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Keep Calm and Carry on? Fissure, Perception, and Narrative Contestation Following the Demise of the Crown

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On September 8, 2022, after more than 70 years on the throne, Queen Elizabeth II passed away. The responses among the public, media, and state institutions to the news were varied, with competing views on the role of the monarchy and the legacy of the queen. The questions this article seeks to answer are (1) how the monarch's death introduced a fissure into the United Kingdom's autobiographical narrative and (2) how exactly this moment led on the one hand to efforts to reaffirm the dominant UK autobiographical narrative and on the other to efforts to contest this narrative. In framing this analysis using Gestalt psychology, we theorize the role of perception in subjects' experience of a fissure as well as their subsequent attempts to manage the ensuing anxieties. We show how perception enables and guides avenues for narrative contestation as well as conservative attempts to (re)establish the predominant autobiographical narrative by exploring how the government and the royal family sought to create a sense of continuity and transfer royal authority onto the next generation while activists attempted to subvert this established narrative to problematize the country's (post)colonial history and societal inequalities.

Le 8 septembre 2022, après plus de 70 ans sur le trône, la reine Elizabeth II estdécédée. La réaction du public, des médias et des institutions étatiques à la nouvelle a été plurielle,les visions divergeant quant au rôle de la monarchie et à l'héritage de la reine. Cet article cherche àrépondre aux questions suivantes : 1) comment la mort de la monarque a-t-elle introduit une fissuredans le récit autobiographique britannique ? Et, 2) comment ce moment a-t-il exactement conduitd'une part aux efforts de réaffirmation du récit autobiographique britannique dominant et d'autrepart, aux efforts de remise en question de ce récit ? En cadrant cette analyse à l'aide de lapsychologie de la Gestalt, nous théorisons le rôle de la perception de l'expérience d'une fissure parles sujets, ainsi que leurs tentatives de gestion des anxiétés qui s'en sont ensuivies. Nous montronscomment la perception permet et oriente les pistes de contestation narrative, mais aussi lestentatives conservatrices de (ré)établir le récit autobiographique prédominant en explorantcomment le gouvernement et la famille royale ont cherché à créer un sentiment de continuité et detransfert de l'autorité

royale à la génération suivante, alors que les militants tentaient de subvertir cerécit établi pour problématiser l'histoire (post)coloniale du pays et les inégalités sociétales.

El 8 de septiembre de 2022, y después de más de 70 años en el trono, falleció lareina Isabel II. Las respuestas del público, los medios de comunicación y las instituciones estatalesante esta noticia fueron variadas, con opiniones contrapuestas sobre el papel de la monarquía y ellegado de la reina. Este artículo pretende dar respuesta a las siguientes cuestiones: 1) ¿cómointrodujo la muerte de la monarca una fisura en la narrativa autobiográfica del Reino Unido? y 2) ¿dequé manera, exactamente, este momento condujo, por un lado, a los esfuerzos por reafirmar lanarrativa autobiográfica dominante del Reino Unido y, por otro lado, a los esfuerzos por impugnaresta narrativa? Enmarcamos este análisis utilizando la psicología de la Gestalt, lo cual nos permiteteorizar sobre el papel que ejerce la percepción sobre la experiencia de los sujetos en el marco deuna fisura, así como sus intentos posteriores por manejar las ansiedades resultantes. Demostramoscómo la percepción permite y guía nuevas vías que permiten la impugnación narrativa, así como losintentos conservadores de (re)establecer la narrativa autobiográfica predominante, explorando cómotanto el Gobierno como la familia real buscaron crear un sentido de continuidad y transferir laautoridad real a la próxima generación, mientras que los activistas intentaron subvertir esta narrativaestablecida con el fin de problematizar la historia (post)colonial del país y las desigualdades sociales.

The death of the Queen was not unexpected—Elizabeth II was 96 years old, and operation "London Bridge," the plan for managing her passing, was reportedly 20 years in the making. However, her death nonetheless represented a significant loss for many of her subjects when she passed away on September 8, 2022, after more than 70 years on the throne. Arguably the most important British figure of the last century, the Queen was a bedrock of the United Kingdom's political and social landscape, a symbol of coherence and stability for many of her people, and one of the last representations of the United Kingdom's "glorious past" in an era replete with narratives of British decline (Vučetić 2021). The Demise of the Crown, as the death of the monarch is officially known, disrupted daily life in the United Kingdom and had a significant emotional impact for many of the 150 million people over whom she ruled, especially in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In the intervening 10 days of mourning, planned strike actions were canceled and thousands queued in London for the opportunity to pay their respects. On the day of the funeral, sporting matches were canceled, shops were shut, and pubs screened the funeral. The Speaker of the House of Commons, Sir Lindsay Hoyle, went as far as to declare her death as "the most important event the world will ever see" (The National, September 18). The outpouring of grief reflected the perception of a profound loss, as Elizabeth II's life captured the imagination of millions and reflected—or was made to reflect—the self of the nation. Yet at the same time, several protests took place across the country as, for many, she was a symbol of colonialism, classism, and a Britain treading nostalgic waters rather than forging a progressive future. In short, despite the *awareness* that the Queen would one day pass, confronting the *reality* of her death introduced a *fissure* into the United Kingdom's national self, making visible the hegemonic narratives that have, thus far, held it together. This left the public at a crossroads, unable to either keep calm or carry on, contesting what a post-Elizabethan UK could and should look like.

The monarchy is integral to the British autobiographical narrative that provides legitimacy to the state, reifies the social order, and through which citizens

understand what it is to be British (Croft 2012). In the immediate aftermath of the Queen's death, most mainstream media, public, and state institutions attempted to reaffirm the longstanding dominant narrative of the monarchy, (re)producing and promoting a positive legacy of the Queen, which positioned her as the matriarch, protector of the nation, and Britain's most stalwart champion on the world stage. The purpose of this narrative was not only to solidify a national collective memory but to secure the position and perceived legitimacy of the monarchy into the future while cementing the position of the institutions that underpin and facilitate it. Yet, the sudden visibility of these mechanics created space for others to contest the dominant British autobiographical narrative and attempt to re-construct it by shining a spotlight on the country's (post)colonial history and societal inequalities. The Demise of the Crown splintered the United Kingdom's autobiography, introducing what we call a "fissure," a crack in the ritualistic routines, narratives, and practices of the everyday that renders often invisible hegemonic narratives visible. This sudden perceivability opens opportunities for narrative contestation. In the case of the Queen's death, the fissure in the British autobiographical narrative presented a choice between "going on" through narrative repair or "moving on" through narrative change. Put differently, non-dominant narratives could take advantage of the prevailing vacuum to challenge the hegemonic narrative (Delehanty and Steele 2009).

By the time of Queen Elizabeth II's passing, there were already numerous biographies, documentaries, and first-hand accounts of her life and legacy swirling in the narrative ether. The Netflix TV show *The Crown* renewed interest in the royal family, with 73 million individual accounts tuning in since 2016. For many, *The Crown* humanized the royal family, bringing the challenges of reigning in a turbulent century into the homes of millions of viewers. For others, it was propaganda that sought to rehabilitate the monarchy. With so many competing perspectives, it is difficult to unpick which stories matter, how they come to be embedded so deeply into the fabric of British identity, and which aspects are open to contestation. This leads to questions regarding how we can understand the emergence and manifestation of these competing narratives and, more fundamentally, how contestations of (autobiographical) national narratives can play out following a fissure.

Drawing on literature in ontological security studies (OSS) and Gestalt psychology, we argue that the answers to these questions boil down to matters of *perception*, a crucial but under-theorized concept in OSS. Ontological security is the phenomenological security of the *self* and requires a stable and positive self-perception; this is maintained through autobiographical narratives and routinized practices. We introduce the concept of *fissure* with the intention of moving OSS beyond its preoccupation with "crises" (Rossdale 2015) and more fully understand how existential matters of the self are maintained and disrupted without having to essentialize any and all disruptions as a crisis.

The perception of narratives is thus integral to understanding how the public negotiates a fissure as part of a collective self, what narratives emerge from their reading of a situation, and how these narratives contribute to a positive sense of self, meaning, and purpose (Delehanty and Steele 2009; Ejdus 2018; Chernobrov 2019; Gellwitzki 2022; Rogers 2024). Building on these insights, we offer a theorization of how to better grasp the role of perception in OSS by employing principles from Gestalt psychology, namely *proximity*, *similarity*, *common fate*, *closure*, and *continuation*. We argue that these principles can help us understand affective-relational perceptions at a collective level insofar as they influence narrative (re)production and (re)interpretation. We suggest that, when confronting a fissure, actors' discursive and practical efforts to (re)establish and (re)construct narratives are organized following the logic of these Gestalt principles to maintain or regain a continuous and positive perception of the self. Analyzing these efforts thus allows us to

better understand how narrative contestation and the (re-)establishment of narratives work in practice.

This article thus makes three contributions to the field of OSS and international political sociology more generally. First, it introduces the concept of "fissure" as an alternative to "rupture" most often discussed in the scholarship. We argue that the Queen's death was a decisive moment for the hegemonic narrative by making a deeply embedded narrative unavoidably visible in an unfamiliar way. Without causing a radical rupture or crisis in the traditional sense, this moment of decision is still of interest to the study of ontological security-seeking behavior and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of everyday life and the (in)ability to "go on." Second, it offers an empirical analysis of the processes of narrative contestation following the Demise of the Crown, demonstrating how competing narratives have played out through the principles of perception. We identify mechanisms that allow us to understand how the seemingly conflicting, irrational, and highly emotional narratives ultimately constituted a form of ontological security-seeking practices that were constituted *by* and constitutive *of* public perceptions. Third, it offers a theoretical framework that helps us better understand and explain the particular form narrative practices take. The existing literature tends to focus on how narrative practices need to navigate within and be consistent with different meta-narratives (Gellwitzki and Houde 2023, 2024), emphasize the strategic agency of actors (Subotić 2016), or how they address anxieties and ontological security concerns (Browning 2019). Our article further theorizes the role of perception and how it guides the logic of narrative practices.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. First, we review the literature on narratives in ontological security and international relations, developing the notion of fissure. Second, we introduce our theoretical framework of affective perception based on Gestalt principles. Third, we demonstrate our framework by empirically analyzing two predominant narrative strands that emerged following the Queen's death, showing how proximity, similarity, common fate, closure, and continuation informed perception and framed the competing narratives. We conclude by arguing that these narratives are integral to the United Kingdom's sense of self as debates surrounding monarchy and the legacy of the Queen remain salient months after her death, and that our framework of affective perception offers a useful way of making sense of narrative responses to disruption more broadly.

Ontological Security, Narrative, and Fissure

Ontological security was coined by psychoanalyst R.D. Laing (1990 [1969]) to refer not to physical security but to the security of one's sense of self. The term was later adapted into sociology by Anthony Giddens, who reflected that this experience of security was rooted in a sense of trust within a social environment, and the routines, relationships, and autobiographical narratives that sustain that trust and allow individuals to "bracket out" the everyday anxieties of being in the world (Giddens 1991). Since then, OSS has focused on stories about the self in relation to internal and external Others (Delehanty and Steele 2009). Yet, narratives about the self not only establish who or what the self is but *how* the self is (re)produced through temporal, spatial, and social-relational elements (Carr 1991).

Narratives are the way people make sense of the world, providing what Ricœur (1990, 83) calls the "synthesis of the heterogenous"—the method by which factors like agency, expectation, outcome, and time come together to form something coherent. This "coherence in life" is maintained through retroactively ordering events, linking behaviors into patterns, and assigning significant others in such a way that life is given meaning (see, e.g., Shenhav 2015; Forchtner et al. 2020; Homolar 2022). In this sense, narratives help individuals "order disordered experience and impart meaning to themselves and their world" (Krebs 2015, 16). They also help

define and establish a coherent sense of self as "ontological narratives are used to define who we are," which is a precondition for knowing what to do. In order to "go on" in a teleological sense, we have to subscribe, fully but non-consciously, to a faith in linear narratives (Somers 1994, 618). This "doing" is an iterative and ongoing practice; each act produces new potential narratives and so requires new actions to manifest the preferred narrative. Therefore, the relationship between narrative and ontology is "processual and mutually constitutive" (Somers 1994, 618). In short, the stories we tell (to ourselves and others) about ourselves *are* who we are.

Narratives are not only individual-level concepts. Every "nation and nation-state has a narrative, a story that defines what the nation is—its origins and history, characteristics, claims to legitimacy, values, mission, and destiny" (Banai et al. 2022, 18). These collective narratives draw on a multitude of myths, traumas, memories, and experiences and constitute groups and national communities (Rosher 2022). This does not mean that national autobiographical narratives are distinct from individual, domestic, or international narratives; rather, they are mutually constitutive and engender the boundaries of domestic and international realms, the inside and outside of states, and nationals and non-nationals. While the foundational myths of nations tend to maintain some sense of continuity, collective narratives are not immutable; "where such a community exists it is constantly in the process, as is an individual, of composing and re-composing its autobiography" (Carr 1991, 163). Indeed, the ability to adapt to change is necessary for communal narratives to endure; change is built into communal stories over time in a "continuous process of functional selection and reinterpretation of these stored cultural resources; in other words, in what is remembered and how at any point in time" (Wulf 2016, 29). This can be a deliberate process in which political elites, either recognizing shifts in or seeking to shift public opinion, may choose to "activate" or "deactivate" certain narrative elements to support and direct political change (Subotić 2019). However, while this flexibility is necessary, it can also lead to fragility, especially when societies are suddenly confronted with narratives to which they tacitly subscribe to in the everyday.

Collective narratives, which are generally taken for granted to the point that they are invisible yet nevertheless underpin daily life, are everywhere. It is through this taken for grantedness that they derive their dominance and dictate both the center and the margin of society (Delehanty and Steele 2009). Hegemonic actors exploit the dominant autobiographical narrative to reflexively make sense of the world and maintain a continuously positive understanding of themselves. This leaves those on the margins, who are often excluded or othered by this narrative, forced to reconcile with the gap between narrated and perceived reality (Nicolson 2023).

When confronted with a fissure—a fracture that makes visible the underlying narrative of a nation—the taken-for-granted narrative must be adapted and its elements rearranged in order to keep existential anxiety at bay. Like a penguin straddling a cracking ice shelf, a fissure forces upon us an inescapable moment of decision where we have to choose which direction to take. This has profound and direct implications for the future of the self. A fissure in the meta-narrative opens a window of opportunity where marginalized narratives have opportunity to challenge the ideas, norms, values, and expectations of the dominant autobiographical narrative.

Fissures can emerge as the result of political or social upheaval (Subotić 2019) or when longstanding narratives and values no longer align with the actions of the state (Steele 2008; Innes 2023; Gellwitzki and Houde 2024), potentially leading to narrative contestation (Delehanty and Steele 2009). A fissure in the central story creates space for new and divergent accounts to emerge and possibly usurp the hegemonic narrative through a rupture, even when that narrative is deeply embedded in the state Self. The fact that "phases of dispute" can occur within the autobiographical narrative of the state has several key implications (Bially Mattern 2003). First, it underscores that the narrative of the Self is not fixed or unchangeable, but

rather constantly evolving in a process ontological security scholars call "becoming" (Houde 2024). Second, it demonstrates that, though hegemonic narratives can and do exist within society, this does not preclude the existence or power of other narratives. Finally, it shows that there is a complex relationship between dominant and non-dominant narratives, which are always in a state of tension and negotiation that become visible through fissures. As Delehanty and Steele (2009, 531) note, "marginalised narratives can potentially challenge the dominant narrative, primarily because it is only dominant in relation to the construction of other marginalised narratives." The mutual constitution of dominant and subordinate narratives makes the need for active reinforcement by elites through rituals, rhetoric, and performance even more urgent when confronting a fissure.

Moments of contestation between dominant and marginalized narratives can be particularly potent when the hegemonic narrative is deeply tied to a person. As Berenskötter (2021) notes, some leaders are so intrinsically bound to the story of a nation that they not merely *represent* the nation but *personify* it. Leaders who embody national narratives invite identification and vicarious feeling from their subjects; a monarch, deeply infused with mythology and mystique, invites such narrative assignment. Even though her death was not unexpected, there is a distinction between being aware of the potential for a loss and confronting its reality. The Queen's life transcended the body in such a way that she was tied to the nation spiritually. Given that narratives of British decline, especially post-Brexit, were part of the discursive fabric of British politics prior to her death, the event itself resonated as a further symptom of decay and rot. Moreover, as Steele and Subotić (2024) note, an icon embodying a narrative also invites a point of critique; the death of the Queen therefore sparks the same kind of criticisms that marked her life, and which also reflect Britain as a whole.

Thus, the death of Queen Elizabeth II introduced a fissure that splintered the hegemonic UK narrative. Such situations threaten to tear the thread of continuity and, at the state level, must be addressed by political elites not only to "go on" but also to prove the capacity and agency required for legitimacy (Steele 2008, 12). The fissure allows anxiety to seep into the body politic, a sense of uncertainty as to what comes next, and an inability to answer the "fundamental questions" at the heart of the self. In Kierkegaardian terms (2014), a fissure introduces anxiety through foregrounding the awareness that things could be otherwise. The Queen's death forced Britons to consider the last 70 years of British history and redraw the line between then and now while straddling colonialism, inequality, and, ultimately, international decline. This reassertion of the hegemonic narrative came from many levels, including the public performance of mourning itself, and served to suppress the anxiety of confronting one's own place in history. Yet, this narrative was also contested as its reassertion destabilized ontological security in other groups. The ontological security dynamics are therefore complex; for some, the fissure itself unleashed anxiety and demands reconstitution; for others, it is the sudden questioning of the dominant narrative that is anxiety-inducing. This is an important part of understanding any ontological security dynamics: Security for one does not necessarily mean security for all. Perception, therefore, is an important tool for understanding how the narratives are reconstituted and across which lines.

Perception and Gestalt

Perception is a core yet under-theorized concept in OSS: mentions of *perceived* ontological needs (Mitzen and Larson 2017), *perceived* threats or security (Kinnvall 2007; Chernobrov 2016; Dingott Alkopher 2018), *perception* of others (Mitzen 2006; Houde 2024), *perception* of change (Kinnvall and Svensson 2022), self-*perception* (Kinnvall 2007; Chernobrov 2019), *perceived* importance, inferiority, or cohesiveness (Innes and Steele 2013; Krickel-Choi 2022) are found scattered throughout

the field. Contra assumptions found in mainstream International Relations (IR), in OSS perception does not refer merely to a description of an object or an event in a search for accuracy, but rather to how subjects' understanding of a situation is motivated by stability seeking and anxiety avoidance (Chernobrov 2016). Simply put, the seeking of a positive self-identity activates biases in the perception of autobiographical narratives, telling us more about how the self is understood.

Narratives are a fruitful entryway to understanding perception. They encapsulate past, present, and future, and provide a sense of causality in order to provide a sense of continuity. These are not fixed elements but are narrated into being through the perception of the narrator. The setting of modern Britain could be the final gasps of empire or a renaissance of sovereign power and influence. Queen Elizabeth II is both a hero and a villain, and King Charles is both the end and the rebirth of the monarchy. At points of fissure, the dissonance in these perceptions is laid bare precisely because opportunities for narrative contestation become visible. However, within OSS, we do not pay sufficient attention to the role of perception in narrative and the ways in which hegemonic perceptions of reality can color the dominant understanding of ontological security within a society. Thus, perception becomes a vital way of untangling both the pursuit of ontological security and narrative coherence, yet we lack a framework for understanding how narratives are organized according to perception.

To address this, we turn to Gestalt psychology. Drawing on insights from Gestalt psychology is a productive way to further develop social and IR theory (see, e.g., Carr 1991; Berenskötter 2021; Hom and Campbell 2022). Based on the works of Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka, Gestalt is a theory of perception and sensation that provides an alternative to structuralism by emphasizing that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." In a nutshell, when using their senses to perceive an object, humans will perceive the object as a whole rather than as the different parts forming it. This cognitive process is generally performed rapidly and reflexively, rendering perceptions to be taken for granted by the subject experiencing it (Köhler 2015).

The experience of Gestalt perception follows the principle of *Prägnanz*: When perceiving an object, people will reflexively tend to perceive the simplest and most stable form over more complicated ones (Wagemans et al. 2012); it is only after close inspection of the object that it becomes deconstructed. These principles are cognitive shortcuts that structure how we organize things. While Gestalt was originally developed around perceptions of the material world, we suggest that, developing on Berenskötter (2021), the underpinning logics can be applied to affective perception and, by extension to narrative (re)production or reorientation of these perceptions. In OSS terms, in everyday life, actors do not perceive their autobiographical narrative in terms of its constitutive parts but as a single unitary *whole*. Moreover, it is the effort to sustain this unitary, linear narrative that defines self-identity to begin with; humans are "storytelling animals," and in the effort to find this unitary whole, there is a necessary sense-making process mediated through language (MacIntyre 2007, 216). When faced with a fissure in the narrative, the fragments of the whole become visible and require a reorganization of the autobiographical narrative following the Gestalt principles of perception.

There are five central principles of Gestalt—proximity, similarity, continuation, closure, and common fate—that hold implications for perception and ontological security. The first principle is *proximity*. According to Gestalt theory, we tend to group together objects or shapes that are physically close and to perceive them as being more closely related to each other than objects that are further apart. Even objects of different shapes and colors will be grouped together as long as they are physically close to each other. The second principle is that of *similarity*, which stipulates that we group together objects if they present as having the same characteristics or function. This could be in shape, color, or any salient shared characteristic. The

third principle, *continuation*, states that objects that possess smooth lines are more likely to be perceived as continuous, whereas sharp edges or angles are not. For example, when looking at an X, we are more likely to perceive it as two intersecting diagonal lines rather than two mirrored vs. the fourth principle, *closure*, specifies that when looking at objects, we fill in the blanks to perceive them as whole. Finally, *common fate*, the last principle, relates to our tendency to group together objects that are moving toward the same destination.

Although these principles were originally designed with perception in a material-sensory context in mind, we contend that they translate effectively into a framework that helps us better understand *affective* perception. This can help us understand how and why certain events and narratives are experienced as anxiety-inducing for some people but not others. We suggest that the framework is valuable for providing more nuanced insights into how our sense of ontological security can be compromised and how we understand and narrate ourselves vis-à-vis anxiety-inducing situations. We argue that, following a fissure that renders erstwhile taken-for-granted narratives visible, narratives are often (re)interpreted, (re)organized, and (re)constructed along the lines of the five principles of perception. Thus, the principles of Gestalt can help us make sense of how actors align their perception and, by extension, their narrative practices to maintain or regain a sense of ontological security. More specifically, they help us understand how particular re-narrations of familiar stories engender the sense of temporal continuity and cohesiveness integral to feelings of ontological security.

Gestalt Analytical Framework

We have demonstrated, then, that perception and narration are part of the same process—we tell stories based on our positionality and perception of events. In general, those who feel ontologically secure in the dominant narrative will attempt to emphasize its positive aspects and justify its continuity; those who ascribe to marginalized narratives will instead focus on contradictions and shameful aspects of the dominant narrative to challenge and ultimately change it toward something they perceive as more positive. In practice, the different principles of Gestalt frequently overlap, yet for analytical purposes we differentiate between them to offer a detailed typology of how affective perception, narrative contestation, and ontological security are interrelated (see Table 1).

Beginning with the principle of *proximity*, we perceive people who are physically closer to us to be *more like us*. More specifically, in narrative terms, this can refer to the perceived proximity of the self to the protagonist of the story. This can guide perception and narration in two ways. Those seeking to maintain or reassert the dominant narrative will perceive and present themselves as closer to the protagonist, while those seeking to contest the dominant narrative will work to highlight the perceived distances between themselves and the protagonist, or place the protagonist in close proximity to a negative context.

On *similarity*, we perceive people who share or present as having values that align with our own as being similar to us. Consequently, we either focus on positive traits and characteristics we share with the protagonist or seek a positive sense of self by focusing on dissimilarities between the self and the protagonist in order to challenge the dominant narrative (see Gellwitzki and Houde 2023). This is particularly potent, for example, during election campaigns where positive coverage highlights how a candidate embodies a country's values or history, while negative coverage isolates them as something *other*. The consideration of similarity in the analysis of narratives gives us insights into how in-groups and out-groups are perceived and according to which characteristic(s): If a narrative is re-established by some and contested by others, how are these new groups forming, and what do they have in common? How do they perceive themselves to be dissimilar to members of the outgroup?

Table 1. Principles of Gestalt and narrative contestation

		Dominant narrative Emphasis on continuity with the past as sources of pride and self-confidence	*Fissured narrative* Marginalized narrative Emphasis on shameful aspects of the past to inspire change and arrive at a positive future
Principles of Gestalt	Proximity	Self as in close proximity to the protagonist	Self as distant from the protagonist or protagonist as close to negative events
	Similarity	Focus on the positive aspects the self shares with the protagonist	Focus on dissimilarities between the self and the protagonist or similarities between the protagonist and negative others
	Closure	(Restrictive) anxiety about the end of a golden age	(Productive) anxiety about the end to a period of shame
	Continuation	Envisions continuity with positive perceptions of the past as embodied by the protagonist	Envisions continuity as a teleological process of progress moving on and away from the protagonist
	Common fate	Destination is a return to an idealised past	Destination is a more just future where mistakes of the past are ameliorated

Closure sits at the center of perception and narration in situations that challenge ontological security. Fissures in a narrative constitute a moment of decision; to attempt to recover to the hegemonic narrative or the beginning of something else. The question is, therefore, whether the fissure is perceived as portending the end of a golden era, leading to a rupture, grief, and a pining for a return to the status quo, or the end of a period of shame that offers the hope for a more positive and just future. The principle of closure, in other words, acts as a fulcrum—relations of proximity and similarity have brought us to the present juncture where a point of closure opens different possible futures guided by the principles of continuation and common fate.

Continuation is intimately connected to ontological security, which relies on a sense of continuity (Giddens 1991). For those who seek to renew the dominant narrative, time is a flat circle where the old order should be maintained and reproduced into the future. Thus, those seeking to re-establish the hitherto dominant narrative will promote a future in ways that emphasize continuity with positive aspects of the past. Conversely, those seeking to contest the status quo will promote a teleological or dialectical narrative that frames change and progress as a natural form of continuity—not a break from the past that forgets it, but a better future that learns from it.

Continuity leads to the principle of *common fate,* which is ultimately about the destination of the self. It concerns questions of who and what the self will be in the future, whether it will split, converge, transform, or stay the same, as well as how it will relate to internal and external others. Is the collective perceived to be moving in the same direction? Is the outlook on the future optimistic or pessimistic? Importantly, common fate does not contradict or negate the principle of continuation, as continuity does not necessarily essentialize the status quo. For those attempting to re-assert the dominant autobiographical narrative, common fate envisions a return to an idealized past. For those contesting the dominant autobiographical narrative, the notion of common fate offers a utopian future whereby the mistakes of the past are a lesson on how to live better.

Ontological Security-Seeking Practices and Perceived Narratives after the Death of the Queen

In this section, we apply our framework to understand how the reassertion and contestation of the British autobiographical narrative played out during the 10-day mourning period following the death of Elizabeth II. The data are from news media reports gathered using the database LexisNexis. The search filtered for the major UK newspapers that published articles between September 8 and 18, 2022 containing the terms "Queen AND protest OR Paddington OR Empire OR grie* OR queue OR colonial* OR arrest*." Of these, the fifty results designated as most relevant were analyzed following our framework to act as a lens on public opinion.

Throughout the empirical analysis, we show that the reassertion and contestation of British autobiographical narratives is intimately connected to individual citizens' lived experiences, global histories of empire, colonialism, and racism, as well as broader anxieties of British decline and nostalgic fantasies of "Global Britain." As Innes (2023, 655) asserts, the production ontological (in)security occurs "across and between the conventional individual-state-system triad," and it would be false to suggest that "sub-state collectives do not do meaningful international politics of their own accord." In other words, the (re)construction of the British autobiographical narrative inevitably draws on a plethora of experiences, histories, memories, desires, and fantasies that transcend traditional levels of analysis or any artificial divide between domestic and international politics. Importantly, we explore dominant and contestation narratives and their performances, rather than analyzing whether expressions of embodied experiences such as grief and mourning, are authentically felt by individual, corporate, or collective actors.

Proximity

In the wake of the death of the Queen, politicians and the media attempted to narrate her passing in a manner that reflected the profoundness of the event and shaped public reactions to the news. The Queen's *proximity* to British society and its citizens was a central theme in discourses that aimed to reassert the dominant British autobiographical narrative. Those reinforcing this narrative sought to position the Queen as a member of every British household. As some observers put it, the Queen had "symbolised [. . .] the mother of the nation" (The Times, September 13), was "thought of by millions as Britain's grandmother" (Mail Online, September 9), part of British "collective identity" and "Britishness" (The Independent, September 12), and "the ultimate matriarch" that Britain looked to "during national crises to reassure and calm us" (Mail on Sunday, September 11). The Queen, in other words, was not only narrated as the very embodiment of Britain but as a *close* family member of every single British citizen and a loss to us *all*. As a symbol personifying the nation, her death challenged the United Kingdom's autobiographical narrative and threatened the ontological security of those who identify with it. At the same time, narrating the Queen as a maternal figure of *all* Britons implied a positive collective identity and sense of community, while depriving those who rejected the Queen of their Britishness, potentially challenging their sense of ontological security.

Indeed, the sudden visibility of this dominant narrative in British media also forced others to reckon with their own perceptions of the Queen, and made space for those already skeptical of the monarchy, such as anti-monarchy group Republic, to give voice to their grievances. The emerging alternative narratives also centered around the Queen and the monarchy and their proximity to others. Yet, in this case, it was not the proximity to the populace but to colonialism, empire, and atrocities that were foregrounded. Activists and a minority of journalists steered the debate to discuss the proximity of the Queen to minorities and minoritized

subjects. One commentator, for example, argued that "one of the effects of the empire that Queen Elizabeth personified is that it is unevenly remembered within our communities" and that in Britain "minoritized people are remembering [the] Elizabethan era through the lens of the racism that was allowed to thrive during it" (The Guardian, September 13). Another pointed out that the Queen "was no passive bystander to contemporary injustices. Her reign was incontrovertibly fraught with the suffering of Black and brown people, from the structural inequalities we face and the Mau Mau rebellion to Britain's involvement in the Biafran war and its refusal to pay reparations for transatlantic slavery" (The Independent, September 14). Other commentators pointed out that her ancestors "were great supporters of the Nazis in the 1930s [. . .] the same family has been involved in scandal after scandal down through its history" (The National, September 16). This alternative reading of British history through the Queen's proximity to violence was adopted by those who did not recognize the dominant narrative, and whose experiences were silenced and neglected by it. In other words, positioning the monarch in proximity to the experiences of minorities provided a pathway to acknowledge and include their experiences in the British autobiographical narrative, thereby offering an opportunity to mitigate structural ontological insecurities.

The Queen's death also coincided with a general domestic and international reputational decline in the United Kingdom, meaning the distance between the dominant narrative and alternative perceptions was far larger. When the Queen first sat on the throne the British Empire was still a world-power. However, following the end of colonial rule, the Suez crisis, and Brexit, the words of American Secretary of State Dean Acheson still hold true. The United Kingdom has "lost an empire but not yet found a role." During the Queen's reign, some fifty countries left the Commonwealth and gained independence, and social attitudes are more critical of the colonial violence of empire than under any previous monarch. International commentators and citizens of former colonies took the opportunity to raise the atrocities of empire and question the legacy of the Queen rather than expressing grief or reverence for her. One commentator, for example, observed that during the Queen's reign, "British soldiers committed widespread atrocities against Kenyans [. . .] Roughly 1.5 million people were forced into concentration camps where they [were] subjected to torture, rape and other violations" (The Guardian, September 12). Another wrote in solidarity with First Nations people of Australia and lamented the "glorification of our oppressor" and that their kids "will have to pay their respects [to the Queen] at school despite the British empire's attempts to wipe us out" (The Guardian, September 14). In these narratives, far from being the benevolent mother of the nation, the Queen (and wider monarchy) is put in intimate proximity to the violence of empire, rejecting nostalgia and the glorification of British history among anxieties of global decline.

Similarity

While the principle of proximity supported the dominant narrative of the Queen's demise as a deeply personal loss, the principle of similarity organized the dominant narrative in a way that grouped similar public expressions of emotions together. Public expressions of grief, irrespective of their individual manifestations (or, indeed, how sincerely they were felt), were collectively assigned as performances of British identity, delineating who belonged within the hegemonic imaginary of the nation, and who did not. Accordingly, citizens, businesses, and politicians alike engaged in an array of public expressions of grief. This included speeches in the House of Commons by then Prime Minister Liz Truss, former Prime Ministers Johnson and May, as well as the Leader of the Opposition Keir Starmer. Elsewhere, the fitness company CrossFit posted a workout called "Queen Elizabeth II," supermarket chain Morrisons lowered the volume of checkout sounds (The

Scotsman, September 18), the United Kingdom's largest airport London Heathrow re-scheduled flights to avoid planes flying over the Queen's coffin (The Guardian, September 15), and food banks were closed and cancer screenings canceled for the day of the funeral (The Independent, September 15). Despite these starkly different expressions of mourning, they are all *similar*—they share the same sentiment of the Queen as somebody worthy of highly public displays of mourning and a suspension of everyday routines. In doing so, they recognize those performing these acts as *British* and make visible those who did not, marking them as *un-British* by highlighting their dissimilarity. The result is an ontological (in)security dilemma, in which some attempts to (re)establish a positive and firm sense of self undermine other efforts, and vice versa, leading to a self-reinforcing downward spiral.

The most remarkable of these public expressions of grief was what became simply known as "The Queue" where, in the best British tradition, people waited in line for a long time. Between September 14 and 19, 2022, over a quarter of a million people waited to file past the Queen's coffin to pay their respects. The Queue stretched for up to 16 km and waiting times peaked at 25 h. In media discourse, it was widely celebrated as the epitome of Britishness, a symbol of how close the Queen and the monarchy were to the British people, and how unified the nation was in mourning. One commentator argued that the crowd "represent a particular sense of Britishness, unified Britishness, [. . .] which not only reverse the Queen, but also supports the monarchy," creating an "image of a nation united in support for monarch and monarchy," and by "going on pilgrimage in the queue, [people] affirm [their] national identity and [their] sense of belonging" (The National Scotland, September 18). Another noted that the "period of national mourning had a uniquely British tinge, with the rain, the queuing, the marmalade sandwiches" (The Guardian, September 18). The concept of *Britishness* is a lodestar of UK ontological security; as Croft (2012, 122) notes, Britishness is a floating concept that links "contemporary culture with traditions" and nothing is more traditional or ritualistic than the monarchy.

The queue brought together proximity and similarity to reassert a positive sense of self and belonging within the dominant narrative. Moreover, it contrasted those who waited their turn, like footballer David Beckham, with those who took shortcuts or chose not to queue; the implication was clear: to queue was to be British, not to queue was disrespectful. These performances of the "right" way to mourn were an active reinscribing of the hegemonic narrative, thus re-affirming the ontological security in some, and exacerbating ontological insecurity in others. According to the dominant narrative, the globally broadcasted and impressively choreographed ceremony was a performance of Britishness in the eyes of the entire world, a moment of pride among a crisis. With Ahmed (2014, 109), we might say that the performance of shared grief and mourning was narrated as showing a distinctively British "'value' and 'character'" to an international audience and allowed them to be proud of "approximating an ideal that has already taken their shape."

Those contesting the dominant narrative formulated alternative accounts that sought to highlight the parallels between British state institutions' behaviors and policies and those of authoritarian regimes, making clear the dissimilarities between mourners and anti-monarchy protestors. Activists and protesters were charged and arrested by the police across the country that prompted concerns over free speech and democratic rights (see, e.g., Mail on Sunday, September 14). As one activist argued in an interview, their "protest disrupts this idea that everyone is grieving, it disrupts this culture that everyone is bowing to the monarchy, and that really offends people, and I find that revealing about the things that can't be questioned in this country" (The Independent, September 13). Subsequently, protesters and critical journalists associated the potentially anti-democratic police crackdown with similar practices in other countries. In Edinburgh, "anti-monarchy arrests have been compared to demonstrations held in Russia. Blank Sheets of paper were held up by

protesters as people queued to see the Queen's coffin" (The Herald, September 13). Protesters contested the dominant British autobiographical narrative by linking state actions to the Russian state's crackdown on dissent by utilizing the same symbols as Russian anti-war protesters. In general, this crackdown on dissent was problematized by some as undemocratic (The Sun, September 13).

Another similarity that was often drawn was between the British media's reporting and that of state media of authoritarian regimes to lament the enforced performance of national mourning and grief that not everyone was feeling or willing to express. As one commentator put it, the "BBC's vomit-inducing coverage thus far is akin to something you might have expected in North Korea. The rush to identify and then condemn dissenters is about forcing conformity on the nation. There's something totalitarian about it" (The Herald, September 12). Indeed, the dominant narrative of an image of a nation united in grief made some feel silenced (The National, September 18). In sum, those contesting the dominant narrative sought to identify similarities between the actions of the British state and authoritarian regimes, while distancing themselves from the collective mourning that enveloped much of society. This deliberate positioning Britain as similar to authoritarian regimes can be interpreted as particular form of shaming (see Steele 2008) aimed at enforcing a realignment between the dominant British autobiographical narrative and state practices as well as a way to create space for "being otherwise."

Closure

The principle of *closure* helps us understand how the competing narratives made sense of the death of the Queen as the end of an era, and crucially, an inflection point for contrasting future potentialities. In short, how we suture the fissure back together in order to "go on" again in daily life. The 10 days of mourning were framed as the time for the entire nation to pay respect and say goodbye to an almost mythical figure and remember her reign. Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson summarized this sentiment, claiming that the death of the Queen was "our country's saddest day [. . .] we grieve for Elizabeth the Great, the longest serving and in many ways the finest monarch in our history" (The Spectator, September 8). As the BBC put it, the moment the Queen died was "the moment history stop[ped]" (BBC, September 8). Closure, in this framing, was predominantly narrated as the end of a golden era.

Anti-monarchists, on the other hand, took the death of the Queen as an opportunity to encourage discussions around the potential to end the monarchy altogether. The length of Queen's tenure served to in many ways obscure the popular changes in attitudes that occurred over the last half century. While republicans have long pushed for the abolition of the monarchy, they took their moment and utilized the fissure following the demise of the Queen to amplify these discourses, asking whether this was an opportune moment to bring an end to a seemingly outdated and superfluous institution (The Guardian, September 10, 2). As one observer formulated it, "Britain is engaging in a moment of transition without even considering what that transition means. How could any nation not debate monarchy at a time like this? [. . .] All that's needed right now is a respectful discussion about the future of the monarchy" (The Herald, September 15). The demise of the Queen, in other words, was narrated as a (possible) end to a problematic and contentious status quo.

Continuation

These two different notions of closure were closely intertwined with efforts to generate different aspirations of continuity. In the dominant narrative, the Queen's

successor King Charles III was framed as continuing his mother's legacy. As one observer put it, "We are living through a period of history in which a familiar era suddenly ended. And yet the transition to the new one is ordered and smooth" (Daily Mirror, September 18); royal protocol saw the King officially proclaimed on September 10, 2022. As *The Guardian* framed it, the "bonds of affection and respect from the British public are not so automatically passed from mother to son, and the reaffirming of this relationship is one purpose of this [. . .] pageantry" (The Guardian, September 16). Part of this ritualistic transfer of regal authority included depicting the new King as a continuation of the Queen and the British people. This included a strong emphasis on his grief that brought him close and made him similar to "his people" (i-Independent, September 12) but also in how similar to his mother he is in personality and temperament (The Independent, September 11). In other words, the transition from Queen to King emphasized the continuity and consistency of the monarchy as a source of national stability and pride. This was underscored by an emphasis on the overall preparedness for the death of the Queen. In the immediate aftermath, the details of "Operation London Bridge"—the plan to deal with her death—were published to reaffirm the readiness of the monarchy and government to cope with this loss and move forward almost seamlessly (Daily Mirror, September 18). This dominant narrative, in other words, promoted ontological security by glossing over the fissure and embracing the highly ritualistic transfer of regal power to alleviate anxieties and uncertainty.

The principle of continuation also opened avenues to contest this dominant narrative. In the light of arrests of anti-monarchy protestors, republican activists and critical journalists alike sought to defend anti-monarchy views by insisting accepting dissent is consistent with Britain's history as a democracy. Thus, unlike the dominant narrative that drew on stories of a romanticized empire, those contesting the dominant narrative drew on stories of Britain's democratic tradition of embracing debate. As one newspaper put it, the "Queen was the constitutional monarch of a democracy. The bedrock of any democracy is freedom of speech [. . .] If this nation, which the Queen headed, is indeed a democracy, does it not do that democracy a grave disservice to abandon the need for difficult discussions, to softly smother freedom of speech" (The Herald, September 15). This sentiment was echoed by various commentators and critical newspaper articles. An MP, for example, tweeted that "Whilst many might question whether this is an appropriate time for such protests, the right to protest is fundamental to our democracy & should be facilitated," and a spokesperson for the Republic argued that "Free speech is fundamental to any democracy. At a time when the media is saturated with fawning over a king appointed without discussion or consent, it is even more important" (The Guardian, September 13). Another activist asserted that calling "for the abolition of the Monarch is as old as the monarchy itself and a cornerstone of freedom of speech in the UK" (The Herald, September 14). Similar sentiments were also expressed in letters published by different newspapers. One reader, for example, argued that "we have a history and culture of peaceful protest in this country and that is something a democratic nation should be proud of" (The Guardian, September 15), another insisted that "regardless of where you stand on the monarchy, the right of people to peacefully express their views is fundamental to democracy, and not something people should be arrested for" (The Sun, September 14), and yet another argued that the "police response is an infringement of our democratic right to protest and runs counter to a society built on tolerance" (Mail on Sunday, September 15). Thus, while reconstructions of the dominant autobiographical narrative insisted on the continuity of the monarchy as a source of stability and pride, marginalized narratives emphasized that protesting against the monarchy was consistent with Britain's democratic legacy and that the post-Elizabethan era had to engage dissenting opinions to move forward.

Common Fate

The dominant autobiographical narrative sketched a particular vision of the future following the principle of common fate. In this future, the monarchy and the British people were imagined as a unified entity, projecting a romanticized perception of the past into the future. The dominant autobiographical narrative tapped into affectively appealing empire nostalgia (Melhuish 2022) to create a positive sense of self and common destiny. The Queen was narrated as one of the last remnants of the British empire, which is why, as former prime minister Johnson put it, "wave after wave of grief was 'rolling across the world'" and in particular through the "great Commonwealth of nations [the Queen] so cherished and which cherished her in return" (Scottish Daily Mail, September 9). This also implied that continuing the tradition of monarchy would lead to a future largely consistent and continuous with a romanticized past where the widespread experience of grief was narrated as an expression of a country becoming increasingly unified, generating new attachments that would "consolidate [people's] sense of Britishness" and perhaps "even mint a new generation of reluctant royalists" (The Independent, September 15). In other words, ontological security was sought through envisioning a unified country with a cherished monarch leading into a future past.

The principle of common fate also guided narratives intended to offer alternative futures. These narratives did not insist on a singular and uniform nation moving toward a future envisioned in terms of the romanticized past. Instead, they offered pluralist accounts as to what the future could and should look like. On the one hand, the future was narrated in terms of how monarchists and republicans disagreed over a fundamental aspect of British society yet nonetheless moved in the same direction into the future on the basis that British democracy embraces diversity, tolerance, and differing opinions. As one journalist argued that "Diversity makes the world go round" and that whether "you're a monarchist or a republican is neither here nor there [. . .] There is no right or wrong way to react, think or feel during this period of national mourning [. . .] That's the beauty of freedom [. . .] neither side is wrong" (Daily Record, September 17). This narrative thus tapped into an affectively appealing notion of democracy and popular sovereignty (see Browning 2019, for a discussion of the affective appeal of sovereignty).

On the other hand, ontological security was sought through promoting a fantasy narrative of an idealized pluralistic liberal democratic society acknowledging the wrongs of the past and moving on together into a utopic future. The future of British society was not imagined in terms of a romanticized past but a future in which Britain would confront its history and start to overcome its denial of wrongdoings and atone for its atrocities. As one commentator put it, "Britain lost the luxury of long-lasting denial, at the same time as it lost its Queen" and subsequently, "the voices of those colonised in the name of the British crown [were] being heard, not as a fringe, exceptional view, but as a clamouring chorus of global trauma" (The Guardian, September 13). Engaging with this past, in other words, is necessary to be able to move forward. As Ahmed (2014, 109) explains, by "witnessing what is shameful about the past, the nation can 'live up to' the ideals that secure its identity or being in the present."

Conclusion

We have argued that, through the Death of the Queen, a fissure emerged that threatened to fragment the national self by making visible erstwhile taken-for-granted narratives and forcing the United Kingdom into a choice about its national self. This was navigated through the principles of similarity, proximity, closure,

continuation, and common fate guided affective perception in a way that enabled both the (re)assertion of the dominant autobiographical narratives *and* directed counter-narratives. Both, we argue, were intended to placate anxiety and restore a sense of ontological security for one group, often at the expense of another. Attempts to contest the dominant autobiographical narrative were often discarded as illegitimate, disrespectful, and inappropriate. Several commentators pointed out that it became quite difficult to express these views in public discourse (The Herald, September 15). One republican, for example, stated that she felt "unable to express an opinion without being branded as disrespectful, so therefore I've been funnelled into complying with the country's grief" (The Guardian, September 10), while another stated that they told their children not to "express any views critical of the monarchy, given the belligerent intolerance demonstrated towards those calling for its abolition" (The Guardian, September 14). Indeed, on several occasions, protestors were arrested or threatened to be arrested for inappropriately expressing their anti-monarchy views in public (The Guardian, September 12). Crucially, despite this hegemony of the dominant autobiographical narrative, Gestalt principles of perception also offered effective entry points for contesting the dominant autobiographical narrative through protest, reckoning with the United Kingdom's colonial past, and the imagining of different futures. Consequently, marginalized narratives emerged to subvert and redirect the dominant autobiographical narrative.

The months since Queen Elizabeth II died have not been kind to the British Monarchy. While institutional actors sought to re-invisibilize the hegemonic narrative of her life, ultimately the effort to maintain continuity between monarchs and reinforce the rose-tinted vision of Britain failed to resonate. This is in part due to renewed accusations of racism and xenophobia within the Royal family following Prince Harry's memoir, and due to Prince Andrew's continued role in the royal family, which offends large sections of the British public. Small-scale protests at football games in Scotland and elsewhere marked more vocal anti-monarchy sentiments. This demonstrates that this fissure caused by the death of the Queen while sutured has left a visible scar. In making visible that the maintenance of such hegemonic national narratives, it became clear that this process is neither simple nor uncontested. It is also not merely a domestic debate but rather situated within broader transnational dynamics of empire and colonialism. It is nonetheless interesting how deeply the story of Queen Elizabeth's death resonated with the British public at a time when decline felt in some ways inevitable. The United Kingdom was languishing and directionless, and as much as the Queen's death offered a chance to consolidate strong throughline narratives of British history, her death ultimately exposed more than healed.

This is not to say that there is only one way to contest this story, nor is this contestation solely about deconstruction. By expounding upon the concept of perception using the principles of Gestalt, this paper has shown that what is at stake in narrative contestation is the need to create and maintain a positive self-image based on perceptions of a hegemonic story. This contestation is grounded in what individuals and groups identify as (dis)similar and proximal subject-positions within the context of a hegemonic national narrative, and whether that feeds into a positive or negative self-understanding. When we alter or double down on our autobiographical narratives to respond to a fissure in the story of the self, we (re)construct these stories in a way that we perceive them to be continuous and positive with who we imagine ourselves to be. In the case of narratives, the principles tend to be more abstract but offer a coherent framework to understand how fissures are perceived, and what specific aspects of the (re-)emerging narratives are particularly contentious. Simply put, the principles of perception in Gestalt psychology help us make sense of how exactly dominant narratives can be and are contested.

Acknowledgments

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available in the *ISAIPS* data archive.

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