a record of it. The film's temporal structure will extend this resistance further, formally preventing the past from being sealed off through linear narrative closure.

SYNTHESIS

Film as Political Knowledge

Taken together, the Suara's effective employment of communicative silences, affective atmosphere, and nonlinear memory structure in *Cría cuervos* highlights the ways in which cinema can reveal how authoritarian afterlives persist in lived experience, not only in institutions or laws. Political theory often describes systems of power at state or international level, but film humanizes those systems, thereby making them easier to understand and empathize with; as a viewer, in a sense you live the protagonist's life; you see through their eyes, better understand how they may feel, and navigate their world. This discussion is grounded in meaning construction; "meanings are not found but made" (Bordwell, 1989, p. 3), and *Cría cuervos*

requires viewers to actively infer power relations from silence, atmosphere, repetition, and fractured chronology. These household dynamics work together to produce a lived model of authoritarian persistence rather than a pedagogical one. This experiential political knowledge is anchored most clearly in its subjective perspective: Ana. This is especially accentuated through Ana's continuing relational memory of her mother.

Ana–Mother Spectrum as Counter-Discourse

The relationship between Ana and her mother solidifies how the film constructs both a counter-discourse and a counter-timeline within a communicatively restricted environment. Ana's identity is largely established in relation to those around her. When communication fails, she often turns to internal dialogue structured around her mother's remembered, and imagined, presence. Within this framework, the mother functions as a kind of communicative anchor, enabling interpretive and emotional processing where household discourse, or lack thereof, blocks it. Nussbaum's (2001) discussion of how one's history informs the shape of their emotions (p. 175) further supports this reading, since Ana's remembered relationship carries a great deal of weight on her (re)actions and expressed emotions. Since Ana's mother lives in both Ana's memory and her imagination, her existence disrupts the expected linear chronology. This stands in direct opposition to the post-authoritarian culture Encarnación (2010) describes as la desmemoria, thereby serving as a counter-narrative to the hegemonic norm of the time. The film seems to deliberately reject such closure by playing with memory, time, and expectations.

Final Synthesis Claim

Cría cuervos both demonstrates and challenges the many ways in which that authoritarian power endures at the interpersonal level, through discourse patterns, affective transmission, and nonlinear memory anchored in Ana's maternal counter-structure. Throughout the film, authority operates through strict, yet unspoken, regulation of speech, affect, and even time—resistance of which foments through internal dialogue, incorporation of a child's imagination, and nonlinear memory. Brennan's (2004) discussion of affect also helps clarify how both control and resistance operate atmospherically as well as discursively. As a result, the film does more than represent authoritarian aftermath; it models how it is both lived and how it is interrupted. This analysis shows that communicative theory, affect theory, and narrative form together reveal dimensions of political life that no abstract description or theory could hope to capture. Authoritarian afterlives are lived before they are theorized; movies make those lives personal.

CONCLUSION

Cría cuervos demonstrates that authoritarianism persists not only through institutions or official narratives but through communicative control and lived experience. This paper has argued that authoritarian power continues at the interpersonal level through three interconnected mechanisms: communicative restriction, affective transmission, and pressure toward temporal closure. These mechanisms govern how people speak, what they are permitted to feel, and how they are encouraged to remember. Viewers experience power in the film not through explicit political orders, but through inference built from silence, omission, repetition, and nonlinear structure. This framework is clearest in Ana's ongoing memory—imagination relationship with her mother, which underlines how nonlinear memory resists enforced forgetting, or desmemoria. The spectrum between Ana and her mother functions simultaneously as counter-discourse and counter-timeline: where household authority restricts dialogue and expression, memory enables internal conversation, and resultingly, a kind of freedom for Ana. As a result, the film directly challenges the post-authoritarian culture Encarnación (2010) describes as "the years of great silence and of no memory" (pp. 78–79). By actively maintaining and playing with memory, the film rebuffs this silence.

By highlighting the ways in which authority shapes how people speak, feel, and remember, the film reveals dimensions of political power that theoretical description alone cannot capture. Atmosphere, hesitation, silence, and recurrence become evidence of this. Brennan's discussion of affect describes how politics becomes an embodied experience. Taken together, communicative theory, affect theory, and film form support the paper's central contribution: a paired model of communicative control and the politics of memory and time. Authoritarian regimes may end, but they live on both communicatively and temporally: enduring phenomena which cinema can make visible in ways abstract theoretical description alone often cannot. Films can connect souls across space, time, and reality; we need only watch.

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I Just Ride

White Femininity, Melancholia, and the Settler Colonial Aesthetic in Lana Del Rey's America

Bronwyn Ellerby

Abstract

With over 54.9 million monthly listeners on Spotify alone, Lana Del Rey has taken the world by storm with her melancholic music and vintage American aesthetic (Spotify, 2024). This article seeks to identify and analyze the perpetuation of settler colonial memory and power structures within the music and aesthetics of Lana Del Rey. Despite having the potential to critique an idealized notion of the American dream, I argue that Del Rey's aesthetic ultimately perpetuates settler-colonial power structures and imaginaries through a nostalgic idealization of America and of white femininity, founded on settler colonial violence. I interrogate Del Rey's use of aesthetics through Kevin Bruyneel's (2021) concept of "settler memory," which describes how structures of settler politics, history and media selectively remember and frame the past to erase Indigenous existence and sovereignty. I first argue that Del Rey's aesthetic romanticizes open landscapes and erases the past and ongoing reality of settler-colonial violence within the United States. I then highlight how Del Rey's depiction of Kennedy-era politics reaffirms settler colonial power structures and white heteropatriarchy. I finally analyze the implications of Del Rey's "sad girl" aesthetic in bolstering white fragility and framing the sexuality of Indigenous and racialized women as inferior and degrading. Del Rey's contributions to settler memory as one of the most popular female artists and celebrities of the early-mid 2000s are largely underdetermined and deserve further analysis.

Keywords

Settler-Colonialism, Aesthetics, White Femininity, Thematic Analysis, Lana Del Rey, Visual Media

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Introduction

Lana Del Rey, born Elizabeth Woolridge Grant, is an 11-time Grammy-nominated American singer-songwriter, known for her melancholic depiction of America across landscapes of Las Vegas, New York and Old Hollywood. Central to her early albums *Born to Die* (2011), and *Paradise* (2012) is an exploration of American identity through the lens of longing, loss, and nostalgia. An abundance of academic analysis has centered around Del Rey's music and Americana aesthetic as a critical performance of the neoliberal American dream (Crutcher 2019; Usmar 2014; Nurani & Ananda 2025; Kruger 2025). However, I argue that despite the transformative potential of Del Rey's work, her discography ultimately perpetuates settler-colonial power structures and imaginaries through a nostalgic idealization of America and white femininity founded on colonial violence. For the use of this paper, "Americana aesthetic" broadly refers to a sentimental utilization of American history, pop culture, iconography and material culture (among other themes) as a form of cultural heritage (Holtsträter & Pöhlmann, 2024). As Del Rey is born and based in the United States of America, this essay will largely define Americana and America within the context of the US. While Americana is an incredibly broad and subjective concept, this conceptualization serves the purpose of this paper as a tool for understanding how collective notions of America are continuously shaped, performed, and constructed (Holtsträter & Pöhlmann, 2024). Using a framework of settler colonial theory, this essay will first examine Del Rey's perpetuation of settler-colonial narratives. It will then examine her representation of temporal aesthetics as they intersect with her portrayal of nostalgic yearning for America. Finally, it will examine the critical constructions of white femininity amidst her settler identity and "Question for the Culture" public statement. With roughly 54.9 million monthly listeners of Del Rey on Spotify alone (Spotify, 2024), her contributions to settler narratives, as they are digested and solidified into a settler imaginary through mass consumption are quite significant and warrant further analysis.

Review of Literature

Communications theorist David Marshall argues that "celebrity status" confers a certain level of discursive power within a society. Celebrities simultaneously represent a marketable commodity, an example of individualistic success in their given field, and "a voice above others, a voice that is channeled into media systems as legitimately significant" (1997, p. x). Dyer &

McDonald, (1998) similarly view celebrities as constructed vehicles for competing hegemonic and subversive ideologies. Through their concept of "star theory," Dyer & McDonald argue that celebrities attempt to manage competing forms of ideology in three major ways: displacement (i.e. by remaining apolitical), foregrounding one side as either hegemonic or subversive, or reconciling conflicting ideology into their work and celebrity persona (p. 26).

Much of Del Rey's transformative potential has been defended by scholars as taking place across a similar line of gendered and sexual reconciliation. Crutcher (2019) and Usmar (2014) argue that Del Rey's use of the Americana aesthetic is one based in a respective "American grotesque," and "American gothic" that romanticizes America's chaos, material culture and idealistic potential, while playing within the tension of its violent structural failures. Crutcher (2019) cites Del Rey's ability in particular to "depict herself both as street prostitute and as the Virgin Mary, as a rough biker's Ol' Lady and as a glamorous Malibu homeowner" (p. 251). As Dyer & McDonald (1998) explain, celebrity culture perpetuates often contradictory gendered and racial ideologies, condemning women's sexuality while expecting female celebrities to be simultaneously virginal and sexy—an expectation Del Rey performs, mocks and embraces throughout her array of work.

A great deal of academic analysis has therefore taken a postfeminist approach to Del Rey's discography, interpreting her use of aesthetics as a form of transgressive gendered performance. Kruger (2025) suggests Del Rey's work as a performed "queering" of white femininity and the neoliberal figure of the "ideal woman" in a method akin to drag. Nurani and Ananda (2025) likewise highlight Lana Del Rey's reclamation of sadness and emotional vulnerability, debating its value to construct a more transgressive version of "female empowerment" based in emotional complexity rather than postfeminist detachment and "polished strength" (p. 76). While these sources advocate an intentional manipulation of gendered aesthetics and ideologies on Del Rey's behalf, a thorough analysis of how race intersects with her performances is lacking from both Crutcher (2019), Usmar (2014), and Nurani & Ananda's (2025) analysis. While Kruger (2025) acknowledges Del Rey's aesthetics of white femininity as they are tied to supremacist themes of purity and fragility, her analysis is largely isolated to a gendered approach, separated from Del Rey's use of the Americana aesthetic. The use of this aesthetic is inherently grounded in cultures and landscapes of settler colonial violence.

Scholars such as Mooney (2018) critically address the intersection of race within Del Rey's work. Mooney argues that while sadness can be employed as a form of resistance, Lana Del Rey's "sad girl" aesthetic is an affective performance of race based on the weaponization of white victimhood and cultural appropriation from West-coast Latina/x artists—who first coined the "sad girl" movement to cultivate solidarity and resist machismo culture within their communities. Oakeby (2024) similarly utilizes the concept of the "eternal feminine" to describe Del Rey's nostalgic depiction of whiteness, post-war consumerism, and "the all-American girl" who reproduces and loves her white nation, as she does her white lover (p. 6). While Oakeby argues that Del Rey is ultimately disillusioned by her fatherland throughout *Born to Die*, one can't help but consider the idealized, white-coded form of patriotism underlying her vision for America in the first place. In this sense, while much of the existing literature has explored Del Rey's discursive and feminist potential, and, in some cases, the intersection of racialized and gendered themes within her work, this analysis has remained largely separated from a critical settler colonial perspective.

Theoretical Framework

Del Rey's ability to project herself across and onto various time periods and landscapes of the United States can be understood through Kevin Bruyneel's (2021) concept of "settler memory." Bruyneel uses settler memory to describe how Indigeneity is "variously constructed, reaffirmed…and refashioned through such means as elite narratives, popular culture, historical teachings, national and communal myths" that render Indigeneity as highly visible and exploitable, yet simultaneously eternally absent (p.14). Considering Del Rey's discursive celebrity power, I analyzed her work as a legitimate and potent contribution to collective understandings of settler colonialism and Indigeneity. Addressing Del Rey's use of distinct time periods and eras within her work (i.e. 1960s America), I draw on Mark Rifkin's (2017) concept of "settler time" as a contribution and framing force to settler memory. Settler time describes the process through which colonial nations have historically regulated time as a tool for instilling colonial patterns, assimilation, and systems. This is achieved through both memory of time (i.e. how and what is remembered through history), as well as control over how time is conceptualized (i.e. the ways in which time is gendered and raced). I examine how Del Rey's manipulation of time and space perpetuates a settler version of time, contributing to greater

settler-colonial themes and power structures. Given the role of settler colonialism as a continuous process of physical dispossession and violence, settler memory plays a vital role in organizing the cultural discourses and political meanings that justify these physical structures (Bruyneel, 2021).

Furthermore, as a white settler scholar writing from the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabeg, and Haudenosaunee peoples, I am largely shaped by these dominant settler narratives. I acknowledge my position and distance from lived experience as an inhibitor and source of bias in my ability to critically analyze Del Rey's work. Included in this was my decision to centre Bruyneel, who is another settler scholar, as the main theoretical source for my paper. While I want to emphasize the utmost importance of centering Indigenous scholarship in analyses of settler colonialism, I use the concept of "settler memory" as a grounding theory for the multitude of academic study conducted around the political, cultural and social mechanisms of settler colonialism. Considering the constraints of a shorter essay, Bruyneel's reliance on a wide and diverse range of Native, Indigenous, and Black scholarship allowed for my analysis to remain in dialogue with multiple interconnected perspectives. While this does and should not serve as a replacement for direct engagement with Indigenous scholarship, I made this methodological choice with the aim to provide a concise and specific grounding lens for my analysis of Del Rey's work.

Methodology

Considering Lana Del Rey's vast discography—including over nine studio albums—the scope of this project required a narrowed focus. I decided to concentrate on two of Del Rey's earliest works: *Born to Die,* and her extended play *Paradise*. I chose these early albums as they constitute the foundation of Del Rey's discography and use of her iconic Americana aesthetic. While Del Rey's entire discography is highly aestheticized, *Born to Die* and *Paradise* represent distinctly temporal and spatial works. As *Dissent* writer Kate Arnoff describes, Lana Del Rey's *Born to Die* persona revolves "in one way or another around death, bad boyfriends, and Americana—sometimes all three at once, and always painted in a thick, tacky coat of nostalgia" (2014, p. 11).

Over a two-week period (from November 4–18, 2024), I consolidated the lyrics of Del Rey's songs, within a shared document, organizing each song within a table and each album

within a different document section. I primarily focused on an analysis of the songs “Ride,” “National Anthem,” “Born to Die,” and “Off to the Races.” From there, I conducted a thematic analysis through a close reading of her lyrics and their associated visual works, specifically the music videos for “Ride,” “National Anthem,” and “Tropico.” While selecting my material I drew from Bruyneel’s (2021) analysis of the “mutually constitutive relationship” between heteropatriarchy, anti-Black racism, and settler colonialism through his concept of “settler memory” (p. 32). I analyzed content based on three main criteria: connection to a melancholia and the white feminine aesthetic, broader relationship to the Americana aesthetic, and explicit contribution to settler-colonial memory. I sought to analyze how these intersecting hierarchies of oppression intertwined within the works of Del Rey to construct an aesthetic of nostalgia and whiteness. While my choice of visual and lyrical evidence is perhaps not novel in the greater scheme of analysis on Del Rey’s work, little examination has been done to connect these themes within a settler colonial theoretical framework.

“I Just Ride,” Settler Desire and Relationality to Land

Del Rey’s song “Ride” on her EP *Paradise* (2012), is a ballad saturated with classic American iconography. The accompanying music video depicts Del Rey perched atop a motorcycle as she rides across the open desert, smoking, and drinking with a group of Hells Angels in a romanticized performance of wild freedom. Drawing from the work of scholar Kim TallBear, Bruyneel (2021) argues that settler memory fundamentally operates through a "simultaneous past and present,” one that “mnemonically absorbs” Indigenous identity into the background of settler (especially white settler) life, absorbing Indigeneity into easily controllable symbols, stereotypes and aesthetics (p. 29). The chorus of the song, “I’ve been out on that open road…I’ve got a war in my mind/So, I just ride” and Del Rey’s opening monologue within the music video, where she refers to herself as a “chameleon soul/with no moral compass pointing due North” (Del Rey, 2012e) position the Nevada desert as an empty, open, landscape for self and sexual discovery. This structure of memory relies heavily on depictions of *terra nullius* or "nobody's land,” a concept historically enacted throughout the political and cultural history of the US, used to frame territory as untouched and inherently available for conquest (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. xx). In this case Lana Del Rey’s spiritual, emotional, and artistic conquests. Indigeneity is not fully erased in this regard, but as TallBear describes, it is

fundamentally craved and consumed by White America, used as a nation-building tactic to establish a moral and physical claim to the land of America (TallBear cited in Bruyneel, p.19). Del Rey's hunger to consume and claim Indigeneity is made tremendously explicit through her appropriation of the headdress, which she wears while laughing, singing, and toting a handgun (see Fig. 1). In her desire to embody the all-American girl (Oakeby, 2024), Del Rey engages in a form of appropriation akin to mascotry, one that attempts, as Bruyneel (2021) describes, "to acculturate a sense of settler belonging on this land" by acknowledging Indigenous peoples as historical figureheads, while rendering their contemporary identities, autonomy, and claims to self-determination obsolete" (p. 142).

Figure 1:

Del Rey wears a headdress and holds a handgun in the music video for "Ride" (2012).

One can also point to Lana Del Rey's romanticization of the "travelling biker" as an expression of white-settler masculinity and heteropatriarchy. The "Ride" music video is interspersed with romantic dalliances across the desert between Lana Del Rey and several different members of her biker crew, ending with Del Rey and her lover screaming at each other in wild release (Del Rey, 2012d). Her depiction of these relationships are often intermingled with shots of her brandishing her handgun while wearing a headdress and racing down the open road with her lover. These images call back to an aesthetic of white settler masculinity, a taming of the "wild frontier" and "wild west" through which white heteropatriarchal fantasies of sexual, physical, and territorial domination have been imagined and enacted (Bruyneel, 2021, p. 128). Just as Del Rey submits to the open road, to her lovers, and to the "war in her mind," she frames

the open landscape of America as a conquerable wild resource for self-discovery and pleasure. As Moreton-Robinson states, "In its self-legitimacy, white possession operates discursively through narratives of the home of the brave and the land of the free" (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. 52), a trope echoed in Del Rey's *Ride* monologue: "I believe in the country America used to be, I believe in the person I want to become, I believe in the freedom of the open road" (Del Rey, 2012e).

A White Woman's "National Anthem," Settler Nostalgia and Heteropatriarchy

Del Rey directly explores this notion of the country America used to be in her song and music video for "National Anthem." Adopting the polished glamour and hazy Technicolor-eqsue look of the 1960s, Del Rey personifies herself as late First Lady Jackie Kennedy, with rapper A$AP Rocky by her side as her modern JFK (see Fig. 2) (Del Rey, 2012f).

Figure 2:

Lana Del Rey and A$AP Rocky as John and Jackie Kennedy, with two of their children running playfully through several luxurious 60's-era estates in the music video for "National Anthem."

The opening lines of the song, "money is the anthem of success/so before we go out what's your address" (Del Rey, 2011), set the stage for her romantic entanglement and ultimately doomed romance with a Kennedy-era American dream (Samuel, 2012). Considering the violent end of the music video, many scholars have pointed to Del Rey's iteration of JFK's death, as a satirical portrayal of institutional power, a false American dream that inevitably ends in tears and destruction (Crutcher, 2019). Kruger (2025), moreover, highlights the radical juxtaposition of

historically white-coded family values expressed by the Kennedys, contrasted with the "ghetto" rap culture embodied by A$AP Rocky, as an intentional queering of race as a stable category and a rejection of white supremacist power (pp. 254–255). Swezin (2024) similarly highlights the casting choice as a rejection of cinematic convention, and a means of challenging the hegemonic power structures of the early 60s (pp. 120–121).

However, when asked about her decision to draw on early 60s-era aesthetics in the "National Anthem" music video, Del Rey stated in a 2013 interview with *Nylon* that she, "loved the idea of a girl telling her boyfriend, 'Tell me I'm your national anthem, your star-spangled banner, salute to me and love me'... I wanted to show how modern-day romance could still have that classic feel" (Nylon, 2013). Rather than an intentional transgressive queering of the era, Del Rey evidently draws upon an old-fashioned, nostalgic imaginary of heteropatriarchy, calling for utter devotion on behalf of the ideal man, who paternally cares for his woman as he would his (white) nation. Metaphorically and physically mapping herself onto the American flag, the National Anthem, and as the figure of the First Lady, Del Rey constructs a "motherland" of America grounded in a false notion of white femininity and womanhood (Oakeby, 2024). Referencing the highest paragon of white, nuclear heterosexuality, she romanticizes a white institutional idealization of heteropatriarchy that has somehow been tainted over time, having lost its elusive "classic" roots. The language of reclamation, and of proudly embracing America's romantic and brave past, has been historically invoked as common settler-colonial talking points (Bruyneel 2021). In her obsessive reinstatement of an America that does not and has never existed, Del Rey obscures the history and collective memory of an era distinctly marked by a strengthening Civil Rights Movement and systematic colonial projects such as the operation of residential schools and the Sixties Scoop (Bruyneel, 2021).

Just as she paints over decades of settler-colonial violence and genocide, Del Rey similarly erases how dynamics of "utter devotion" and paternalistic care are products of white settler patriarchy. Her romanticization of such aesthetics severs them from the violent racial and colonial structures by which they are produced. White heteropatriarchy in particular denotes access to white women and marriage as constructional resources to white male citizenship, while framing Black and racialized women as "invisible nonsubjects" (Bruyneel, 2021, p. 65). Rifkin (2017) explores in this regard, the notion that the "classic" nuclear family has been historically and currently used as a vehicle for constructing a settler timescape. The seizing and division of

Native land through allotment policy and private ownership enacted a physical and temporal reframing of life itself—shifting patterns of labour, development and kinship to rely on the isolated heteropatriarchal family structures (Rifkin 2017, p. 96). As Rifkin (2017) states:

> Native activists and intellectuals have argued against the idea of inclusion within the United States, understanding that gesture as an erasure of the specificity of Indigenous geopolitical claims, rights to self-determination, autochthonous existence as polities distinct from the settler state, and, perhaps most pointedly, the ways the colonial violence of settler rule has worked through forced incorporation of Indigenous peoples into the "domestic" space of the nation (p.60).

Lana Del Rey's use of the Kennedy aesthetic represents a romanticized and temporal reframing of domestic space as a nostalgic fantasy. This form of settler time can also be understood as a method of "reproductive temporality" through which the convention of marriage and heterosexual courtship, as a fundamental force in settler-colonial power and capitalism, is naturalized and solidified (Rifkin, 2017, p. 37). A$AP Rocky's ultimate fate, as he is "sacrificed" like the real JFK, reduces his role from powerful president to a disposable body within a colonial framework which delineates and erases him as consumable. As Hartman (2006) discusses, Black sovereignty is not necessarily "the dream of a White House, even if it was in Harlem, but of a free territory. It was a dream of autonomy rather than nationhood" (Hartman 2006, as cited in Rifkin, 2019, p. 46).

Just as Del Rey erases Indigenous sovereignty and memory from the open road of *Ride*, A$AP Rocky is further framed to bolster Del Rey's white feminine identity, especially its association with tragedy and sadness, the weeping Jackie who mourns her dead, expendable husband. Del Rey's appropriation of land and memory can be understood as interconnected to her depiction of family and A$AP Rocky in the *National Anthem* music video. As Bruyneel (2021) describes:

> Settler desires for control over land, women, and racial others are at the propertied and patriarchal root of the production of white standing that formalizes…anti-Blackness, and

> the genocidal elimination and dispossession of Indigenous peoples—of necro-Indigeneity (p.67).

While Lana Del Rey's depiction within "National Anthem" may not have been an overt and intentional display of anti-Blackness, her romanticization of the heteropatriarchal nuclear family, in combination with her cultural appropriation and claiming of land in "Ride" combine to cultivate a "necro-Indigeneity" that frames Indigenous lives, sovereignty, and claims obsolete, similarly structuring Black lives as disposable and consumable. Her desire to claim control over women, specifically by appropriating from and villainizing women of colour, will be explored in the next section.

"Sad, Sad Girl," White Melancholia & Settler Colonialism:

Icons Jackie Kennedy and Marlyin Munroe included, upper-class white women have been historically constructed as symbols of the American nation, portrayed as the "reproducers" of a white society requiring the protection of white men (Perry, 2004). This parallels the settler colonial framing of America itself as stolen land that must be preserved and defended at all costs (Bruyneel, 2021). Lana Del Rey perpetuates this dynamic through her music and visuals. Across albums like *Born to Die*, *Ultraviolence*, and *Paradise*, she embodies an idealized version of fragile white femininity, frequently portraying herself as the object of male desire, under the control (financially, sexually, and emotionally) of older white men (see Fig. 3). In her song "Off to the Races," Del Rey describes herself as the young Lolita to her male lover who she depends upon for happiness, "Light of my life, fire of my loins/…cause I'm crazy, baby/I need you to come here and save me" (Del Rey, 2011).

Figure 3:

Lana Del Rey and her older male lover in the "West Coast" music video, Ultraviolence (2014).

A defining feature of the "sad girl" aesthetic is its reliance on white women's public displays of fragility, melancholia, and victimhood, historically used to skirt accountability and villainize women and people of colour (Mooney, 2018). Del Rey, who falls asleep in an American flag in her *Born to Die* song "Cola" (Del Rey, 2011), is nursed and nurtured by the patriarchal and settler colonial safety that she accesses through her white womanhood and nation (Oakeby, 2024) Within a broader sociopolitical context, this aesthetic is often exercised through the performance of "white woman tears," the weaponization of white women's emotional displays to incite racial violence and punishment towards people of colour (Phipps, 2021).

Del Rey's aesthetic capitalizes on this historical framework evident in her 2020 "Question for the culture" post on Instagram. In this online message, Del Rey defended her Americana aesthetic, claiming that there was no room for "women like her" within feminism, "the kind of women who are slated mercilessly for being their authentic, delicate selves" (Del Rey, 2020, as cited in, Yassssne1, 2026). In her post, Del Rey expressed frustration towards critics who condemned her work for romanticizing emotional and sexual abuse. In defense, she named several other female artists, all of whom are women of colour (primarily Black women) who she critiqued for "wearing no clothes, fucking, cheating" within their performances (Del Rey, 2020, as cited in, Yassssne1, 2026). As writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin describes, such constructions of victimhood and disavowal of responsibility constitute a "willed innocence of whiteness" that relies on a collective memory of white moral purity and fragility to disavow the impacts of structural racism (Ioanide, 2014). As Bruyneel (2021) describes in his analysis of Baldwin's writings, collective settler memory is not an epistemological issue, but rather a defence mechanism towards "a threat white people sense will be posed to their individual and collective identities, power, and status if they act upon what they know" (p. 30).

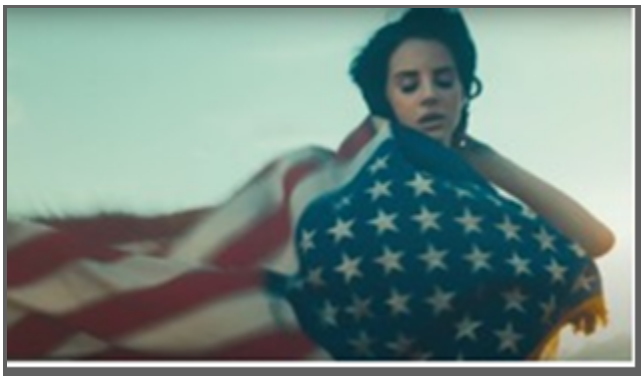
In a 2017 interview, Del Rey acknowledged "it would feel weird…now," to use the American Flag on stage during her first post-Donald Trump presidency tour (Frank, 2017). Despite this acknowledgement, and her financial contributions to various Native American foundations in response to backlash from her Instagram post (Del Rey, 2020, as cited in, Yassssne1, 2026, slide 3), nothing has stopped Del Rey from continuing to profit from a discography steeped in settler colonial fantasies, while continuing to condemn the bodies of Black women as reflexively lascivious. In a song on her subsequent album Lust for Life, titled "When the World Was at War, We Kept Dancing," Del Rey sings,

> Is it the end of an era? /Is it the end of America? /…/It's only the beginning/If we hold on to hope/We'll have a happy ending/When the world was at war before/We just kept dancing (Del Rey, 2017).

The distinct reference to the "end of an era," implies the existence of another era, a pre-Trump era that was somehow a safer or better version of America. Regardless of when this era supposedly began, the nature of settler colonialism as a transitive, multidimensional system, rather than a single event, highlights the continuous violence perpetuated in all eras of settler contact (Byrd, 2011). Del Rey's desire to dance as the world burns around her, to return to a nonexistent version of America that nurtures and blankets her as her white womanhood does, reiterates a continuous contribution to false settler narrative and memory (see Fig 4.).

Figure 4:

Lana Del Rey with eyes closed as she is embraced by her nation's flag, "Ride" video (2012).



Despite perhaps some level of feminist resistance in her work, Del Rey evidently grounds her expression of femininity in a hypocritical expression of meritocracy. In both "National Anthem" and "Off to the Races," money represents to Del Rey the "anthem of success" (Del Rey 2012b). She positions herself as both an empowered wild child and a submissive figure to her older male lovers, who she asks, "tell me you own me, give me them coins" (Del Rey, 2012c). Throughout her early albums, Lana Del Rey asserts her sexuality freely, even in potentially dangerous situations, cultivating an aesthetic based on confronting the so-called perverse and grotesque sides of sexual desire (Usmar, 2014). In stark contrast, women of colour are criticized

and shamed for doing the same, framed by Del Rey herself as being too sexual, or representing a more degrading sexuality than that of her white fragility.

This dynamic is pervasive not just in her lyrics but also in her music videos. In "Ride", Del Rey frames her body against the vast, conquerable landscape of Nevada, alluding to a sexual or prostitution-based relationship with the bikers she travels among (Del Rey, 2012g). In her short film, *Tropico*, Lana dons a teardrop tattoo and *calavera* makeup appropriating the clothing and culture closely associated with Mexican-American *Chicana* culture. She uses the visual aesthetic to bolster her exotic and free sexuality as she dances on a pole (see Fig. 5 & 6) (Del Rey, 2013). Just as Del Rey positions racialized and white sexuality within a binary of purity and degradation, the settler-colonial power structures and memory she perpetuates, frames Indigenous women through a binary of "'unrapeable' (or 'highly rapeable')" (Simpson 2016, as cited in Bruyneel, p.37). As Lana Del Rey espouses in "Born to Die", "this is what makes us girls," "we don't stick together 'because we put our love first" (Del Rey, 2011). This "love" for men, as we can see through "National Anthem" and "Ride," is interchangeable with the rocky relationship Del Rey has with America itself, a settler-colonial vehicle she will evidently protect and defend at any cost.

Figure 5:

Lana Del Rey dons calavera makeup in the "Tropico" short film (2013).

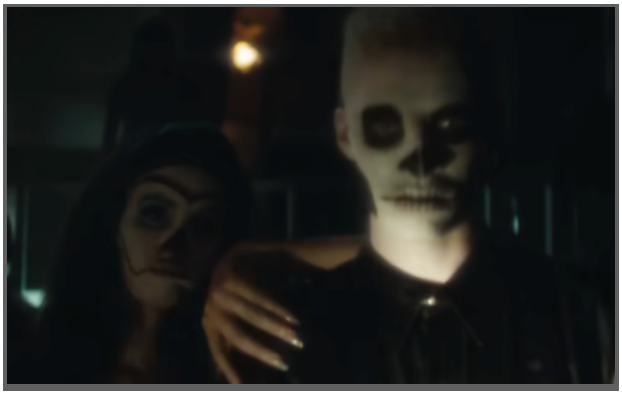
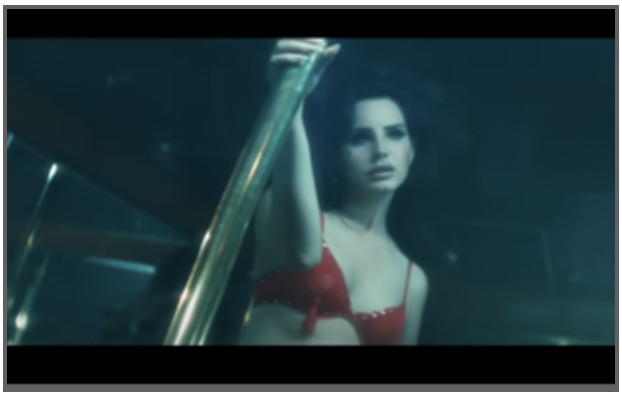


Figure 6:

Del Rey dances in a club, "Tropico" short film (2013).



Del Rey thus romanticizes her sexual freedom in ways unavailable to women and people of colour. This is especially significant considering the settler context of her work. In "Off to the Races," Lana Del Rey describes a love affair that has turned her so crazy she is "facing time at Rikers Island," (Del Rey, 2012c), an American prison where Black and Indigenous men make up 66% of incarcerated adults ages 18–25 (Chester et al., 2022). Furthermore, her perpetuation of settler-colonial imaginaries and tropes further contributes to the framing of Indigenous women, who are victim of murder and sexual assault within North America at a disproportionately high rate, and described as inherently sexually available, disposable, and criminal (Scully, 2005). In Canada alone, Indigenous women are three times more likely to be victims of sexual assault than non-Indigenous women (Department of Justice Canada, 2017). Sexual violence takes a unique role in both the structure and process of settler colonialism and settler memory, rendering both "land and native women…as objects of use, extraction, violation and exchange" (Bruyneel, p. 37). While the ultimate message of *Born to Die* is perhaps Del Rey's disillusionment with this American fantasy, her ability to remain illusioned in the first place points to a certain level of privilege and safety within its white-supremacist-coded aesthetics (Oakeby, 2024). As Black feminist Audre Lorde highlights in a 1984 interview with James Baldwin, "nobody was dreaming of me, nobody was even studying me except as something to wipe out" (Lorde, 1984, cited in Bruyneel 2021, p. 132). Lorde highlights how Black women have never been allowed the privilege of believing in the American Dream, so much as it was never a "believer in her because it was built upon Black women's othering, denigration, and disappearance" (Bruyneel 2021, p. 132). Del Rey's appropriation of systems and aesthetics of sexual violence, as well as her overt denigration of sexuality when expressed by racialized women, points to the continuation of a

settler aesthetic and logic grounded in the domination of the land, body, and labour of women of colour.

Conclusion:

Through her aestheticization of a false memory of America predicated upon open landscapes in her music videos for "Ride," and as well as the weaponization of white feminine identity through the "National Anthem," and "Tropico" music videos, Del Rey participates in a cultural memory that erases Indigenous and racialized histories, while profiting from the exploitation and appropriation of marginalized identities. While analysis has questioned whether it is the persona of Lana Del Rey, rather than the real person, who yearns for an unreachable version of the American dream, Del Rey's ability to reject and accept these competing ideologies as they suit her brand that which she heavily profits from, highlight her use of American landscapes, time periods, and racialized women as resources to be used as discarded. Del Rey's portrayal of various romantic and sexual relationships mapped onto and across settler colonial hierarchies further highlights the inextricable role of heteropatriarchy in the construction of settler colonial memory and dominance. Considering Lana Del Rey's rising popularity since the foundation of her discography through *Born to Die,* her discursive influence as both a celebrity and creator of culture cannot be underestimated. While Del Rey represents just one piece within a broader culture that disavows, erases, and intentionally misremembers America's ongoing structure as a settler colonial state, she is a reminder of our need to rethink the constant passive narratives of anti-Indigeneity and anti-Blackness laid out for our effortless consumption.

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Whose Ballot?

How Tanzanian Youth Confront Corruption During Election Cycles

Iman Panchan

Abstract

Africa is the youngest continent in the world, with its median age being 18-19 years old (Al Jazeera, 2025). Despite these numbers, many African countries are governed by political elites who are significantly older than the populations they lead. State-controlled media across Africa often rely on traditional media channels to reinforce state-informed dominant ideologies. These ideologies portray Africa's youth as rebellious, violent political disruptors rather than legitimate political actors. Such narratives contribute to the continued marginalization of African youth, excluding them from political, social, and economic processes and denying them meaningful opportunities to shape their own futures. It is precisely this exclusion that has pushed Africa's youth to voice their concerns on social media platforms. In this article, I draw on postcolonial theoretical frameworks and Mahmood Mamdani's Citizen and Subject to examine how Tanzanian youth confront corruption, using social media platforms as alternative channels of political expression. Monitoring social media content during election cycles, I argue that Tanzania's youth produce counter-narratives, mobilize political movements, and raise global awareness of election corruption and mismanagement through online platforms.

Keywords

Content Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, Africa, Tanzania, Election, Postcolonialism, Activism, African Politics, Social Media, Digital Activism

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Introduction

Africa is the youngest continent in the world, with its median age being 18–19 years old (Al Jazeera, 2025). Yet despite these numbers, many African countries are governed by political elites who are significantly older than the populations they lead. State-controlled media across Africa often rely on traditional media channels to reinforce state-informed dominant ideologies. These ideologies portray Africa's youth as rebellious, violent political disruptors rather than legitimate political actors. Such hegemonic discourse is intensified during election cycles, where public dissatisfaction and demands for change are most intense. Such narratives contribute to the continued marginalization of African youth, excluding them from political, social, and economic processes and denying them meaningful opportunities to shape their own futures. It is precisely this exclusion that has pushed Africa's new generation, Gen Z, to voice their concerns on digital platforms. Instead of waiting for corrupt or unresponsive governments to hear them, young Africans are taking to social media to tell their own stories. The case of Tanzania is not any different. Many young people in the country face the same continental patterns of political marginalization and economic hardship, much of it driven by government corruption and mismanagement. Tanzanian youth confront corruption during election cycles by creating alternative channels of political expression on social media platforms. Despite facing state repression, they actively use social media platforms to produce counter-narratives, mobilize political movements, and raise global awareness. As such, Tanzanian youth are diligently changing the country's political climate, asserting their agency, exposing government corruption, and redefining national democratic identity.

The Myth of Democracy in Tanzania

While Tanzania presents itself as a peaceful and progressive democratic state, its reality depicts a different story. Tanzanian state-controlled media deploys colonial-influenced narratives of discipline, respectability, and order to control its citizens. Since 1995, Tanzania has held six presidential elections without descending into large-scale electoral violence (Ersia, 2025). However, since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1992 (Ersia, 2025), the ruling party—Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM)—has increasingly relied on authoritarian measures to suppress and control its citizens. It has systematically weakened opposition parties, targeted journalists, civilians, and activists through arrests and violence, and imposed media censorship, and

surveillance (Ersia, 2025). Ugandan academic Mahmood Mamdani theorizes that the authoritarian governance of East African countries mimics the power dynamics of colonial Africa (Ersia, 2025). He argues that state governance operates with a paternalistic and top-down approach, treating its people more as subjects to be managed than citizens with inherent rights (Ersia, 2025). This structure thereby reproduces the coercive and controlling style of governance established during colonial rule, resulting in states that are formally democratic but covertly authoritarian (Ersia, 2025). The Tanzanian government's efforts to restrict political participation reflect the enduring colonial legacy of corrupt governance, particularly within media and digital spaces. Media technologies play a central role in shaping social environments—they influence how individuals process information, interpret the world, and construct social structures, norms, attitudes, and beliefs (Hoelscher & Ott, 2023). Given this, it is unsurprising that the Tanzanian government seeks to assert control over media ecologies as digital spaces become a dynamic environment where different actors struggle among competing voices to shape public perception. When faced with resistance, criticism, and dissatisfaction by young people on media platforms, the government has taken brutal and harsh actions against young Tanzanians online. Just days before the 2025 election, the Tanzanian government enacted a nationwide internet blackout, aiming to isolate citizens, suppress potential protests, and limit both resistance and international scrutiny (OkayAfrica, 2025).

Youth Visibility and the Politics of Presence in Digital Spaces

Despite years of repression, strict surveillance, and political exclusion, Tanzanian youth have used social media platforms to produce counter-narratives, mobilize grassroots action, and raise global awareness during election cycles. Young people online have taken it upon themselves to challenge, resist, and assert their agency in political systems through social media, producing counter-narratives that oppose dominant hegemonic discourse.

Satire, Solidarity, and the Radical Possibility of Joy

Rather than staying complicit to their oppressors, youth online use short-form video platforms, like TikTok and Instagram, to create humorous and satirical content, helping them make sense of their realities and find strength and solidarity in their oppression. State-owned and controlled media often suppresses dissenting voices in fear of their regime losing dominant

narrative legitimacy. Humour, however, functions as a powerful counter-strategy because its subjectivity makes it difficult for governments to gatekeep and control. Political messages embedded in satire take complex issues—such as electoral corruption—and make them more accessible for viewers to discuss and engage with. The infamous #nywinywinywichallenge became a satirical response to President Samia Suluhu Hassan's governance. TikTok and Instagram users posted videos of themselves dancing to an audio clip from the president's speech on voter turnout. In the clip, she declares, "*Hakutakuwa na nywinywi wala nywinywinywi*…" (Hamisi, 2025, 00:43), meaning there will be no noise, referring to protesting, resistance, or upset, during the election process. Young people mocked the irony of this statement, especially as distrust, anger, and political tension were at their peak. Influencers such as Jennifer 'Niffer' Jovin, known online as Niffer Cosmetics, joined in on the trend and was subsequently arrested and charged with treason (Magai & Jumanne, 2025). Her arrest only amplified the challenge across the continent, with users from Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and other countries participating in the dance as an act of solidarity and digital resistance (See Figure 1).

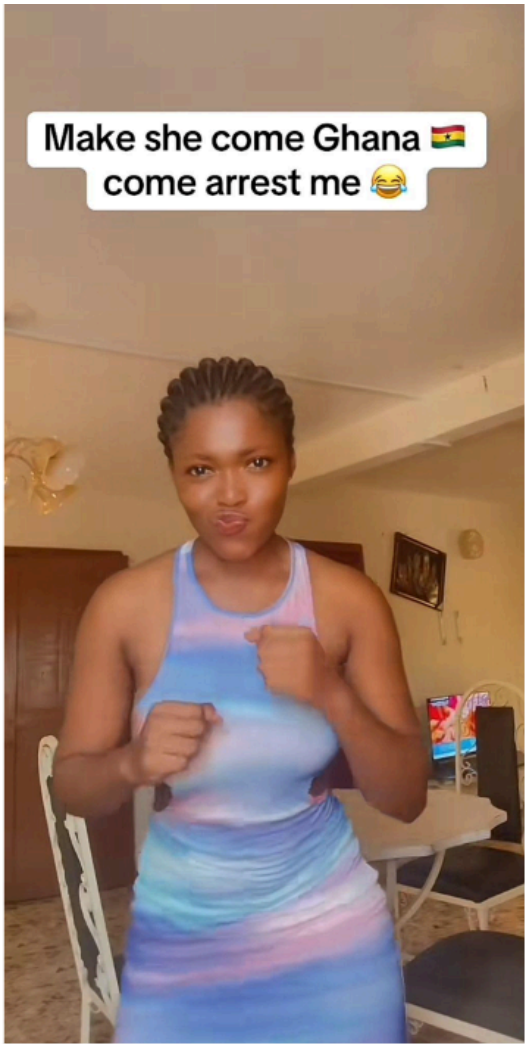

Figure 1. Screenshot from *the #Nywinywinywi Challenge on TikTok.* This screenshot illustrates the intercontinental participation in the Nywi Nywi trend. From *TikTok* [video], by Ekpoilaku Bomo, 2025. https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSfw5hbML/

Similarly, memes and satirical images circulated widely in response to corrupt governance. AI-generated photos, edited pictures, and humorous video clips spread online in Tanzania and the diaspora abroad (See Figure 2). In engaging with satirical content, users online turned humour into an effective tool of resistance against their oppressors.

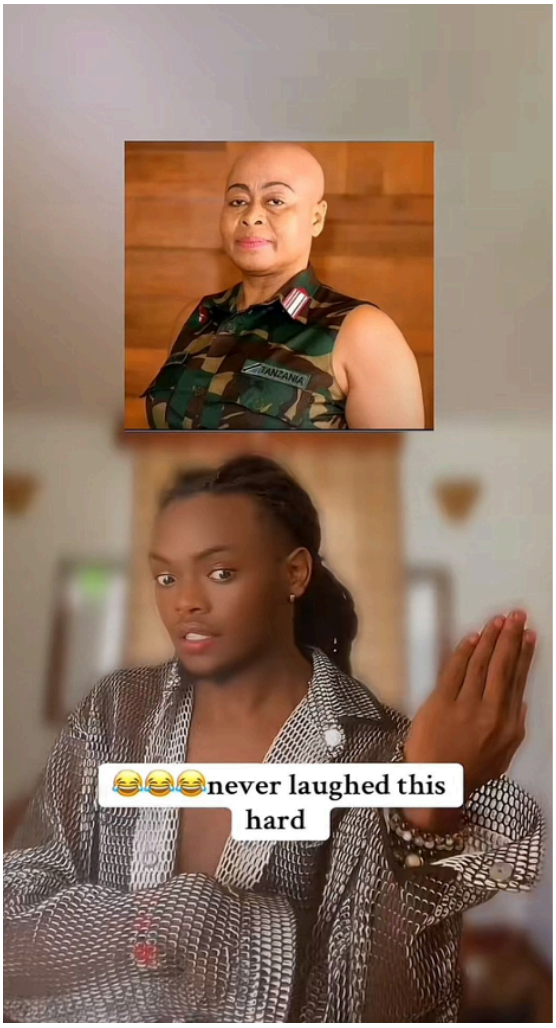

Figure 2. *Screenshot of a TikTok with Satirical Images of President Samia Suluhu.* This screenshot uses satirical imagery as a political critique of Tanzania's Governance. From *TikTok* [Video] by Jabar Shawn, 2025. https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSfw55n6t/

Hashtag Citizenship and Online Mobilization

During Tanzania's independence, mobilization and grassroots activism relied heavily on cultural spaces for political outreach (Natterman, 2022). However, the emergence of modern media technologies has transformed traditional grassroots methods into powerful tools for organizing, coordinating, and amplifying political messaging. Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram have become primary organizing platforms where young protesters can coordinate

protest locations, share safety information in real-time, and amplify their political demands. The hashtag #Maandamano—originally coined by young Kenyans in response to government corruption—has become a central organizing tool for digital activism in Tanzania. The word *Maandamano* in Swahili means to protest or to demonstrate, and holds significance for many young East Africans. The hashtag has been used to document demonstrations, circulate calls for mobilization and call for political change. Clips on TikTok under the hashtag #Maandamano document young Tanzanians taking to the streets, waving flags, chanting slogans such as *Suluhu must go,* and captioning their posts with messages like *No Reform, No Election* (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. *Screenshot of a TikTok Video using the hashtag #Maandamano.* This screenshot is from the Namanga One-Stop Border Post, where Kenyans and Tanzanians were protesting election results. From *TikTok* [video] by Signal Lost, 2025. https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSfwutuTc/

The use of #Maandamano demonstrates how Tanzanians bypass traditional media gatekeepers by creating an alternative counter-public space to channel alternative political expression online. The visibility of #Maandamano content makes it difficult for the government to fully suppress dissent, as the digital footprint of protests circulates beyond Tanzania's borders, drawing regional and international attention. Young Tanzanians have effectively used social media as a tool to give voice to the 'subaltern' and have their voices represented and heard. They

have become producers of their own content unhindered by mainstream state-controlled media. They have created, disseminated, and circulated counter-narratives that actively challenge dominant hegemonic ideologies, while simultaneously using these digital counter-public spaces to mobilize and organize collective actions in response to their grievances.

From Chawacracy to Meritocracy

Tanzanian youth-led digital activism is reshaping the country's political landscape. By utilizing media platforms, young Tanzanians assert their political agency, redefine national democratic identity, and challenge the enduring legacies of colonial governance and authoritarian control. Online platforms have provided Tanzanians with a space to articulate their realities and demand new approaches to politics. Activists, scholars, and youth leaders have developed their own political thought—most notably through the term *Chawacracy*. Derived from the Swahili word for lice, *Chawacracy* describes a system in which power is maintained through flattery rather than skill or merit (DW The 77 Percent, 2025). In practice, it privileges certain individuals, groups, and communities while marginalizing others (DW The 77 Percent, 2025). Chawacracy, in several ways, replicates the governing methods imposed by colonial authorities during Africa's colonial period. Colonial powers often favoured certain groups, commanded respect from subjects, and demanded control and supremacy over any opposing parties (Ersia, 2025). The demands of young people are actively transforming chawacracy into meritocracy, whereby political candidates, citizens, and leadership are elected based on their merit rather than nepotism or proximity to power. In response to these demands, many users on media platforms have challenged chawacracy by boycotting artists, influencers, politicians, and social elites. Famous musician Diamond Platnumz faced significant backlash online from young Tanzanians for endorsing President Suluhu's campaign (Ajon, 2025). Becoming the face of Tanzania's public anger, Diamond deleted all posts that endorsed the CCM party and fled to Kenya in fear of protest (Ajon, 2025). As such, online activism did more than just criticize individual social elites; it disrupted the social and political hierarchies that sustain Chawacracy. By targeting influential figures like Diamond Platnumz, youth expose the complicity of cultural and social elites in maintaining an unequal political system.

Conclusion

Tanzanian youth-led digital activism demonstrates the power of Gen Z to challenge entrenched political hierarchies, authoritarian governance, and the lingering legacies of colonial rule. Through humour, hashtags, and coordinated online campaigns, young Tanzanians have created alternative public spaces where they can produce counter-narratives, mobilize collective action, and demand accountability from political leaders. By critiquing systems like Chawacracy and holding cultural and political elites accountable, youth not only contest individual acts of corruption but also disrupt the structural inequalities that mirror colonial governance. Tanzanian youth are redefining what it means to participate in democracy, asserting that political legitimacy should derive from merit, transparency, and citizen involvement rather than nepotism, flattery, or inherited power. Their activism illustrates how Africa's youngest generation is reshaping political discourse across the continent, creating a new model of civic engagement that proves that the future of Africa lies in the hands of the youth.

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