

# Masculinities in Immigration Detention Centres

## *Crime as a Result of the Institutional Victimization of Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants in Multicultural Liberal Democracies*

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**ABSTRACT:** A great tool to grow an empire, detention camps have been historically used and abused as a subordination tactic by all of the most powerful empires, most notably by Germany's Nazi Regime in the Second World War. Commonly thought to have been born and died in history, they are a mostly forgotten piece of the past. Many would be shocked to discover that there is a secret world of institutions that disregard international human rights law in order to prioritize their national goals, where refugees, asylum seekers and migrants are the primary victims. Systems for migrancy and immigration detention have emerged in the wake of globalization, seeking asylum from conflicts, natural disasters or financial insecurity, or simply searching for better economic opportunities, education or reunion with family. Multicultural liberal democracies use detention centres to enforce their racialized and gendered penal power and establish a national hierarchy where poor, young men of colour are the most marginalized. This paper critically examines the victimization of male refugees, asylum seekers and migrants by neo-colonial masculinities in Canadian, American and British immigration detention centres and how these experiences create offenders through the victim-offender overlap.

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**KEYWORDS:** Masculinity, Immigration, Victimization, Marginalization History, Racialization, Detention Centres, Immigration Detention, Multicultural Liberal Democracy, Government Policy, Canadian Policy, American Policy, British Policy

## Introduction

A great tool to grow an empire, detention camps have been historically used and abused as a subordination tactic by all of the most powerful empires, most notably by Germany's Nazi Regime in the Second World War. Commonly thought to have been born and died in history, they are a mostly forgotten piece of the past. With the belief that humanity has turned a new leaf by subscribing to human rights conventions and building an indestructible saviour complex, the continued existence of detention camps, especially in the developed world, seems impossible. Many would be shocked to discover that there is a secret world of institutions that disregard international human rights law in order to prioritize their national goals, where refugees, asylum seekers and migrants are the primary victims.

Systems for migrancy and immigration detention have emerged in the wake of globalization, with the increasing flow of refugees and immigrants seeking asylum from conflicts, natural disasters or financial insecurity, or simply searching for better economic opportunities, education or reunion with family (Bosworth, 2019). "Multicultural liberal democracies" use detention centres to enforce their racialized and gendered penal power and establish a national hierarchy where "poor, young men of colour" are the most marginalized and victimized (Bosworth & Turnbull, 2015, pp. 61-62). This dynamic is constructed by the collision of neo-colonial masculinity and migrant masculinity, the first trying to subordinate the latter by instilling issues of "belonging and dignity," and a lost "sense of self and [their] rights as human beings" (Bosworth & Turnbull, 2015, pp. 61-62). As proposed by the theory of "the victim-offender overlap," which is the concept that a victim is more likely to offend and an offender more likely to be victimized, migrant men are more likely to offend as a result of their experiences in immigration detention centres (Bucurius et al., 2021, pp. 149). This paper will critically examine the victimization of male refugees, asylum seekers and migrants by neo-colonial masculinities in Canadian, American and British immigration detention centres and how these experiences create offenders through the victim-offender overlap.

**"I Didn't Feel Like a Human in There"**  
(Human Rights Watch [HRW] & Amnesty International, 2021)

## *Victimization in Detention Centres and the Masculinities Responsible*

Migrancy institutions are complex systems constructed by the presentation of various types of migrants and the receiving nation's responses to them. Immigration detention centres (also known as immigration removal centres or IRCs) are intended to be "administrative, non-punitive measure[s] used as a last resort" to control the mobility of those considered flight risks, however they have evolved into a tool to help with "unwanted migration" (Lindley, 2020). Consequently, the "boundaries between immigration and criminal justice" have been blurred, as detainees are denied their liberties and agency, criminalized and kept in prison-like conditions, making them out to be "dangerous and guilty of something" (Bosworth & Turnbull, 2015).

In Canada, the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) is in charge of the immigration detention system and has "sweeping police powers" to arrest and detain any foreign nationals without the need of a warrant (HRW & Amnesty International, 2021). As long as the CBSA official has reasonable grounds to believe that a person is inadmissible to Canada or is considered a danger, security risk, criminal or flight risk, they can be arrested with no charge, and held in an IRC, a provincial jail, or another similar facility (like a local or provincial police cell, port of entry, RCMP detachment, etc.) (HRW & Amnesty International, 2021). Those that are detained under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, are "refugee claimants; victims of armed conflicts or torture; victims of smuggling and human trafficking; or even children" and many do not speak one of the official languages of service (Canadian Red Cross, n.d.). Foreign nationals and permanent residents that are suspected by the CBSA can be detained at any time, no matter how long they have been living in or visiting Canada (Canadian Red Cross, n.d.). The process is similar in other countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom. Between 2016 and 2020, 88 per cent of detainees were held because they were believed to be flight risks, meaning that the CBSA suspected they would "not appear for a hearing or for [their] removal from the country" (HRW & Amnesty International, 2021).

Migrants that are sent to provincial jails are housed with those "awaiting criminal court proceedings or serving criminal sentences of up to two years" (HRW & Amnesty International, 2021). Here

they are criminalized and dehumanized, treated as “unwanted and unwelcome” by both the guards and the other inmates, and subjected to violence and sometimes solitary confinement (Bosworth & Turnbull, 2015; HRW & Amnesty International, 2021). After appearing at a “detention review hearing” within 48 hours of their detention, those that aren’t released to community supervision remain in custody to await another hearing within seven days (HRW & Amnesty, 2021). Thereafter, their only opportunity for release comes every 30 days (HRW & Amnesty, 2021). One of the greatest concerns of immigration detainment is that “there is no statutory limit on a period of detention,” meaning that migrants can be detained indefinitely (Bosworth & Turnbull, 2015). In the case of Abdirahmaan Warssama, a Somali refugee who had received a ministerial permit to remain in Canada in 1989, he was detained as a flight risk in maximum security jails from 2010 to 2015 and finally released after 76 detention review hearings (HRW & Amnesty, 2021). He described his time in detainment as “torture,” where he was “humiliat[ed] and degrad[ed]” through “stripsearche[s], assault[s and] robbe[ries], and was “denied warm clothing[,] health care” and safe living conditions (HRW & Amnesty, 2021). The uncertainty of release is “traumatizing and re-traumatizing” and leads to “severe mental health deterioration,” suicidal thoughts and attempts, and even death (HRW & Amnesty International, 2021).

Where immigration detention systems fail is in the ways that they are not predictable, nor transparent. Punishment is non-defendable and illegitimate, as it denies people their rights, no longer recognizing them as “equal before the law” (Bosworth, 2019). These unjust institutions are developed by neo-colonial masculinities, extending their purpose from border control administration to the deliberate construction of “a ‘hostile environment’ to immigration,” in the hopes of deterring unwanted foreign arrivals (Bosworth, 2019). Bilgiç’s neo-colonial masculinity theory discusses the “mutually constitutive relationship” between masculinity and sovereignty, where the state has been masculinized to legitimize many binaries (“heterosexual/homosexual, [...] state/society, citizen/non-citizen”), where “the heterosexual man” represents statehood and sovereignty (Bilgiç, 2018). This identification with the state subscribes to the “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarch[al]” ideals of social hierarchy, where “the heterosexual

man” is considered to be the most authoritative and dominant (Hooks, 2004; Bilgiç, 2018). Thus, neo-colonial masculinity is a form of hegemonic masculinity, where, by dictating these oppressive structures, hegemonic men are able to perpetuate their supremacy and domination over women and non-hegemonic men (men that are feminized or aren’t white, cisgendered, middle class or able). This demonstrates that immigration detention systems are both gendered and racialized, acting in whichever way will best benefit the “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (Hooks, 2004). However, neo-colonial masculinity is also a form of complicit masculinity, in the way that it benefits from the patriarchal dividend, while not necessarily displaying hegemonic masculinity. This can be seen in the ways that these liberal democratic states have not altered legislation to make the immigration detention environment less hostile and more hospitable, even after being exposed for their violations of international human rights laws (HRW & Amnesty International, 2021). For example, one of U.S. President Joe Biden’s promises during his 2020 campaign was to “end for-profit detention centers,” as part of his immigration platform,” and in April 2022, he did issue an order to end the use of private prisons (Leach & Hafter, 2022). However, facilities that were closed by this order are simply being refilled by another detained population as Biden has realized the gains they provide, especially as the number of people in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody has been rising (Leach & Hafter, 2022). Biden’s initial order may have reflected well on his government, but it continues to profit through private contracting that isn’t widely publicized. This tension between national progress and human rights is demonstrated in the “Anglo Model,” where states expand immigration detention to be indefinite, private and offshore so as to preserve their national identity as liberal democracies that respect human rights (Mainwaring & Cook, 2019). Through this display of subordinate masculinity, which indirectly perpetuates hegemonic structures, these states are able to reap the benefits of their status as liberal democracies but also of the hidden oppressive systems that run them.

Systemic oppression constructed by neo-colonial masculinity is enforced by border security in their “emotional performances of sovereignty” when facing different groups of migrants and recognizing them as either regular or “irregular migrants” (Bilgiç, 2018). Colonial constructs inform the emotional reactions

that masculinities have when they encounter their “other” (Bilgiç, 2018). At this point, two forms of neo-colonial masculinity begin to interact, offering three possible reactions to the perception of migrants. When a migrant is perceived to be a “feeling subject [...] in need of help, protection and guidance,” a border security agent may respond in a humanitarian way, displaying the compassion of a “bourgeois-rational masculinity” (Bilgiç, 2018). This “migrant-centred approach” focuses on migrants’ well-being, developing a White saviour complex that seeks to help the perceived “other” and “save” the “lower life” (Bilgiç, 2018). If a migrant is deemed the subject of disgust or fear, the reaction is most commonly a reproduction of “a neo-colonial gendered and racialized power hierarchy” which demonstrates a “European sovereign masculinity” that has been “culturally and historically produced” (Bilgiç, 2018). In this case, a “bourgeois-rational masculinity” will “animalize” an “irregular migrant,” associating them with being unclean or physically ugly (Bilgiç, 2018). By employing discursive distancing to separate the “hygienic ‘White’ self and the ‘disgusting,’ animalized, other,” these agents are able to promote their hegemonic identities (Bilgiç, 2018). Detainees are treated like animals or slaves and in some cases even caged at night and controlled in the day in order to instill the oppressive hierarchy within the migrants (H, 2014). To maintain the hierarchy and a population to dominate, the White self cannot get rid of the colonized other; rather they must build systemically oppressive institutions to subordinate people. This systemic marginalization is shown in the higher proportion of African, Caribbean and Asian immigrant detainees and the length of their detention in Canadian centres, compared to that of South American and Mexican, European and American detainees (HRW & Amnesty International, 2021). The table below indicates that Black detainees make up as much as 54 percent of the population in custody for upwards of three months, 59 percent of those detained for six months or more, and 68 percent of those detained beyond nine months (HRW & Amnesty International, 2021). With immigration from Asia making up 62 percent of Canada’s recent immigrant population, Black migrants are overrepresented in the country’s immigration detention centres (Statistics Canada, 2022).

Finally, if a migrant is the subject of fear, they will most likely be met with a “citizen-warrior masculinity,” which views the “irregular migrant” as a threat to their community’s existence and relies on aggressiveness to

protect the “White political body” (Bilgiç, 2018). This form of sovereign masculinity is not above death as a means to secure borders, and detention centres allow for these masculinities to leave unwanted migrants to die (Bilgiç, 2018).

With every encounter between border security and a “stranger,” the borderscapes (an articulation of the border as “a fluid and constructed space”) of the protected nation are negotiated to better define the wanted and unwanted. Border security must differentiate between what is good and trusted by the community and what is bad and threatening, like a “virus” to the health of the nation. These decisions are made through the emotional performances of neo-colonial masculinity, a historically and colonially informed heteropatriarchal hierarchy that subordinates thousands of migrants, perpetrating mass human rights violations under the guise of progressive liberal democracies.

### Recouping a Respectable Masculine Identity *Perpetration by Migrants as a Result of their Victimization*

Migrants as perpetrators is a very under-researched field, especially in regards to those that have been detained in IRCs. As a result, this component of the paper is more theory-based. The immigration structures of liberal democracies have a traumatizing effect on masculinities, as they move vulnerable populations from one place of uncertainty to another. Removal or deportation remains a possibility until the migrant is able to obtain citizenship. Residency permits, refuge or asylum aren’t always granted and job, housing and food security are never guaranteed. Liberal democracies may be safer and have better economic opportunities, but their systemically

**Proportion of Immigration Detainees in Canada by World Region and Length of Detention in 2019**

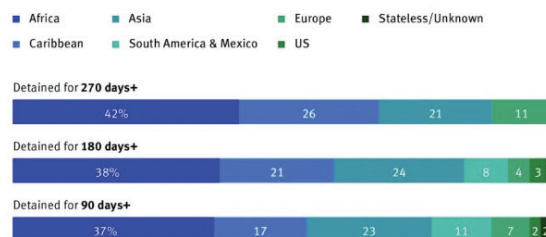


Table 1 (HRW & Amnesty International, 2021)

oppressive societies make it difficult for outsiders to build a life. In the face of this daunting immigration process, it could be suggested that migrants are likely to commit crimes according to the victim-offender overlap, as they are repeatedly victimized, both by the conditions they have escaped, and those forced upon them by that process. Most often, these victim-offenders are young, racial-minority adult males who are unemployed and uneducated and have had adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as neglect or substance abuse that also contribute to their subscription to the cycle of violence (Bucerius et al., 2021, pp. 150). The transition from one social structure to another can be difficult for men as they adapt to the “fluidity of masculinity between cultures and over time,” especially in regards to patriarchal men who are used to being the breadwinner (Charsley & Wray, 2015). As hegemonic masculinities are forced to confront the shifting domestic powers that are “erod[ing] their ability to exert patriarchal privilege,” men may have issues with “social impotency and psychological emasculation,” resulting in a sense of “lost value because they are no longer the masters of their own families” (Charsley & Wray, 2015). Other migrant men may feel “humiliated” when they are denied asylum, unable to work or establish and maintain a family and forced to rely on charities, friends, family and the state to survive (Charsley & Wray, 2015). These tensions of emasculation, infantilization, humiliation and shame “related to their perceived lack of power” may manifest themselves as adverse behaviours (Allsopp, 2017). In this case, the migrant becomes a perpetrator simply by attempting “to recoup some form of respectable masculine identity” that fits both their own standards and those of the new nation (Charsley & Wray, 2015). In addition, in the case of men having to rely on their wives to provide for the family when they can’t, or if the man has had to rely on his wife in order to immigrate through spousal migration, he may react by engaging in intimate terrorism (IT), in order to reassert power and control in the relationship (Charsley & Wray, 2015). IT is a form of intimate partner violence (IPV) that is about intimidation, coercion and control, and is more long-term, constant and violent than IPV.

The masculine attempt to reclaim one’s masculinity as a patriarchal figure after it has been torn down by an oppressive racialized and gendered system where a migrant can be repeatedly victimized can lead to perpetration, as dictated by the victim-offender overlap. This is especially true for refugee claimants

who seek to escape the dangerous conditions of their home countries and upon arrival in their country of refuge, are detained and then repeatedly criminalized and dehumanized. Men already struggle to find an “acceptable and effective way [...] to express distress [...] powerlessness.” This is especially true for migrant men who lack social power and therefore “the result of their conduct may be self-defeating, furnishing only new opportunities for misunderstanding and stigmatization” (Charsley & Wray, 2015). Without seeking out treatment, or finding an outlet to talk about their feelings and experiences, men will grow more frustrated and seek out less productive outlets, such as substance abuse or crime (Charsley & Wray, 2015).

While migrants do commit crime, not enough data exists to directly link the conditions of the immigration system to the increase or decrease of perpetration. As well, in many migrant receiving countries, the average age of citizens is older than the average age of refugees, which leads to the development of negative stereotypes of the dangerous “strong young male” as the face of the refugee crisis (Allsopp, 2017). In actuality, refugees commit less crime than citizens per capita, out of the fear of deportation (Gopalakrishnan, 2017).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, neo-colonial masculinity operates as a perpetrator by developing performances that guarantees the perpetual dominance of an “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” by disguising oppressive immigration systems under the guise of progressive liberal democracies (Bilgiç, 2018). These systems result in the victimization of innocent migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who have been identified as the “irregular other” by colonially informed prejudices (Bilgiç, 2018). While not enough research exists to come to a factual conclusion, the victimization experienced by migrants in IRCs and in the immigration system could subscribe to the victim-offender overlap and result in migrants becoming perpetrators. The extent of perpetration and victimization in immigration detention centres is a violation of international human rights law and is used to advance a racist agenda which, if left unchecked, will continue to reproduce explicitly racist immigration paradigms into a contemporary immigration framework.



Deng, Henry, *Passing Glimpses*, Photograph, 2023.

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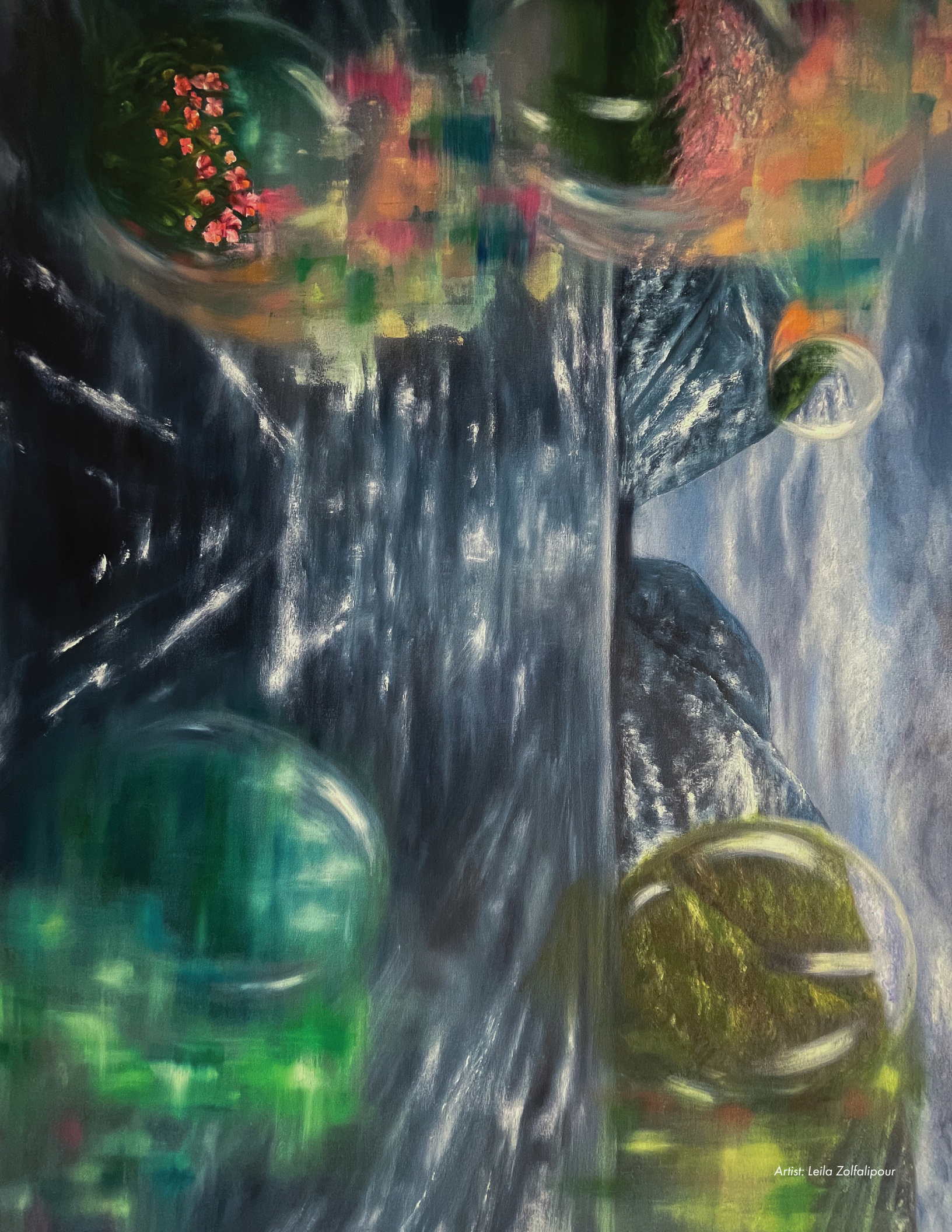
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