

Disorientations: Literary Storytelling as a Means of Recreating Experiences of Mental Illness

By

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Preface

This dissertation emerged, in many ways, out of my own experiences with mental illness. The impetus to write a dissertation about mental illness in literature came both from my reflections on my own experiences and from conversations I've had with other people who've struggled with mental illness, including friends, family members, and people whose paths I've crossed while undergoing treatment at psychiatric facilities. Regardless of the different diagnoses we may have, I have found that there always tend to be overlapping experiences. One of the most common frustrations I hear from other neurodivergent people is that no matter what words they use to communicate their feelings and experiences to other people, nobody ever seems to "get it," even those who are genuinely trying to understand. A common analogy I hear is that it is like being in a deep hole shouting up to an unseen person on the surface, or trying to talk with someone across a long, mazelike tunnel. All they hear is a distorted echo.

These frustrations always resonated with me. Whenever I have tried to explain to others the specific ways that obsessive-compulsive disorder impacts every facet of my everyday life, those explanations always seemed to come up short. This dissertation is my attempt to address these frustrations by exploring the powerful ability of art to communicate, through storytelling, those aspects of mental illness which are incredibly difficult to communicate directly. It is my belief that art can facilitate a limited access to the reality that another person experiences, and in doing so, allow people whose minds work very differently to get a sense of how the other thinks and feels. That possibility is what I endeavor to demonstrate here.

Abstract

This dissertation demonstrates that literary storytelling can play an indispensable role in communicating *experiences* of mental illness. What is often missing from both clinical and popular descriptions of mental illness is a sense of *what it is like* to live with mental illness on a day-to-day basis. To address this deficit, I examine the methods by which literary works, through the production of an individualized perspective, offer instantiations of what I call “body-mind-worlds” via a storytelling process I call “body-mind-worldbuilding.” Whereas worldbuilding refers to the process of imagining and constructing a living, breathing fictional world within which a story may take place, body-mind-worldbuilding involves constructing the system of relations between a person’s body, a person’s mind, and the world that body-mind inhabits. Through body-mind-worldbuilding, a literary work can reconstruct the complex and unique structures of feeling and mentation through which mental illness is experienced by an individual, while simultaneously situating these experiences of mental illness within the social and cultural contexts within which they emerge. I use the word “disorientation” to describe a system of relations between a person’s body, mind, and world that produces conflict rather than harmony, such that body, mind, and world cannot be integrated without causing a great deal of mental, physical, and/or emotional distress for the person in question. The four chapters of my dissertation examine anhedonia, depression, dissociation, and social anxiety as “disorientations” that structure and transform a person’s experience of reality in powerful and distressing ways. Through readings of texts written by authors who struggle with mental illness, I show how literary works can filter reality through the perceptual frame of a neurodivergent consciousness, offering readers the opportunity to perceive and experience reality in the way that it is perceived and experienced by a person with mental illness. It is my hope that, by doing so, it will be possible to imagine new pathways through which neurodivergent persons, allies, and clinicians can work together to find ways of making mental illness less debilitating and less agonizing for those who struggle with it.

Introduction

My dissertation examines the relatively underexplored relationship between mental illness and storytelling, including both literary storytelling and other forms of fictional storytelling such as film and television. Throughout the four chapters of this dissertation, I perform readings of literary texts and audiovisual media that showcase some of the ways that storytelling can play a transformative role in both broadening and deepening the collective understanding of how mental illness is *experienced* by mentally ill persons and the unique struggles such persons face mentally, emotionally, and socially. In so doing, I also hope to demonstrate the possibility for fictional storytelling to bring into view “invisible” forms of psychic struggle which may be difficult for others to notice but which should nonetheless be considered in the treatment of mental illness. It is my contention that fictional storytelling can illuminate dimensions of experience which are pervasive in the lives of many people with mental illness, but which cannot be discerned exclusively through clinical studies or within the framework of a therapist-patient interaction, because they are difficult to communicate directly or in expository terms. My goal is not to dismiss the importance of clinical practices such as talk therapy or cognitive-behavioral therapy, which can be vital to the project of making life more livable for those dealing with mental illness. Rather, I hope to supplement them by filling in some very important narrative gaps in the picture of mental illness that those more descriptive and expository discursive forms present.

I am heavily invested, above all, in imagining ways to make mental illness more bearable for mentally ill persons. Such an imagining necessitates a deeper and more comprehensive empathic understanding of what having mental illness is actually like. This dissertation therefore seeks to speak to multiple audiences simultaneously. First and foremost, this dissertation attempts to speak to individuals struggling with mental illness. It is my hope that this dissertation will demonstrate the possibility of, and provide a potential methodology for, locating within literature and other storytelling media new forms

of expression for articulating experiences uniquely associated with mental illness, beyond those which are available within the lexicon of popular and clinical discourses, which may compensate for some of the descriptive limitations of those discourses. Such forms of expression may be profoundly meaningful to mentally ill persons who find themselves frustrated with vague, monolithic diagnostic categories that fail to attend to their individualized experiences or with the inability of direct language to adequately communicate the nature of their psychic distress. Secondly, this dissertation seeks to approach clinical practitioners interested in deepening their understanding of the experiential aspects of mental illness. Such an understanding could improve clinicians' ability to empathize with their patients and work with them cooperatively¹ to brainstorm ways to reduce the pain and stress caused by their mental illness, thus empowering them to live more fulfilling lives. In a similar vein, this dissertation will also be of interest to anyone who either cares for or frequently interacts with mentally ill persons. The ubiquity of mental illness in the 2020s suggests that most people likely fall into one of these categories, even if they are unaware of it. For this much broader audience, this dissertation proposes a method for interpreting literary representations of mental illness that will allow them to gain tangible insights into the embodied experiences of mentally ill persons. In doing so, they might better understand the unique challenges facing the people around them who may be enduring mental health crises and thus interact with those people in a more thoughtful, empathic manner.²

¹ This is, ostensibly, the therapeutic methodology of cognitive-behavioral therapy, whereby the patient takes ownership over both producing and enacting a specific, individualized therapeutic regimen and the role therapist is to help guide them through this process. With that in mind, a strong argument could be made that the most significant flaw in cognitive-behavioral therapy is less with the theory behind it than with the implementation of that theory in practice. Implementing such a therapeutic regimen requires a high degree of both empathy and flexibility, qualities which not every clinical practitioner possesses.

² In the book version of this dissertation, I will engage more with the field of narrative medicine, which Rita Charon describes as "medicine practiced with these narrative skills of recognizing, absorbing, interpreting, and being moved by the stories of illness" (Charon 4) in order "to understand that patients and caregivers enter whole—with their bodies, lives, families, beliefs, values, histories, hopes for the future—into sickness and healing, and their efforts to get better or to help others get better cannot be fragmented away from the deepest parts of their lives" (Charon 12-13). This description of medical treatment as a complex engagement with the totality of a person's lived existence, rather than a decontextualized treatment of a strictly delineated medical condition, parallels my own

I. Situating the Dissertation and Outlining Its Core Objectives

The core objective of my dissertation is to chart the intersection of storytelling and psychic distress. More specifically, I seek to elucidate the unique power of fictional storytelling to bring to life experiences of psychic distress which are either invisible or unrecognizable to those who have never experienced them, and even sometimes to those who have. I use the term “psychic distress” as an umbrella term to describe a condition in which an individual is experiencing, quite acutely, not one specific painful emotion, such as anxiety or anger or despair, but many such emotions simultaneously, and also many uncomfortable physiological sensations which accompany those emotions, to the point at which it becomes difficult to disentangle one emotion or sensation from another. There are two reasons why I find the concept of “psychic distress” to be a useful term for conceptualizing the role of the literary in deepening humanity’s collective understanding of the experience of mental illness. Firstly, the non-specificity, and malleability, of the term suggests that it might be expanded to address not only situations in which one is being assaulted by a deluge of painful thoughts and feelings, but those in which the sources and triggers of those thoughts and feelings are multitudinous and perhaps even frustratingly opaque. Secondly, under certain conditions, the approaches which might be most helpful, even vital, in addressing one aspect of a person’s mental health may actively exacerbate, or even create, other mental health problems. The term “psychic distress” is flexible enough to accommodate these types of conflicts and contradictions, while simultaneously emphasizing the urgency of finding ways to address and alleviate the feelings of distress.

pursuit, throughout this dissertation, of a way to use art to situate experiences of mental illness within the context of all of the other aspects of a person’s experience of life. An engagement with narrative medicine will present a concrete methodology for examining the narrativity of mental illness through a lens oriented toward treatment. This lens will be immensely helpful for developing a shared language to speak with clinical audiences about the importance of storytelling in the description, imagination, and ultimately treatment of mental illness. An engagement with narrative medicine will present a concrete methodology for examining the narrativity of mental illness through a lens oriented toward treatment. This lens will be immensely helpful for developing a shared language to speak with clinical audiences about the importance of storytelling in the description, imagination, and ultimately treatment of mental illness.

With this definition of psychic distress in mind, the question remains: what makes literary storytelling uniquely suited to conveying experiences of psychic distress in a tangible, perceptible way? To begin with, a literary work immerses the reader in the space and time in which experiences of psychic distress occur. Furthermore, it allows those experiences, along with the spatial and temporal elements of the situation which fosters those experiences, to be expressed in language that reproduces the perceptual frame through which the person with mental illness encounters them. Mikhail Bakhtin's conceptualization of the chronotope as an organizing principle for literary storytelling is helpful in elucidating how literature facilitates this kind of immersion. In his description of the chronotope, Bakhtin emphasizes "the connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin 84). Moreover, these spatiotemporal relationships are "always colored by emotions and values" (Bakhtin 243). For Bakhtin, the literary fusion of time and space allows for historical and/or social phenomena to be rendered visible as individuated, embodied experiences in a way that fuses historical time with the time of everyday life, to bring history to life, as it were. In the same way, the connectedness of time and space allows for a representation of the embodied experience of psychic distress, replete with the various conflicting thoughts and feelings which accompany it, that is rooted in the context in which those thoughts and feelings present themselves. The context, in this case, refers to the complex set of relations between the body-mind of the person experiencing psychic distress and the multitude of other phenomena which impact, and are impacted by, the thoughts, feelings, and actions of that person.

Perhaps most importantly, Bakhtin's notion of space and time in literature as "forms of the most immediate reality" (Bakhtin 85) means that literary storytelling allows for the representation of these relations, along with the thoughts and feelings which emerge within them, as a *present experience*. This allows a work of literature to attend to the acuteness of psychic distress, an acuteness which, by definition, is felt only in the moments when psychic distress is at its peak. These are the types of

moments that fictional storytelling can bring into view in a perceptible and communicable manner. By way of theorizing different types of chronotopes, Bakhtin makes a distinction between times of crisis and the time of everyday life. He suggests that “in the crisis-type of portrayal we see only one or two moments that decide the fate of a man’s life and determine its entire disposition” (Bakhtin 115), emphasizing that a narrative of this type “depicts only the most exceptional, utterly unusual moments of a man’s life” which nonetheless “shape the definitive image of the man, his essence, as well as the nature of his subsequent life” (Bakhtin 116). In the texts that I investigate throughout the four chapters of this dissertation, crisis-time is stretched out indefinitely to the point where it becomes indistinguishable from every-day time. Moments of crisis which other narratives may frame as “exceptional” or “utterly unusual” are instead presented as the defining characteristic of everyday life. Rather than a catalyst for the type of metamorphosis Bakhtin identifies as a key temporal dimension of literary narrative, whereby a person’s life, along with the person themselves, is transformed into something different (and implicitly better), crisis becomes a kind of static, perpetual present.

This indefinite elongation of crisis time forecloses the possibility for moments of crisis to be folded into what Alison Kafer describes as “the timeline of normative progress” (Kafer 43), according to which disability, which includes mental illness, is a flaw of the present that technological and social progress will eventually eliminate. Kafer explains that “in our disabled state, we are not part of the dominant narratives of progress, but once rehabilitated, normalized, and hopefully cured, we play a starring role: the sign of progress, the proof of development, the triumph over the mind or body” (Kafer 28). The presence of mental illness in the future stands as a testament to lingering social ills, to an antiquated manner of thinking, feeling, and behaving that will presumably have been corrected by social progress. Mental illness, and by extension those who struggle with it, must therefore be written out of the future. As a result, this “timeline of normative progress” also imposes upon those suffering from mental illness a social responsibility not only to orient their energies toward curing their mental

illnesses, but also to be successful in doing so. From that perspective, “the only appropriate disabled mind/body is one cured or moving toward cure” (Kafer 28). In other words, the only socially acceptable mentally ill person is one who is well on their way to no longer being mentally ill, or who actively suppresses any outward expression of their mental illness to avoid disrupting the status quo of public spaces by making other people feel guilty or uncomfortable.

It is no surprise, then, that popular and clinical discourses on mental health are rife with triumphalist narratives about people who have supposedly overcome their mental illnesses and achieved states of psychological and social normality. One can hardly wade into such discourses without being bombarded with stories of individuals who overcame their opioid addiction or their anxiety or who pulled themselves out of a deep depression by going to therapy, going to the gym, sticking to a routine, embracing their spirituality, maintaining a healthy work-life balance, banishing their negative thoughts and replacing them with positive affirmations³. Latent within such a teleology is the assumption that one can and should achieve such an overcoming through their own mental discipline, without the assistance of others. Those who cannot or do not do so are labeled as deficient or weak, too lazy or stubborn to put in the work to improve themselves. I myself recall being told by peers that I “clearly want to be depressed” because I was taking too long to recover from a severe depressive episode. The socially expected timeline for recovery from mental illness rarely matches up with any sort of realistic timeline, and the socially accepted definitions of recovery rarely match up either with what is feasible or with what would actually be most helpful for the wellbeing of mentally ill persons.

Kafer’s conceptualization of crip time as a reversal of harmful and implicitly eugenic curative teleologies offers a model for imagining temporalities that match the realities of embodied experiences

³ It is also worth pointing out that many spaces within which mental health is a common topic of discussion are rife with harmful actors or “influencers” trying to capitalize on the emotional fragility and desperation of people with mental illness in order to sell some product, or market some kind of lifestyle as a product, which they promise will help life people out of the acute psychological crises in which they are currently mired.

of mental illness. Kafer explains that “crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time or recognizing how expectations of “how long things take” are based on very particular minds and bodies” (Kafer 27). Rather than forcing neurodivergent body-minds to adapt to everyday temporal rhythms, crip time creates an opportunity, perhaps even an obligation, for these everyday temporal rhythms to adapt to, or at least make room for, neurodivergent body-minds. Moreover, crip time creates the possibility for the mentally ill subject to “inhabit both the before and after at once, refusing the bifurcation of [disabled] identity into two distinct temporal planes” (Kafer 43). In other words, rather than projecting a future in which one’s mental illness has magically vanished, crip time might actually help us reckon with a temporality in which mental illness is a defining characteristic of both the present *and* the future and fabricate modes of organizing social life that will make mental illness less debilitating.⁴

This last point is particularly relevant to my own reconfiguration of Bakhtin’s notion of crisis time as a perpetual present rather than an impetus for dramatic self-transformation. Indeed, this is how crisis time is presented in the primary texts I examine throughout this dissertation. For instance, in the stories of Thomas Ligotti, which I analyze in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, the viewpoint characters’

⁴ There are strong resonances between my analysis of the temporality of mental illness and Margaret Price’s recent book: *Crip Spacetime: Access, Failure, and Accountability in Academic Life*. Price coins the term “crip spacetime” as a way of conceptualizing the relations between space, time, and experience within a disability studies framework. She suggests that crip spacetime “lives in the material-discursive situation through which disability becomes” (Price 74). That is to say, disability emerges as a coproduction of the material conditions and discursive frameworks that structure the particular space and time within which a disabled person exists and experiences their disability. She uses the term “pluriversal” to illustrate the notion that a disabled person inhabits a different reality from their nondisabled peers, a reality which has its own unique spatial and temporal dimensions which can be designated as “crip spacetime.” Price states further that “a bodymind event, as part of crip spacetime, may be perceptible only in a fragmented way” (Price 96). This last point is especially salient to my dissertation. I am primarily concerned with finding ways to communicate embodied, enminded experiences of mental illness that are relatively invisible and incommunicable. Her assertion that such experiences are “perceptible only in a fragmented way” speaks to the impossibility of understanding another person’s mental illness by viewing it exclusively from within one’s own perceptual frame. This is one of the key representational challenges my dissertation seeks to address by exploring the methods by which literary storytelling both recreates the space and time of experiences of psychic distress and, through the use of narrative voice and other storytelling devices, filters its representations of these experiences through the perception of the mentally ill person.

traumatizing confrontations with otherworldly horrors merely serve to reinforce the narrators' bleak views of the world and the profound hopelessness they already felt. Meanwhile, Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*, the subject of my second chapter, reveals early on that the novel's primary protagonist has committed suicide. Not only can his story, which is told in flashbacks, not move forward from that starting point in any direction, since his life is over, but the flashbacks themselves reveal a life lived in a kind of perpetual stasis wherein he continuously oscillates between two conflicting self-narratives without ever being able to move forward with either one. The girl in Anna Kavan's *Ice*, one of the key texts examined in my third chapter, is brutally murdered multiple times throughout the novel, such that even death cannot change anything about her situation. And at the end of *Mr. Robot*, the television series which I examine in my final chapter, the socially anxious protagonist admits that he still hates people and that he is still afraid of them, and that that will never change. The only thing that has changed for him is the way he chooses to orient himself toward those feelings.

It is important to note, however, that while the elongation of crisis time forecloses the possibility of incorporating the events portrayed in these stories into a curative teleology, it also does not frame the moments of psychic distress unfolding in these texts as instigators of some sort of downward spiral or classical tragedy culminating in ruination. Instead, crisis is simply the status quo, a structuring condition of the viewpoint characters' experience of everyday reality. Arseli Dokumaci provides a useful model for thinking about how to represent this everydayness of crisis, which she calls the "habitus of ableism." She uses the term "habitus" much in the same way that Pierre Bourdieu uses it, to refer, broadly speaking, to a conditioned, almost unconscious set of social practices, habits, and dispositions, modes of inhabiting space and time, which reflect an internalization of dominant structures of social organization while simultaneously reproducing those same structures within the flow of everyday social life. In that vein, Dokumaci identifies ableism as "something beyond the reach of consciousness, something that is in fact deeply ingrained in the reflexes of the body," such that "as a form of habitus, ableism sizzles in the

muscles, tendons and reflexes of the flesh; runs through its sensory schemes; and animates the way the body comes to perceive its world and make sense of things” (Dokumaci). That is to say, rather than being simply a belief or ideology, ableism manifests in built environments and social spaces that are constructed in a manner that is concerned only with maximizing convenience for the normate body, often at the expense of accessibility for other bodies. Moreover, the manner in which people utilize these spaces often forecloses the limited avenues available for disabled persons to make use of these spaces. Dokumaci explains that this is not so much an intentional form of discrimination but rather an unconscious reflex, a kind of muscle memory that comes from inhabiting the type of body-mind these spaces are designed to accommodate and thus not having to consider either the limitations these spaces produce for people with different body-minds or how one’s own use of those spaces might limit the ability for other people to make use of them.

This same type of concept can easily be applied to sanism as well. Most everyday forms of sociality, whether they occur in the workplace or in school or in more recreational social settings, are structured in a way that not only presumes but also demands certain mental capabilities, certain forms of social knowledge, certain types of affective presentation, and the absence of any sort of trauma that might be triggered by certain topics, behaviors, settings, or other types of external stimulation which many neurotypical people would find mundane and unworthy of notice. Neurotypical people, both individually and collectively, often vocalize a strong belief in the importance of paying attention to mental health and accepting neurodivergence. In the context of their everyday life, however, those same people may demonstrate, at the level of their actions, an intolerance or even a disgust for certain traits, affects, behaviors, and social limitations that are common symptoms of mental illness, thus compounding the very forms of social exclusion they performatively denounce. These are the types of dispositions and social practices that can transform everyday social situations into sources of profound

psychic distress for many people with mental illness. In other words, this ableist and sanist habitus is part of what turns everyday time into crisis time for mentally ill persons.

I look to what Dokumaci calls “disability as method” to brainstorm strategies for rendering visible this everydayness of crisis, and more specifically, the impact of that crisis upon the body-minds of mentally ill persons. Dokumaci states that “to apply disability as method is to recognize the hard labor that disabled people do every day in order to create their own space for action in competition with an ableist habitus that constantly exhausts that space” (Dokumaci). Within the context of mental illness, this means engaging with forms of representation that can situate the everyday experience of mental illness, spatially and temporally, within the context of an encounter with an everyday reality that places enormous pressure upon mentally ill persons to strain themselves not only to perform but also to internalize modes of thinking, feeling, and acting that feel unnatural, exhausting, or even disturbing. The texts I examine throughout this dissertation facilitate an immersion into this sort of encounter, within which both space and time are structured by an experience of psychic distress. In doing so, they generate an ethical imperative to recalibrate the lines of inquiry we pursue when discussing mental health. Rather than investing all our energy into figuring out how to cure mental illness, we must also figure out how to make life more bearable for those for whom mental illness is a defining characteristic of both the present and the future.

The primary aims of my dissertation overlap quite a bit with many of the core objectives of the burgeoning field of Mad Studies. Mad Studies, an intellectual subdiscipline with activist aims, seeks “to develop a philosophically and ideologically grounded movement with the capacity to take effective action based on survivor-led understandings of madness and wellbeing” (Beresford 6). That is to say, Mad Studies endeavors to engender new ways of thinking about the experiences, struggles, and needs of mad subjects, such as neurodivergent persons and psychiatric system survivors, which centralize the perspectives of these subjects. Because of its emphasis on the first-hand experience of mad subjects,

Mad Studies “is based on an explicit divorce from a simplistic biomedical model and all the theoretical and treatment premises associated with it” (Beresford 7). This means rejecting any kind of pathologization of non-normative mentation as “mental illness” and, indeed, rejecting the term “mental illness” entirely. From the perspective of Mad Studies, the term “mental illness” is individuating, displacing onto the body-minds of mentally ill persons all responsibility for the mental pain they suffer, while also placing the burden of recovery squarely upon their shoulders. In doing so, it elides the myriad social, cultural, and economic factors which contribute to and exacerbate that mental pain. In this way, the psychiatric system’s focus on pathologizing and individualizing mental health issues renders it, whether intentionally or not, complicit in a neoliberal, austerity-based approach to mental health care predicated upon offsetting the harmful externalities of social problems onto individuals through the language of personal responsibility. In practice, then, this idea of mental illness as an individuating phenomenon produced by and contained within a person’s mind leads to a view of users of psychiatric services as a parasitic financial burden upon the state, a view that not only precipitates further stigmatization, but also a reduction in the availability and quality of mental health care⁵.

⁵ It is important to emphasize the distinction between Mad Studies and the anti-psychiatry movement, which, on the surface, might seem to be aligned. The most basic criticism of anti-psychiatry put forth by Mad Studies scholars is the fact that its leading figures and spokespeople are primarily psychiatrists rather than mad subjects, and the ostensible audience for its critiques of the psychiatric system are also other psychiatrists or clinicians. It therefore scaffolds an inherently top-down rather than bottom-up approach to the very real problems to which it endeavors to draw attention. The second, equally important criticism is that the pioneering text of anti-psychiatry: Thomas Szasz’s *The Myth of Mental Illness*, approaches its subject-matter from a libertarian perspective, with its core objective being to reduce the amount of money and resources put into the mental health care system. In furtherance of that goal, Szasz avers that in the majority of cases, especially those involving anxiety and depression, a patient’s symptoms are actually caused either by character flaws or by issues in their personal life which ought to be addressed within their personal lives rather than through the use of medication, hospitalization, or any other clinical approach. Szasz and those who supported his line of thinking ended up providing a plausible academic scaffolding for those charlatans, such as Jordan Peterson, who try to frame mental illness as an issue of personal responsibility rather than a genuine medical problem that needs to be addressed as such. But even those on the New Left who approach anti-psychiatry from a Marxist, or at least anti-capitalist, perspective still tend to prioritize their political agendas over the wellbeing of actual mad subjects, and hence still reproduce the technocratic approach to studying mental illness that values the expertise of professionals over the experiences and perspectives of mad subjects. Even when they do speak of those experiences and share those perspectives, ostensibly to give a voice to mad subjects, they still filter those perspectives through the language of psychiatry, and they still impose an academic framework onto those experiences.

Mad Studies is, therefore, politically oriented, concerned principally with creating and empowering communities of mad subjects and their allies to combat the types of social, political, and economic problems they perceive to be the root cause of the mental, emotional, and social struggles mad subjects experience. In this regard, the political investments of Mad Studies mirror those of disability studies, albeit with a slightly different focus. Mad activists pursue policy initiatives aimed both toward countering neoliberalism's disciplinary approach to non-normative mentation and facilitating greater access to mental health services for those who need them, while also strengthening the agency of mad subjects within these mental health care systems by placing a central importance upon their first-hand experiences and testimony thereof. For the most part, this dissertation aligns itself with these political imperatives. That being said, the lens through which my dissertation examines mental illness is somewhat different. I am somewhat reticent to view mental illness in identitarian terms. In my own experience, I have found that thinking about mental illness in terms of identity can be self-destructive, because it facilitates a deep attachment to, and investment in, the same psychic processes which also produce some of the worst forms of psychic distress. Under such conditions, the vital imperative to preserve one's identity and sense of self can come into conflict with one's mental and emotional wellbeing.

Many Mad Studies scholars eschew the term "mentally ill" due to its stigmatizing nature and the fact that the term "illness" places it within a curative framework. It is certainly true that the term "mentally ill" tends to convey stigmatization in popular discourse and is generally used to denigrate people who exhibit behaviors and opinions that are considered dangerous or absurd or both. Despite these problems, or perhaps even because of them, I have elected to use this term throughout my dissertation. I believe it is imperative that mentally ill persons reclaim the term "mental illness" as one which draws attention to the particular psychological and social challenges they face as a result of their illnesses. Despite the stigma attached to it, I find the term "mentally ill" useful for two reasons. Firstly, it

places an emphasis on the experiences of psychic distress that accompany mental illnesses, which makes it useful both for attaining certain forms of accommodation and for drawing attention to the unique challenges mentally ill persons face in everyday life. Secondly, whether one likes it or not, the term “mentally ill” is the term that is used in public discourse, often to denigrate people with mental illness, so it is important to try and change the narrative and shift the discourse around the term and to reconfigure the rhetorical meaning attached to it. It is, after all, the term that is most commonly used amongst the general populace. If I refer to myself as a “mad subject,” few outside of academia will know what that means. On the other hand, if I refer to myself as “mentally ill,” or as “a person with mental illness,” most people will get the gist what I am saying. “Neurodivergent” is a more useful and widely recognized term than “mad,” and one that is favored by many people with mental illness, including myself, but it is still far less widely used than “mentally ill” and, furthermore, it does not particularly emphasize the distressing nature of mental illness. Therefore, while “mad” and “neurodivergent” are incredibly useful terms (and I myself quite frequently use the term “neurodivergent” to describe my condition, especially when speaking with other neurodivergent persons), “mentally ill” is the term that is most appropriate for the arguments I make in *this* dissertation, even if it may not be the most useful term in other contexts. Because my dissertation focuses on mental illness as an *experience*, and moreover as a representable experience, it is imperative that the term I use unambiguously communicate the distressing nature of that experience, and toward that end, I believe that the term “mentally ill” is most effective.

Lastly, though the core objectives of this dissertation are certainly adjacent to those of Mad Studies, I approach the examination of mental illness from a different angle. The problems with the psychiatric system, and the treatment of mentally ill persons in western societies, go beyond the political. One significant aporia in the very idea of mental health care is the relative incommunicability of the struggles and experiences that accompany mental illness. That is, because a mentally ill person’s

embodied experience of reality is often radically different from that of the neurotypical person, conveying that experience in terms others can understand can be very difficult. Furthermore, the popular lexicon often lacks accurate terminology to communicate those experiences in a concrete, coherent manner. Therefore, rather than pursuing solutions to the social and political issues surrounding mental health, a pursuit that is of vital importance, but which has already been undertaken by many scholars within Mad Studies and other disciplines, I focus on finding ways to think about and represent the *experience* of mental illness that make that experience more legible. For this reason, my analyses focus not on particular illnesses or disorders, but rather upon certain mental/emotional states which are associated not with a singularly delineated mental illness, but with many different mental illnesses, and which cause high levels of psychic distress for those who experience them. Despite these differences, I still consider the approach I take to examining narratives of mental illness in this dissertation to fall under the umbrella of Mad Studies. This dissertation aligns itself with Mad Studies and many of its political objectives but also attempts to supplement the politically inclined approach Mad Studies scholars usually take with an approach that is primarily phenomenological.

II. Defining the Body-Mind-World and a Phenomenological Approach to Mental Illness

Throughout this dissertation, I develop a model for reading literary works phenomenologically, as instantiations of what I call body-mind-worlds, and specifically atypical body-mind-worlds, through a process that I call body-mind-worldbuilding. Through this process, I suggest, literary works might reconstruct the material-semiotic system which structures a person's conscious experience of the world. In doing so, they facilitate an encounter with another person's lived reality, as a concatenation of the mental, emotional, physical, and social dimensions of that person's embodied existence. The body-mind-world, I contend, must be the locus of any phenomenological analysis of non-normative mentation, because it encompasses, if not the totality, then at least the key elements of the psychic reality a person inhabits and the form of the relations between these elements. I borrow the term

“psychic reality” from Freud, though I approach it from a different perspective. Freud primarily used the concept to denigrate neurotic subjects whose unconscious, and presumably also conscious, mental processes had separated them from reality, such that they were living in a false (delusional) reality of their own creation, a projection of their psychosis. I diverge from Freud in the sense that I do not make a sharp distinction between the subjective reality that is experienced by a person and an ostensibly more objective reality which I would argue only appears more objective because it fits more neatly within a normative perceptual frame that is itself the product of fantasy systems. In my view, the difference between the psychic realities of a neurotic and non-neurotic person lies not in the degree to which one’s perception of the world is accurate, but rather in the extent to which one’s perception of the world coincides with the larger fantasy system within which they are operating. Such fantasy systems can exist on any scale, from a single family to a much larger imagined community.

I therefore take the term “psychic reality” to connote an understanding of one’s own, or another’s, experience of reality that insists upon the power of the subject to be involved in the constitution of that reality, and in the co-constitution of their own subject-position and those of other subjects involved in this process of (inter)subjectivation. In the same way that the real material and social conditions of the psychic and physical environment a person inhabits influence that person’s perceptual experiences, that person’s own perception of those elements of their environment plays a role in the production and arrangement of those elements, such that both subject and object, interiority and exteriority, are co-constitutive. In other words, when I speak of a person’s “lived reality,” I am referring to a subjective reality which manifests through the interaction of their body, mind, and world, though, again, I reject the notion that this subjectiveness makes this reality any less “real.” It is the reality a person lives in (often not by choice) and hence the one that structures their life experience.

The nature of a person’s psychic reality, I suggest, is contingent upon the system of relations which produces their body-mind-world. To understand the body-mind-world, I draw partly from

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on what he calls "incarnate subjectivity," which he describes as "a natal pact between our body and the world, between ourselves and our body" (Merleau-Ponty 6). I use the concept of incarnate subjectivity to scaffold my understanding of how the body, the mind, and the external world are imbricated within one another. For Merleau-Ponty, subjectivity lies neither in the body nor in the mind, nor can it be understood as either an internal or external phenomenon. Instead, subjectivity is relational, coming into being through the act of perception, which is an interaction between the body-mind and external stimuli, though even to call them "external" would constitute a false opposition, since Merleau-Ponty posits no definitive bifurcation of interiority and exteriority. Through the act of perception, both the physical body and the external environment play an active role in the construction of not only the subject, but the subject's interiority, making perception the primary catalyst for both subjectivation and consciousness, two processes that become linked within this formation. Body, mind, and world come into being simultaneously through their intersubjective relation with one another, creating what I call the body-mind-world.

The work of other scholars who have built upon Merleau-Ponty's work, particularly his work on perception and his concept of incarnate subjectivity, within a disability studies framework proves helpful here. Jackie Leach Scully, for example, seeks "to examine Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach to the thinking body for what it offers the analysis of phenotypic variation in moral understanding" (Scully 84). She shows that the metaphors which are often deployed within popular discourse to conceptualize abstract moral concepts are predicated upon a putatively normal embodied existence. According to Scully, "we understand the nonliteral meanings of metaphors not because they are linguistic conventions that we have picked up, but because they have embodied meaning for us" (Scully 92). In other words, we make the connection between a metaphor and the idea it implies because that connection manifests within our embodied experience of the world and is therefore intuitive to us. For those whose body-minds experience the world differently, metaphors may take on a different meaning

or even no meaning at all. The idea of embodied metaphor may be brought to bear upon my own analysis of body-mind-worldbuilding as it occurs within literary storytelling. The function of body-mind-worldbuilding is to convey the totality of a character's experience of existence, fusing together sensory perception, cognition, affect, positionality, and milieu. The principal objective of a phenomenological analysis of body-mind-worldbuilding in a literary work, therefore, would be to interpret the narrative expression of these elements and the relations between them as they are experienced by a particular subject, i.e. character. Understanding the ways that embodiment, as well as mentation, influence this expression is vital to this type of literary analysis.

Margrit Shildrick, to offer another example, explains how Merleau-Ponty's understanding of perception as an intersubjective act makes the body permeable because it "stresses the reversibility of every body as a visible-seer and tangible-toucher" (Shildrick 55). This bodily permeability produces a kind of existential, in addition to physical, vulnerability which presents itself as "a failure of self-protection, that opens the self to the potential of harm" (Shildrick 11). Shildrick argues that, in this way, vulnerability presents itself as a kind of monstrosity, in the sense that it is "largely projected onto the other and held at bay lest it undermine the security of closure and self-sufficiency" (Shildrick 11). Firstly, the presence of disabled bodies within public spaces makes the vulnerability of all bodies more salient, and for this reason becomes a monstrous other which must be pushed out of social and physical spaces within which the normatively abled live their lives. Yet, in representing a threat to the secure identity and sense-of-self provided by the Cartesian concept of a bounded subjectivity, this monstrous vulnerability also opens the possibility for an intersubjective link between subjects engaged in different ways of living and being in the world.

The works of Shildrick and Scully, though focused primarily on corporeal otherness as opposed to neuropsychological otherness (and Scully in particular seems to view mentation as merely a consequence of embodiment), nonetheless provide valuable insights into how Merleau-Ponty's

particular interventions within the field of phenomenology might assist me in interpreting non-normative mentation as both a psychological and a social process which exceeds the boundaries of a singular, individuated interiority. Shildrick's explanation of perception as an intersubjective phenomenon predicated upon vulnerability dovetails nicely with Scully's conception of "embodied cognition," a term that fuses phenomenology with cognitive neuroscience to assert that "complex mental processes are founded on the physical interactions that people have with their environment" (Scully 90). I build on the work of these disability scholars and supplement it with work from psychoanalysis and clinical psychology to elaborate a model for understanding mental illness as an intersubjective phenomenon that emerges not exclusively within the interiority of a subject, but also in the relations between multiple subjects and the social and physical worlds they inhabit⁶.

By thinking about mental illness in these relational terms, I seek to develop a model for understanding mental illness as an orientation, or rather a disorientation, toward the world in which reality is experienced as violence and suffering. I use the word "disorientation" to suggest a phenomenological construction of the relation between body, mind, and external environment that foregrounds the individual's *perception* of that relation, which then becomes the catalyst for the construction of that individual's psychic reality. When I speak of a subject's "orientation" toward the world, I am therefore referring to the terms and consequences of the relations between body, mind, and the various elements of a subject's external environment, as they manifest experientially and socially. A "disorientation" toward the world might then be understood as a system of body-mind-world relations that produces conflict rather than harmony, such that body, mind, and world cannot be

⁶ There are quite a few other disability studies scholars, as well as scholars working within the domains of gender studies and queer theory, who have engaged with the work of Merleau-Ponty. Some examples include, but are not limited to: Judith Butler's work on gender performativity, Gayle Salamon's work on transgender embodiment, the work of Miho Iwakuma, Drew Leader's interrogation of the Cartesian body-mind dualism and the ways in which the body is absent from our understanding of perception and from the tendency to overemphasize the primacy of perception, and Rosemarie Garland-Thompson's examination of the relationship between staring and the emotion of shame in: *Staring: How We Look* (2009).

integrated without causing a great deal of mental, physical, and/or emotional distress for the subject. The forms of psychic distress I investigate throughout this dissertation might then best be called “disorientations” in order to foreground their relational nature.

Gregory Bateson’s concept of the “double-bind,” which he explains within his “communicational theory” of schizophrenia (Bateson 206), provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding, concretely, how such a disorienting system of relations can emerge. Bateson describes the “double-bind” as “a situation in which no matter what a person does, he "can't win"” (Bateson 205). More specifically, a double-bind presents the subject with a set of choices, each of which would be, in the context of the psychosocial relations within which these choices are presented, the wrong choice, such that the communicative relation will always produce a negative outcome for that subject. According to Bateson, the double-bind is produced by two contradictory directives: a negative injunction and another injunction which conflicts with it “on a more abstract level” (Bateson 210). In other words, the double-bind occurs when one is confronted with two conflicting orders of messaging presented through two different mediums of expression, such as a direct verbal statement indicating one thing and a behavioral or body-language response indicating the opposite. To illustrate this concept, Bateson uses a rather Freudian example of a mother who visibly recoils when her son attempts to show her affection, and then, when her son, out of respect for his mother’s personal boundaries, backs away in response to this recoiling, rebukes him for not loving his mother. The son is punished for showing affection by being rejected by his own mother in an emotionally hurtful way, and he is punished for not showing affection by being gaslighted into thinking he has emotionally wounded his mother by rejecting her love. The responsibility, and the consequences, of the mother’s internal emotional contradictions, which she is either unable or unwilling to put forth the mental and emotional effort to work through, are offset onto the son. Such contradictory communicative actions produce a situation in which the other person

cannot accurately perceive one injunction without misperceiving the other or respond correctly to one without responding incorrectly to the other.

Though Bateson's focus is on the ways the double-bind situation engenders schizophrenic thinking and the impacts this has on the schizophrenic subject's possible modes of communication, the idea of the double-bind is also useful in understanding the disciplinary, and ultimately moral, structures through which mental illness writ large is often socialized. The idea of punishment is central to the understanding of mental illness as a social phenomenon. Within this framework, one might understand the double-bind as a type of relationality in which one party always seems, or is made to perceive themselves to be, in violation of the terms of that relation no matter what they do and is always punished for it. That punishment takes various forms, both external and internal. Some punishments are meted out directly by external forces, and may include social shaming or ostracization, the deprivation of love, affection, or other forms of emotional intimacy, moral humiliation via gaslighting and/or guilt-tripping and, in some cases, more overt disciplinary measures such as involuntary commitment which can include confinement, forcible restraint, and being forced to take psychoactive medications against one's will⁷. Others are less visible, such as the self-hate or the abusive voice inside one's head which may become core aspects of a mentally ill person's interior life. These internal and external forms of punishment often reinforce one another, such that the mentally ill individual becomes complicit in their

⁷ It is important not to over-emphasize this kind of disciplinary approach to mental illness at the expense of other forms of social violence mentally ill subjects experience. Without a doubt, it is still disturbingly easy for a person with mental illness to be stripped of their rights by the psychiatric system. For instance, if a person who is feeling suicidal goes to the emergency room for help, a clinical social worker can decide, arbitrarily and without consulting the patient, to put that patient on an involuntary hold and send them, in restraints, to a psychiatric facility against their will, where they may be held until a psychiatrist deems them fit to be released. There is no objective, accessible criteria for making these decisions, nor are the staff obligated to provide any evidence or even consult with the patient. This is, obviously, a huge problem. However, it is far more common today, at least in the United States, for mentally ill persons to be unable to obtain treatment they need than for them to have unwanted treatment forced upon them. Many health insurance plans do not cover mental health treatment, at least not at the scale that is necessary for people struggling with severe mental illness. Furthermore, the corporatization of medicine creates incentives for hospitals to retain patients for as short a time as possible, in order to clear up beds to bring in new patients. This leads many mental health patients, including overtly suicidal ones, to be discharged from the hospital earlier than they should be, often against their will.

own punishment. As such, the psychological abuse one inflicts upon oneself can often (though not always) be, at least in part, the product of an internalization of external disciplinary forces through what might be understood as a kind of Foucauldian panoptic surveillance produced by the sacralization of inflexible and exclusionary social and behavioral norms. In any case, punishment, within this relation, becomes one of the defining aspects, if not the defining aspect, of the mentally ill person's moral and social existence.

What I try and show throughout my dissertation is that what is often called mental illness might be interpreted as a violent clash between different components of a person's psychic reality which precipitates an ongoing double-bind situation of the type Bateson describes and the various forms of psychological punishment that ensue from it. This clash emerges from the incompatibility of a person's body, mind, and world and can be a profoundly isolating and atomizing experience, partly due to the perception of others that another person is disconnected from what they understand as, or have collectively decided to be, objective reality. In his work on schizophrenia, R.D. Laing offers a plausible explanation for this kind of disconnect. Laing argues that schizophrenic persons, as well as persons with other illnesses that impact perception, are not disconnected from the ostensible real world, but rather occupy a subjective position through which the various elements of reality have come to take on what he describes as "a different hierarchy of significance" (Laing 43) from that of the neurotypical subject. These persons, Laing suggests, experience a profound isolation which proceeds from the fact that, for the schizophrenic subject, "the world of his experience comes to be one he can no longer share with other people" (Laing 43). Rather than being divorced from reality, the "self," as Laing refers to the consciousness of the subject, is, under such conditions, "constantly subject to (as it feels) the threat of an implosive or engulfing 'reality'" (Laing 89). In other words, it is not the "real world" that is overwhelming for the person with schizophrenia. Rather, it is the normative perceptual frame through which situations and encounters are understood by others and the inflexibility of that frame and those

other people to understand and accommodate the schizophrenic person's different, but no less real, way of perceiving these situations and encounters. Understanding this confrontation with an "engulfing reality" as a violent encounter, the texts I choose to examine throughout this dissertation are those which present perspectives that either fail or refuse to acknowledge the immutability of the consensus reality that has been imposed upon them, and who endure the very real and severe psychosocial consequences of such a refusal.

III. Ethical and Social Orientations of the Dissertation

One key ethical function of these texts, which my analyses of them focalize, is to create a bridge that traverses the barrier between the psychic realities of mentally ill subjects and those subjects who are neuro- or psycho-normative. The purpose of such a bridge is to produce a kind of narrative language that can facilitate more effective communication and understanding across these barriers. Merleau-Ponty is again helpful here: if reading literary works can allow the reader to inhabit the psychic reality of another person in a way that produces a shared perception of that reality and how the elements within it are organized, then thinking about this instance of shared perception as a form of intersubjectivity is crucial to understanding reading as the type of truly empathic act I believe it can be. It is through this intersubjectivity, I argue, that the possibility may emerge to imagine, and thence to create, a psychosocial world that is livable, and decipherable, for neurotypical people and people with mental illness alike.

As previously noted, the reading practice I wish to cultivate throughout this dissertation is one that rejects the dichotomy of fantasy and reality. Instead, I contend that every social milieu an individual inhabits is structured by a collective fantasy and is constructed in such a way that preserves that fantasy from anything that might threaten it. Ernest Becker has argued that one primary function of culture is to facilitate and preserve certain collective fantasies, and to protect people from recognizing their fantastic nature. The concept of terror-management theory, which derives from Becker's work and is extremely

relevant to the questions I seek to ask in my dissertation, largely understands this phenomenon as a way of protecting people from death anxiety by fostering delusions of either figurative or literal immortality, delusions which are often identity-based⁸. This, I argue, explains one key motivation for the demonization of mentally ill persons and the disavowal of their perspectives: the radical alterity of the world they perceive, rather than simply being “false,” instead gestures toward repressed truths which threaten to dismantle the elaborate foundation upon which such collective fantasies of immortal transcendence are constructed by revealing their delusional nature. As such, the mentally ill person, if taken seriously as a conscious subject whose perception of the world possesses at least some degree of validity, becomes a threat to the identity and the metaphysical integrity of the neurotypical subject.

The other side of this coin is that neurotypical culture must then disavow the perceptual reality of those, such as the schizophrenics Laing discusses, whose experiences of reality deviate from, and thus rupture, the fantasy which the neurotypical/psycho-normative majority perceives to be the current, true state of the situation. This unfolds, I argue, through a process of social and cultural gaslighting which attempts to pathologize those with alternative perceptual experiences of reality as not only delusional

⁸ The fantasies of immortality theorized within terror-management theory can be either literal or figurative. Certain religions or other forms of spirituality offer a promise of literal immortality in the form of an afterlife. A much less common example might be some techno-utopian idea that one’s consciousness can be preserved in the form of an artificial intelligence. There could also be other examples. Figurative immortality is divided into four broad, multi-definitional categories: Natural, Creative, Social, or Experiential. The “natural” category of figurative immortality refers to the idea that one achieves a sense of immortality by passing one’s genes onto one’s offspring or, sometimes, by thinking about the fact that the matter that comprises one’s body will not disappear but will merely return to the earth to contribute to the creation of new lifeforms. Creative immortality refers to the notion that by creating something that will outlive oneself, whether it be a great work of art or an influential book or a revolutionary technological invention or scientific discovery, one will have left one’s permanent mark on the world. The social category refers to the idea that one is part of some social group which will continue to exist after one dies. Such groups may include one’s family, or one’s culture, or one’s nation, or one’s tribe, or one’s racial or ethnic group, or a political movement in which one participated. It could also be many other things. People might invest a great deal of time and energy into participating in activities that will ensure the long-term survival of that group and/or further the long-term goals of that group. The last form of figurative immortality is the “experiential,” which refers to the belief that certain experiences, such as standing atop Mount Everest after having scaled it, engaging in some intense love affair, or witnessing the aurora borealis, are so profound and timeless that they transcend the moment in which they occurred and even the lifetime of the one who experiences them. In any case, the core premise of terror-management theory is that one of the primary functions of culture is to help scaffold and sustain these fantasies in order to preserve everyone’s self-esteem and prevent them from being consumed by thoughts of their inevitable demise.

but also potentially dangerous. Non-normative mentation thus becomes the antipode against which the normative perception of reality constructs and legitimizes itself. Crucially, this clash of realities produces both the subjective reality of the mentally ill subject and that of the normative subject. This is one key means by which the mind becomes a locus of psychosocial violence as well as the site at which various forms of psychosocial violence are registered. I borrow the term “psychosocial” from Margaret Price, who uses it to “bump psych (soul) against social context...to reach toward both mind and world” (Price 18). The milieu to which I refer, therefore, is one in which the interiority of the subject and the social space that subject inhabits intrude, indeed even force themselves, upon one another. For neuro- and psycho-normative subjects, this interaction can be relatively free of conflict: mind and world may fit together seamlessly. For those subjects, on the other hand, which disability studies scholars such as Price, Robert McRuer, and Melanie Yergeau have referred to variously as “neuroatypical,” “neurodivergent,” or “neuroqueer,” this milieu consistently becomes the staging ground for an apparently irreconcilable conflict between a mind, a body, and a world that cannot seem to find a way to coexist. It is this conflict, I argue, that the institution of clinical psychology seeks to negotiate. In response to this conflict, the field of abnormal psychology asks: “why do certain body-minds fail to adhere to psychosocial norms?” My dissertation seeks to reformulate this question, asking instead: “what are the phenomena that translate nonadherence to psychosocial norms into mental, emotional, and physical distress?”

In order to answer this question, it will be necessary to think more concretely about what is meant by the term “norm,” a term that is quite ambiguous and malleable. Georges Canguilhem has drawn attention to the ambiguity inherent in the very concept of the “norm” and the contradictory definitions it holds within the context of medical discourse. It can refer both to an ideal state, i.e. “that which is such that it ought to be,” or, more commonly, to an average, i.e. “that which is met with in the majority of cases of a determined kind” (Canguilhem 125). There is no inherent correlation between

these two states, and in most cases, the ideal would not resemble the average. For example, the “healthiest” body, the body that is least likely to succumb to disease and death, would have a considerably more powerful immune system than that of the average person. Canguilhem suggests that “the normal is the effect obtained by the execution of the normative project” (Canguilhem 243), and as such is “essentially subordinate to that which establishes the norms” (Canguilhem 126). That is to say that a norm, in the first definition, is incidental to the conditions that the operation of power upon human subjects renders most conducive to survival. The abnormal, or the pathological, according to Canguilhem, thus “comes after the definition of the normal,” presenting as “its logical negation” (Canguilhem 243). The pathological is that which, under the normative conditions, exists permanently in a state of depreciated health and increased vulnerability in large part because of those conditions.

If, as Canguilhem suggests, the norm produces the pathological as its inverse, i.e. as that which is made ill by the normative conditions through which the parameters of the normal are defined, then the production of the norm might be understood as a primary catalyst for the disorientation I described earlier as a conflict between body, mind, and world. That is to say, the norm is what converts this conflict between body, mind, and world into illness, by inscribing as normal, and thus reproducing, the social, physical, and/or economic conditions within which non-normative body-minds cannot function without an intolerable level of physical, mental, and/or emotional stress. This pressure that the normative exerts upon the body-minds of mentally ill persons may usefully be understood in reference to what Lennard Davis has called “enforcing normalcy.” Davis argues that “the idea of a norm pushes the normal variation of the body through a stricter template guiding the way a body ‘should’ be” (Davis 34). Though Davis is referring here to visible, physical disabilities and phenotypic differences, the concept also applies to those with non-normative mentation, whose psychic distress is often increased significantly by the pressure to force themselves to think, feel, and perceive the world in ways that are

difficult, unnatural, and often disturbing for them. The norm thus introduces tension and conflict into the body-mind-world of the mentally ill subject, which can produce high levels of distress.

Yet at the same time that the norm creates tension within the body-mind-world of the mentally ill subject, that tension also exposes the aporetic nature of the norm. Canguilhem suggests that “the norm, by devaluing everything that the reference to it prohibits from being considered normal, creates on its own the possibility of an inversion of terms” (Canguilhem 240). I take this to mean that the conditions within which norms emerge also produce the pathological as that which cannot function, which cannot achieve even a reasonable barometer of health, under those conditions. As such, the creation of a norm also produces visible, measurable limits to the spectrum of possible conditions that can be accommodated by normative psychosocial and economic relations, allowing any condition which exists outside that spectrum to function as the negation of the norm by calling into question its universality.

One underlying assumption I am making here is that social reality is organized according to normative patterns of thought and perception. While I do not wish to place mental illness in some sort of binary opposition with normative mentation, one must acknowledge that the concept of normativity scaffolds many of the medical and popular discourses surrounding mental illness. This is particularly evident within the context of clinical psychology. On the one hand, it is true that a clinical psychologist cannot change the world around a patient but can only assist the patient in finding and practicing ways to cope with the sources of distress they confront within that world. This is an extremely vital service, if executed properly. However, by maintaining such a narrow focus on what the patient needs to do to acclimate themselves to social and psychological norms, clinical psychologists often end up enthroneing and reproducing those same norms, even when they are actively harmful to the person they are supposed to be helping. Indeed, such a reproduction of norms seems to be the modus operandi of

abnormal psychology, the branch of clinical psychology that deals with mental illness, which crystallizes cognitive and behavioral norms by cataloguing and pathologizing deviations from them.

This normalizing treatment methodology is evident in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), the official manual published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) to standardize the criteria through which mental disorders are defined, delimited, and diagnosed. This manual, which many clinical practitioners treat as their diagnostic bible, reifies these illnesses as concrete, bounded biomedical categories defined by a list of descriptive symptoms which can be precisely measured through quantitative empirical metrics. The DSM-5 itself seems to acknowledge the epistemological limitations of this methodology, stating explicitly that “there is no assumption that each category of mental disorder is a completely discrete entity with absolute boundaries dividing it from other mental disorders or from no mental disorder” (APA xxii). This is a single line in the manual, and yet it calls into question the entire premise of the manual, which proceeds henceforth to treat mental disorders precisely as if they were “discrete entities with absolute boundaries.” The manual offers only a list of symptoms for the definition of these disorders, and the descriptions of these symptoms, which frequently include such items as “feelings of sadness” (APA 715) or “excessive/inappropriate guilt” (APA 787), are often so abstract and subjective that they signify a drastically different concrete experience for each person to whom they are applied.

In practice, this reification often encourages psychotherapists to view their patients as passive objects of analysis, as mere embodiments of the diseases with which they are diagnosed. The language of the DSM-5 reinforces this type of subject-object relationship between psychologist and patient by hierarchizing medical knowledge in such a way that only the opinions of clinical experts count, while the opinions of the patients are respected only to the extent that they align with those of the clinicians. These dynamics between psychologist and patient, reinforced by the DSM-5, produce a top-down, technocratic approach to psychiatric diagnosis whereby the patient becomes the mere object of the

clinical expert's medical knowledge rather than a dynamic human being with unique life circumstances which may contribute to their crisis and to their pain. This subject-object relationship undergirds an institutionalized dehumanization and infantilization of mentally ill persons that deprives them, both rhetorically, and sometimes legally, of the ability to function as agential subjects within the psychosocial milieus within which they live their lives.

These problematic dynamics limit the ability of clinical treatments to fulfill the core ethical obligations they set for themselves: to alleviate the pain and suffering that accompany mental illness and enable mentally ill persons to live fulfilling lives in accordance with their own will. For example, one key assumption that underpins cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), currently the predominant mode of treatment for many mental disorders, especially anxiety and mood disorders, is that this pain stems from cognitive distortions or thought errors, and the self-destructive behaviors prompted by these thoughts. The solution, then, is to correct these thought errors and the self-destructive behaviors they supposedly provoke, which to a large degree entails instructing, or perhaps conditioning, patients to adhere to cognitive and behavioral norms. There is some merit to this type of solution. As I suggested earlier, a psychotherapist cannot transform the world in which their patient lives, and with that in mind, the greatest aid they can provide to their patients may be to help them learn how to inhabit that world in a way that causes them less distress. But without establishing a much fuller picture of that world and the patient's position within it, a therapist cannot hope to grasp the specific challenges that patient confronts in that world, nor how those challenges exacerbate the symptoms of their mental illness.

One of the key interventions CBT attempts to make in the lives of patients involves facilitating the development of "distress-tolerance skills." These skills include various methods for managing one's thoughts and behaviors in moments of acute emotional crisis when the usual coping mechanisms prove insufficient. Exactly what constitutes distress is not entirely clear within this framework. Though the term appears 627 times in the DSM-5, listed, in some capacity, as a symptom of nearly every mental

disorder catalogued in the manual, the manual only briefly defines the term, parenthetically, as “mental pain” (APA 20). This does not do much to clarify things, but it is possible to glean, from the contexts in which the words appears and from the way it is employed by psychotherapists, that the word “distress” is defined here in roughly the same way that I have been defining it, as an overwhelming onslaught of multiple, acutely painful emotions. One core premise of CBT is that distress, presumably due to its acuteness, is a temporary state that one overcomes internally through learned coping strategies. The implication, then, is that CBT, by training patients to recognize moments of distress and properly utilize these strategies, can successfully equip individuals to single-handedly overcome crises and the distress brought on by such crises. In response to these assumptions, my dissertation asks the question: how are we to understand, and grapple with, a reality in which distress has become, rather than a mere transient phenomenon, a person’s permanent, or at least frequent, psychic reality? How do we account for dimensions, as well as causes, of distress that are partially internal, but not entirely internal? The inability of CBT, and of clinical psychology writ large, to address these questions does not invalidate their status as crucial tools in alleviating mental and emotional pain. Instead, it creates an ethical obligation to supplement and augment these approaches with other analytical and clinical approaches that address these questions. This dissertation is an effort to imagine what such analytical approaches might look like.

Literature provides a means of responding to this ethical obligation through storytelling. By reading literary works through a phenomenological lens, it becomes possible not only to perceive distress as a concrete phenomenon, but to experience it in the way another body-mind experiences it. The literary works I investigate throughout this dissertation situate these experiences of psychic distress within the body-mind-world of the mentally ill subject. Furthermore, returning briefly to Bakhtin, they enable these experiences to take the form of immediate reality for the reader. This is not a process that can be replicated on a couch in a therapist’s office, because the totality of this experience is something

that is very difficult, if not impossible, to articulate in a purely descriptive sense, especially to someone who has never experienced anything like it. It is something that can only be relayed through an immersion in another person's psychic reality, which includes not only the body, mind, and world of the person, but the relations between these three components and the conflicts produced by those relations. A literary work can offer unique insights into that person's perception of those conflicts by presenting them in the way in which that person perceives them. Though literary body-mind-worlds are still mediated, they are mediated through the perception of the mentally ill subject and on their terms, rather than through the normative, pathologizing language of clinical psychology.

Yet to facilitate this empathic process by which a reader might come to experience another's psychic reality, it is not sufficient merely to reproduce a feeling or map out an interiority. Instead, literary depictions of mental illness might use body-mind-worldbuilding to transmit not only the embodied experience of psychic distress, but also the complex set of psychosocial relations (and the norms which undergird them) within which these experiences occur. Furthermore, the narrative presentation of these experiences can be filtered through the modes of perception through which these relations are internalized by the mentally ill subject, and which thereby underpin their understanding and interpretation of these experiences. That is to say, a literary narrative can present, simultaneously, both the experience of psychic distress and the mentally ill subject's interpretation of that psychic distress in such a way that the reciprocal impact these experiences and interpretations have upon one another becomes discernible. Body-mind-worldbuilding, as a storytelling process, thus might allow for a much more complete illustration of the causes of psychic distress, whereby this distress emerges not as the result of a process contained within a singular body-mind, but as a consequence of a set of psychosocial relations or, more accurately, a consequence of the enmeshment of a particular body-mind within these psychosocial relations.

To be clear, the purpose of body-mind-worldbuilding is not to enable readers to fully internalize the pain and anguish of another as if it were their own. Art can only go so far in that regard. No matter how vividly and viscerally a person relays their experience of, say, the grief they feel over the death of their loved one, they will never be able to instill that same grief, with the same intensity, within another person who has not experienced it directly. That person may produce an empathic reaction by conjuring within themselves memories of their own experiences of loss, but they cannot experience the same grief as the other person, nor can they experience it in the same way. The first person does not have to live in the other person's body-mind-world, just as a reader does not have to live in the body-mind-world presented in a literary text. They may retreat from it any time they wish. This is a form of distance that cannot be bridged. With that in mind, I do not presume to argue that readers of the literary texts investigated throughout this dissertation will somehow come to "know what it's like" to have a particular mental illness simply through the act of reading. Instead, I suggest that body-mind-worldbuilding allows for a type of empathy and understanding that are not otherwise possible. There are contexts, experiences, relationships, and mental processes which are extremely pertinent to the suffering of a mentally ill person, but which that person might not be aware of or understand well enough to convey directly through an explanation. These processes may even be unconscious. These elements, both conscious and unconscious, may nonetheless reveal themselves in a narrative representation of the experience of a situation that emerged while eking out one's existence in a particular body-mind-world. For that reason, the type of literary analysis I employ in my dissertation is one that allows for an interpretation of these texts as narratives about the emergence of distress.

To that end, each chapter of my dissertation examines a different complex emotional state as a kind of body-mind-world figuration. I refer to these states collectively as "states of distress." Rather than a singular emotion, each of these states of distress represents a complex and overwhelming amalgamation of multiple, and often unidentifiable, painful emotions, the causes of which cannot be

easily traced. I use the word “emotion” here, rather than “affect” or “feeling” or any other similar word that may have more cache amongst cultural critics due to its evocation of an embodied subjective experience, precisely because of the mediated nature of emotions. An affect might be understood as a direct physiological response to some sort of stimulus, and as such is both registered and expressed primarily on the body. In contrast, the complex social emotions I analyze here are not registered primarily on the body, though they certainly are registered there as well. Rather, these emotions are a consequence of mentation. They are interpretations of specific affective experiences, such that they fuse together the affective with the cognitive. They are registered simultaneously within the body and the mind of the subject, and also within persons and spaces external to the subject, or, in other words, in the body-mind-world, traversing multiple subjects and objects in a way that complicates any attempts to draw firm distinctions between them. In this way, they are explicitly relational. As such, while many of these emotions can stem from processes of individuation, they are not individuated experiences.

By examining literary texts as narrative expressions of these states of distress, my dissertation seeks to reveal the potential for literary works not only to represent reality as it is experienced by a person with mental illness, but to embody the distressing and disorienting experience of inhabiting such a reality. Such texts not only narrativize the complex relationality between the mind, the body, and the world that envelops that body-mind, as well as between the various facets of each of these components, but also reorganize these components and imagine new ways they might be brought into relation. My dissertation posits that literary works, when written or narrated from the perspective of a body-mind for whom the normative organization of reality is disorienting, may facilitate just such a reorganization. To demonstrate this, my dissertation engages with a literary archive of texts that stage the conflict between body, mind, and world, and between different body-mind-worlds. Through this staging, these texts imagine a space within which demands might be made for a reorganization of the relations between these three components, as well as between different and contrasting subjective realities. In

other words, you may find within these stories a window through which you might, for a short time, perceive the world as a person with mental illness perceives it and, in so doing, begin to imagine another version of this world that can accommodate both your perception and theirs.

IV. Chapter Summaries

The first chapter of my dissertation investigates the experience of anhedonia, which is the inability to feel joy or pleasure. The central problem this chapter addresses is the extreme difficulty in communicating, concretely and tangibly, a feeling that is defined largely by the absence of other feelings: joy, desire, motivation, etc. To that end, I examine how the contemporary weird fiction writer Thomas Ligotti, who has been open about his own struggles with anhedonia, creates an anhedonic “atmosphere” throughout his short stories that immerses the reader in an anhedonic experience of body, mind, and world. I bring together Martin Heidegger’s concept of “mood” and Sianne Ngai’s concept of “tone” to lay the groundwork for a conceptualization of atmosphere as an all-encompassing affect pervading both subjects and objects that is an immanent and structuring condition of the subject’s experience of reality. Within the context of a literary work, then, atmosphere might be understood as a pervasive affect immanent to all aspects of a narrative which structures the reader’s *experience* of that narrative and each of its individual components. Using this definition of literary atmosphere, I argue that Ligotti’s stories collectively create an anhedonic atmosphere that facilitates an imagining of anhedonia as what I call an “affective situation,” or a body-mind-world configuration which structures a person’s affective orientation toward themselves and toward everything around them. Ligotti’s stories thus use atmosphere to produce an affective situation in which those phenomena one might expect to evoke feelings of joy or familiarity, instead evoke horror and a sense of the uncanny. This transformation of joy and familiarity into horror and uncanniness allows for a representation of anhedonia as a concrete, definite experience with its own tangible content: rather than merely feeling nothing in response to phenomena that are ostensibly supposed to produce joy or pleasure, a person

with anhedonia may experience profound psychic distress in any combination of anxiety, disgust, dread, hopelessness, or any number of other disturbing feelings.

The second chapter interrogates the concept of “happiness,” arguing that the imperative to be happy functions, paradoxically, as a major catalyst of depression. Using the work of Sara Ahmed as a theoretical framework, I offer a reading of Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits* that demonstrates how happiness, rather than being merely a state of mind, is in fact an embodied, racialized, and sexualized ideology which structures an individual’s orientation toward their social world. The protagonist of *A Visitation of Spirits*, Horace Cross, is a 16-year-old black, homosexual boy from a fundamentalist Baptist family living in a small, rural community in North Carolina in which homosexuality is cast as a putatively white form of moral degeneracy. As a result, his sense of self becomes an unresolvable paradox, caught between his homosexuality and his position as the young scion of a family of Baptist preachers for whom heteronormativity is a prerequisite for both religious moral clarity and black identity. This puts him in the position of having to engage, incessantly, in a kind of violent codeswitching in which, metaphorically speaking, he must murder one half of himself in order to fit into the social milieu in which the other half of him is accepted and valued. He thus exists in a state of permanent psychological fragmentation. I assert that Horace’s suicide at the end of the novel is the inevitable consequence of this fragmentation and the social dynamic that fuels it, leading me to posit a definition of depression, or at least a certain form of depression, as a predicament in which the depressed person is socially shamed into taking an active role in the annihilation of their own sense of self.

The third chapter examines experiences of dissociation and derealization in two works by Anna Kavan: the short fiction collection *Asylum Piece* and her seminal novel *Ice*. I understand dissociation as a violent separation of the self not only from one’s world, but also from one’s own body, one’s own thoughts, and one’s own feelings. The dissociating subject feels as though they do not belong in the world in which they live or in the body-mind they inhabit, and this causes profound distress. With this

definition of dissociation in mind, this chapter investigates the possibility of narrativizing dissociation as a subjective experience without relying on any of those conventional loci of subjectivity to communicate that experience. How might a literary work convey the embodied experience of feeling disembodied? How might it represent, as a real experience, the feeling that nothing is real? To answer these questions, I examine the ways that Kavan's work uses personification as a literary device for representing a dissociated subjectivity. Personification, in Kavan's work, functions as a means of representing the perceived non-differentiation between the dissociating self and the external world. This places an emphasis not on subjects and objects, but on the relations between them, allowing for an imagining of dissociation not as a strictly individuated form of perception contained within a singular consciousness, but rather as a distressed form of relationality between the body, mind, and world in which those three components cannot coalesce into a stable sense of reality or a coherent sense of self.

My fourth and final chapter addresses a prevalent but misunderstood form of psychic distress that is far more debilitating than most people assume: social anxiety. Throughout this chapter, I perform what I call a "neurodivergent analysis" of the serialized television series *Mr. Robot*, examining the storytelling techniques it employs to immerse the viewer in a psychic reality structured by severe social anxiety. I use the term "neurodivergent analysis" to describe an approach to interpretation that taps into experiential knowledge of social anxiety to tune into an aspect of emotional storytelling within *Mr. Robot* that is unfolding at a wavelength that seems intentionally to be speaking directly and specifically to a neurodivergent audience. In short, I not only interpret the series from the perspective of a neurodivergent person, but also foreground the neurodivergent nature of that perspective. In that vein, I examine the way the series combines the audiovisual elements afforded by its medium with its depressed, socially anxious protagonist Elliot Alderson's internal monologue to reproduce the sense of disorientation social anxiety creates, with respect to the social world and also to one's own sense of self, and to illustrate the massive rift that emerges between his interior self, expressed through the internal

monologue, and his social self, expressed during his interactions with other people. I show how the social invisibility of the socially anxious person deprives them of the recognition which I argue, drawing from both Hegel and Merleau-Ponty, is vital to the establishment of a reliable and coherent sense of self, leading to a splintering of Elliot's consciousness. This destabilization of Elliot's sense of self is embodied in the character of Mr. Robot, who is revealed to be a separate consciousness cohabiting Elliot's body-mind. I ultimately suggest that by addressing his internal monologue directly to the audience, whom he refers to as "friend," Elliot interpellates the audience as his friend and confidant, the only person to whom he reveals his "true" self, thus facilitating an empathic connection which replicates the kind of organic process through which people might give recognition to the personality and subjectivity of those who, as a result of a mental illness, are unable to achieve that recognition through the normative social avenues.

Chapter One: Anhedonic Motifs in the Fictions of Thomas Ligotti

Anhedonia is an experience that is integral to various forms of mental illness, but which is not often discussed in mainstream discourses about mental illness, at least in the United States. Of course, it only makes sense that a culture driven by desire and oriented toward the pursuit of happiness would have little interest in an experience defined in large part by the absence of those things. Because of that, mainstream discourses about mental illness generally do not provide a language that might be used to examine a condition like anhedonia on its own terms. In order to address this deficit, this chapter examines how the “weird” fictions of Thomas Ligotti, a writer whose anhedonia has not prevented him from harnessing the necessary creative energy to produce a rather extensive body of work, create a literary, artistic language through which the experience of anhedonia might be imagined and communicated.

Certain problems emerge when trying to interpret a work of literature, or indeed any work of art, as a representation or embodiment of anhedonia. In a clinical context, which is really the only context in which the term “anhedonia” emerges, it tends to be described exclusively in negative terms, as a “deficit in hedonic capacity” (Der-Avakian & Markou 12) or, in other words, an inability to experience pleasure and a lack of motivation to pursue the experience of pleasure. This “deficit in hedonic capacity” manifests in two ways: as “anticipatory anhedonia,” defined as a deficit in “the interest in potential pleasure (wanting),” and as “consummatory anhedonia,” defined as a deficit in “the experience of (liking) potential pleasure” (Winer et al, 326). According to this definition, a person suffering from anhedonia “wants” nothing and “likes” nothing and, moreover, is not even able to want or like anything. If understood in these terms, as a “deficit,” anhedonia is not an active state of being, but merely a passive reduction in the palette of affects and emotions available to a person. That is to say, the experiences of “wanting” and “liking” are subtracted from the life of the anhedonic subject, but nothing

is added in their place. Anhedonia is not, strictly speaking, a specific mental illness or disorder. In a clinical context, it is understood as a symptom of many different mental disorders, ranging from schizophrenia to depression to ADHD to various anxiety disorders. Furthermore, it may have multiple possible causes, including not only neurotypical causes but also social, environmental, temperamental, and even metaphysical causes, wherein certain core aspects of a person's personality, demeanor, temperament, or way of thinking may make it difficult for them to derive joy and pleasure from the types of experiences and activities that structure contemporary life.

What is missing from these clinical definitions is a concrete illustration of *what it is like* to have anhedonia. That is to say, what kind of experience is anhedonia? Without understanding anhedonia as a concrete experience, it will not be possible for anyone, either clinicians or laypersons, to imagine a world that might make living with anhedonia bearable, or at least more bearable. In order to address this quandary, I describe anhedonia as an *affective situation*, which can be temporary or permanent, that structures the types of affective responses one may have, as well as those one may not have, to various phenomena. If anhedonia is in fact an affective situation defined primarily by a lack of capacity to pursue or elicit certain affective responses to phenomena, then the question this chapter seeks to answer is: how might literature represent, as a concrete phenomenon experienced by a living person, a condition which is defined entirely by the absence of certain affects and emotions and which therefore appears to have no positive content of its own, at least on the surface? In order to answer this question, this chapter will explore the ways Ligotti's stories provide a space for imagining what emerges in the vacuum created by the absence of joy and pleasure. In Ligotti's stories, those phenomena that are ostensibly supposed to produce pleasure do not merely fail to produce pleasure, but rather produce, in place of that pleasure, an intense, unbearable anxiety and dread, which Ligotti represents via his own twist on the genre conventions of cosmic and psychological horror.

I.

This emergence of overpowering anxiety and dread in moments when joy and pleasure might be expected is particularly evident in the story "The Spectacles in the Drawer." The conflict in this story arises initially from the tension between the unnamed narrator, a collector of occult objects who is nonetheless incapable of deriving even the slightest sense of awe or enchantment from them, and his friend Plomb, a man whom the narrator views as "a pest" (Grimscribe 296) due to his obsessive fascination with these same objects. Whenever the narrator returns from one of his frequent travels abroad, Plomb visits him at his home to peruse the objects he has brought back with him. The narrator notes that Plomb views his house as "a kind of palace of wonders" (Grimscribe 296), and Plomb himself refers to the space in which the narrator keeps his occult artifact collection as "the room of secret mystery" (Grimscribe 297). It is precisely Plomb's sense of wonder and mystery, or, more specifically, his capacity to experience wonder and mystery that sparks the narrator's feelings of resentment toward him. There is no indication that the disenchanted narrator is envious of Plomb's continued enchantment with the world, only that he "could no longer endure the sight of it" (Grimscribe 302). In fact, the narrator seems to view Plomb as a child who has failed to achieve a sufficient level of emotional maturity to be properly disenchanted.

From the narrator's perspective, to pursue the experience of being mystified or, in the narrator's words, to be "a seeker of a recondite knowledge" (Grimscribe 299) is a kind of self-indulgence which inevitably leads to self-destruction. This self-destruction stems, in the narrator's mind, from the fact that the mystique and enchantment provided by these secrets and mysteries are, to a large degree, produced by the seeker themselves, a projection of the seeker's own maladaptive hunger to be mystified by a world whose core mysteries have largely been dispelled. The narrator believes, therefore, that the capacity to experience wonder is a finite mental resource that eventually exhausts itself- either by exceeding the limits of the seeker's attention span or by exceeding the limits of the seeker's ability to

continuously dupe themselves into not seeing beneath the surface of things and thus discovering the mundane, mechanical reasons for these previously mysterious phenomena. Indeed, the narrator reflects that as soon as the secrets of the universe reveal themselves, “they become relegated to a lesser sphere, which is that of the knower,” such that “these former secrets now function as tools in the excavation of still deeper ones which, in turn, will suffer the same corrosive fate” (Grimscribe 298-299). Moreover, “this ruthless process is never-ending,” such that “the mortification of one mystery after another has no terminus beyond that of the seeker’s own extinction” (Grimscribe 299). Because mysteries are only enchanting as long as they remain mysteries, a “seeker of recondite knowledge” like Plomb only has two options if they are to persist in indulging their hunger for mystification: either to dwell in a permanent state of self-deception and willful ignorance wherein they learn nothing about the world and continue to look upon it with infantile wonder, trapped in the type of magical thinking that structures the mind of a young child, or to repeat, endlessly, this process of mortifying mystery after mystery until the constant whiplash of enchantment, disenchantment, and re-enchantment destroys them. In this sense, when he observes of these seekers that “Plomb belonged to their infinitesimal number” and confesses that “it was my intention to reduce that number by one” (Grimscribe 299), he considers himself to be doing Plomb a favor by attempting to disenchant him or, in his words, “to cure him” (Grimscribe 304). This perception of a person’s ability to experience enchantment in a disenchanted world as a kind of ailment in need of a cure is a very anhedonic notion. For one for whom the joys and pleasures of wonderment are unavailable, such a thing can only appear as pathological self-delusion.

The narrator’s plan to disenchant Plomb is “to feed Plomb’s hunger for mysterious sensations to the point of nausea” so that “the only thing to survive would be a gutful of shame and regret for a defunct passion” (Grimscribe 299). In other words, he wishes to expose to Plomb the childishness of his continued enchantment with trumped-up mysteries and thus force him to exit his phantasmagoric playpen and step out into the real world. He purports to achieve this result by playing a trick on Plomb.

After ushering Plomb into the “room of secret mystery,” the narrator removes from the drawer, in a rather exaggerated, ritualistic fashion, an ornate box, and from that box, he brings out “a pair of old-fashioned wire-rimmed spectacles” (Grimscribe 300). These are in actuality completely ordinary spectacles, but the narrator implies that there is much more to them. He invites Plomb to speculate upon their origin, possibly in order to implicate himself in the ruse undertaken against him and thus increase the shame and humiliation he feels once he uncovers the ruse. Plomb speculates that the spectacles were created by “a student of the Gnostics and a master of optometry” endeavoring to “construct a pair of artificial eyes that would allow him to bypass the obstacle of physical appearances and glimpse a far-off realm of secret truth whose gateway is within the depths of our own blood” (Grimscribe 302). Despite knowing this to be a complete fabrication, the narrator tells Plomb that “your speculation is so close to truth itself that the details are not worth mentioning for the mere sake of vulgar accuracy” (Grimscribe 302). The narrator then hands Plomb a dagger and asks him to prick his finger with the dagger and stare with the spectacles into the drop of blood that seeps from the cut.

What follows is one of the more verbose and grandiloquent passages in Ligotti’s fictional oeuvre, as the narrator hypnotizes Plomb and then describes to him “the infinite and overwhelming scene expanding before you” within the drop of his own blood, suggesting, among other things, the possibility of viewing within the same frame and within the same instant “mammoth shapes lurching in outline against endless horizons” and “the minutest cilia wriggling in an obscure oceanic niche” (Grimscribe 300). This excessive verbosity is quite intentional on the part of the author. It is a common practice in Ligotti’s stories, wherein those images and scenes that are described most vividly and even romantically inevitably end up being the sources of the greatest horrors, even if they do not appear so in the moment, as is the case in “The Spectacles in the Drawer.” Within the context of this story, this verbosity dramatically accentuates the ridiculousness of the notion that drives Plomb’s fascination with a drop of his own blood and, in so doing, elevates the sense of shame he will likely feel afterward. The narrator

believes that, after he goes home and reflects on the experience, Plomb would realize how ridiculous he had been and feel so foolish as to never show his face to the narrator again, and thus the narrator's disenchantment of Plomb would be complete.

Needless to say, this is not what happens. What happens is exactly the opposite of what was intended. Rather than dispelling Plomb's enchantment and "hunger for mysterious sensations," the narrator succeeds only in amplifying exponentially that hunger and thus accelerating the velocity with which Plomb hurtles toward the self-destruction that hunger inevitably brings. Attempting to rationalize his actions, the narrator insists that "I had provided him with a type of toy: the subliminal ability to feast his eyes on an imaginary universe in a droplet of his own blood" (Grimscribe 304). This almost sophomoric cliché about how the infinite complexity of organic structures means that there is effectively an entire universe contained within a single droplet of blood, and thus an infinite number of universes contained within each and every person, is often put forth as a kind of emotional prophylactic to vaccinate oneself against the paralyzing despair and hopelessness which the monotony of everyday life imposes. The narrator perceives Plomb's fascination with these occult objects to be a kind of repetitive administering of this prophylactic as a means of avoiding reality, and so presumes that his performance with the spectacles will liberate Plomb from his cycle of self-deception and thus allow him to confront the real world.

But, as the narrator confesses, "the possibility that he would desire to magnify this experience, or indeed that he would be capable of such a feat, had not seriously occurred to me" (Grimscribe 304). And, of course, it is no surprise that the narrator, having been thoroughly disenchanted, would not have been able to perceive this outcome. He himself is entirely incapable of experiencing any such sensation as "wonder," and thus can only understand its appeal in an abstract, academic sense. As such, he cannot truly comprehend the visceral intensity of Plomb's need for enchantment. And so, what he finds when he visits Plomb's house is entirely outside the scope of what his disenchanted mind could possibly

anticipate or even imagine: “each wall, as well as the ceiling and the floor, was a mosaic of mirrors, a shocking galaxy of redundant reflections” and “each mirror was splattered across its surface, as if someone had swung brushfuls of paint from various points throughout the room” (Grimscribe 307-308). Only after viewing this room covered entirely by bloodstained mirrors does the narrator realize the effect his little trick with the droplet of blood had had on Plomb: “Plomb had done nothing less than multiplied these visions into infinity, creating oceans of his own blood and enabling himself to see with countless eyes” (Grimscribe 308). In order to recreate the ecstatic experience that the narrator had offered him via his performance with the spectacles and the drop of blood, Plomb had repeatedly mutilated himself, spilling more and more of his own blood in an attempt to uncover deeper and deeper secrets until he eventually bled himself out and died.

After viewing this scene, the narrator realizes that he “would never be rid of the horrible Plomb” because “he had broken through all the mirrors, projected himself into the eternity beyond them” (Grimscribe 308). Rather than disenchanting Plomb, the narrator inadvertently reenchants himself, as Plomb’s final, rapturous, suicidal enchantment forces him to acknowledge that there is no end to the infinite possible visions or sensations one might encounter in a single drop of blood. But because the narrator is anhedonic, the infinity contained inside him can never be a source of wonder; what may appear majestic and enchanting to another person, perhaps even restoring for a time their ability to view their world with a sense of wonder becomes, for this anhedonic subject, twisted into a source of endless, abject horror.

For the narrator, this horror manifests as a condition in which he is forced “to suffer over and over the same nightmare” (Grimscribe 306) in which Plomb continuously appears as “a man-shaped shadow” and in which “the only thing of color” in the “grayish surroundings” is “what appeared to be a mutilated carcass, something of a terrible rawness, a torn and flayed thing whose every laceration could be seen with microscopic precision” (Grimscribe 305). This “mutilated carcass” does not represent, as it

might in a story by, for instance, Edgar Allan Poe, any kind of guilt at having instigated Plomb's descent into madness which culminated in his suicide. Guilt is not an emotion that typically appears in Ligotti's fictions. Rather, the horror stems from the fact that, for the narrator, "the spectacles now seemed to be part of my flesh" (Grimscribe 305). Like Plomb, he cannot unsee what Plomb has seen- his embodied existence will be permanently haunted by this knowledge of the infinite complexity that lies within each atom of his body, an endless series of mysteries which he has no reason to try and solve because doing so will only reveal further and further mysteries, thus miring his entire life in an endless cycle of nauseating futility. But he can no longer ignore this futility and cannot obtain a reprieve from it even in his sleep, as this haunting will penetrate even his dreams. He is thus forced to become exactly the kind of "seeker" he pitied at the beginning of the story, but with the revised imperative "to seek nothing but a way to kill the dream, to expose all its secrets and reduce it to fragments that can be forgotten" (Grimscribe 306). Because the intensification of emotions, for the anhedonic subject, can only ever be a painful experience, the introduction of mystery produces, rather than wonder, only horror and anxiety. By the end of "The Spectacles in the Drawer," then, the narrator longs for nothing more than to return to the state of peaceful numbness within which his disenchantment had allowed him to dwell at the onset of the story.

The narrator's traumatic response to his own re-enchantment invites a reexamination of some widely held assumptions about what proper treatment for anhedonia should look like. Ligotti's work demonstrates the possibility that curative mental health frameworks may not be appropriate, may in fact even be harmful, for some mentally ill persons. In this way, these works invite an interrogation of such frameworks, even perhaps in a slightly different way and from a slightly different perspective than the critiques of "cure" which emerge in disability studies, and which therefore may augment those critiques in powerful ways. Before delving more deeply into how Ligotti's work does this, however, it will be helpful to provide a (brief) explanation of the prominent disability studies perspective on cure, or at least

one such prominent perspective. To that end, I point to the work of Eli Clare, who has described cure as an ideological, and, crucially, also biopolitical, impetus which “aims to make us as normal and natural as possible” by pushing “normalweight, normalwalking, normal ways of thinking, feeling, and communicating as if normal were a goal to achieve and maintain” (Clare 173). Clare’s critique here has predominantly ideological aims, to expose the normativizing agenda underpinning dominant curative frameworks that seek to enthrone certain types of biophysiological norms as social ideals and to produce institutions that not only facilitate, but also enforce, economically, culturally, and socio-politically, the transformation of body-minds into these normative states.

Perhaps the central aim of Clare’s critique of “cure,” then, is to expose the eugenic implications of this normativizing agenda, which insidiously naturalizes normative body-minds by attaching a strictly delimited temporality to disability which “grounds itself in an original state of being, relying on a belief that what existed before is superior to what exists currently” and “seeks to return what is damaged to that former state of being” (Clare 15). This idea of an original, natural state of normative ability conjures up the trope of disability as a loss or a lack. According to this trope, disability represents a reduction from a state of wholeness to a ruptured state of disability, rendering the disabled body-mind less than what it once was, less than what it could and should be. It matters not whether the body-mind in question was born with a disability or underwent a change that caused a disability to occur; cure always frames disability as a signifier which refers to a normative, non-disabled, and hence presumably superior and more natural, body-mind as the ideal form from which the disabled body-mind deviates. The idea, here, is that the long-term biopolitical project of the ideology of cure is to create a society in which such abnormal, disabled body-minds no longer exist. This would presumably happen through medical interventions. But it might also happen through more violent means, such as genetic engineering, in the event that such medical interventions fail to work. And they inevitably will fail if their focus is on normativization rather than something more benevolent like harm reduction or other interventions that

seek to reduce the level of debilitation caused by disabilities, to ensure that disabled persons might live their everyday lives in a way that as closely as possible resembles the way they themselves would so choose to live them.

“The Spectacles in the Drawer” addresses the problems posed by curative frameworks from a slightly different angle. Of particular concern in the context of that story is this notion of “normal ways of thinking, feeling, and communicating” that Clare suggests underpins curative frameworks with mental health-related objectives. There are, in therapeutic settings, especially those involving cognitive-behavioral therapy, certain tropes relating to self-care, in terms of both the type of thinking and the type of behavior a patient should practice. Chief among these is the idea of “mindfulness.” Mindfulness exercises focus on making oneself present in the place and time that one is, which means being aware, even hyper-aware, of one’s physical surroundings and one’s immediate sensory experiences. This often entails such things as going outside for a walk and paying attention to the environs, taking care to notice the colors, sounds, and smells of the various phenomena which populate those environs: plant-life, architecture, the humming of birds, etc. The unstated implication here is that these things are pleasing in some objective sense, such that any person will inevitably perceive them as pleasing if only they can be conditioned to view them in the proper way. Other times, mindfulness may entail a form of meditation in which one focuses on specific aspects of one’s own body, such as one’s breath, one’s heartbeat or the feeling of one’s shoes on one’s feet. There are, of course, many, many other types of mindfulness exercises. But in each case, the objective is to ground oneself in the present moment, in one’s body, in one’s environment, and in one’s own life by being more attentive.

The combination of anhedonia and anxiety represented in “The Spectacles in the Drawer” presents a potential aporia in the structures of mental health care that encourage such grounding and attentiveness. For the narrator of that story, the heightening of his sensory awareness leads only to a nauseating recognition, and subsequent fixation upon, the infinite depth of detail inherent in every

physical phenomenon, all of which only serve to push him further into the depths of the hallucinatory nightmare which has come to structure not only his dreams but also his waking life. The specific details upon which his senses focus are traumatizing ones, most notably “every laceration” on the “mutilated corpse” which “could now be seen in microscopic precision” in his endlessly recurring nightmare. But even if the specific details were not in and of themselves traumatizing, the sheer depth of that detail, regardless of the specificity of such details, is itself traumatizing for this narrator.

What is particularly important to note here is that the specific phenomenon which initially triggers the narrator’s mental breakdown and descent into a living nightmare of hallucinatory madness is one which is generally put forth as evidence of the inherent beauty and wonder of life. When going for a mindful walk, for example, paying closer attention to the color and intricate detail, not to mention the scent, of the flowers one passes by is supposed to instill one with a sense of calm which might therefore alleviate the intense anxiety they are experiencing. One can substitute any other ostensibly “calming” object for “flower” here- I merely use the flower as an example. The more details of the flower one notices, the more beautiful the flower becomes, and the greater the calming effect this sensory experience will have, as one’s attention is diverted from feelings of anxiety toward the details of the flower. The idea that someone may find these details not only not beautiful, but actively sickening and anxiety-inducing is an idea that the hegemonic structures of mental health care can only accommodate by identifying it as a thought error that must be corrected, the product of a sick mind that must be cured. From that perspective, the only possible reason why a person might have an unpleasant affective response to these flowers is that they have been conditioned to perceive the flowers in that way by their depression, or their negative outlook on life, or some other symptom of mental illness. The notion that this negative affective orientation toward flowers might be a foundational affect rather than merely a symptom of a disease, that this person may in fact metabolize reality differently because they just so happen to think and feel in ways that differ from the ways that neurotypical people think and feel, is

simply outside the scope of what these structures of care can afford to acknowledge. These structures of care can accommodate only a certain amount of flexibility, beyond which the demand for flexibility is offset onto the patient. It is the patient's responsibility to counteract their negative mental conditioning and train themselves to think about, and thus to perceive, these flowers in a different, more positive and hence "healthier" way. The proposed treatment for such a person would then be to repeat this unpleasant and possibly even traumatizing encounter over and over again until they have "corrected" their affective orientation toward the world. For someone in the position of the narrator in "The Spectacles in the Drawer," such a treatment regimen can only entail forcing themselves to endure anxiety-inducing experiences that bring them to the verge of outright panic, and thus only compound the affective and emotional crises these treatments aim to resolve.

The aporia here stems from the fact that for any given phenomenon, there are people who, by virtue of their affect, their demeanor, their personality, their way of thinking, etc., will have diametrically opposed emotional responses to that phenomenon. An experience or form of treatment that may work wonders for the mental and emotional health of one person may actively exacerbate another person's mental illness, even when both persons have been diagnosed with the same mental illness. These different responses may have to do with a person's specific personality, temperament, demeanor, personal preferences, or overall worldview. I must question the usefulness of any discursive framework that asks us to accept the idea that those worldviews, preferences, or temperaments are inherently "wrong" and must therefore be altered to fit the artificial constraints of whatever curative regimen is currently most prevalent in clinical settings. Rather, these differences demonstrate a need to reevaluate the types of narratives that circulate, both within and outside of clinical contexts, about what anhedonia is, what causes it, and how, if at all, one should attempt to combat it. If such a thing is to be done, it will be necessary to recognize that certain thoughts and feelings that are interpreted solely as symptoms of

mental illness may actually be an integral aspect not only of a person's affective orientation toward the world but perhaps also of a broader metaphysical model that structures a person's perception of reality.

II.

In the case of Thomas Ligotti, it is difficult to completely separate the emotions and affects portrayed in his fictions from the overarching philosophical and metaphysical worldview these fictions present, one characterized by a resolute cosmic pessimism and nihilism which Ligotti expresses directly in his own philosophical treatise: *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race: A Contrivance of Horror*. Ligotti's argument in that book takes as its starting point Peter Wessel Zapffe's assertion that consciousness is essentially maladaptive: "a breach in the very unity of life" (Zapffe 2) which produces a "cosmic panic" in response to "the tragedy of a species becoming unfit for life by overevolving one ability" (Zapffe 4). Zapffe's core argument, briefly, is that what consciousness enables humans to do is to comprehend the workings of their body-mind at a mechanical level in just enough detail to do two things. The first: to become cognizant of their mortality and thus spend their entire lives dreading their inevitable death. The second: to recognize themselves as biological puppets whose thoughts, actions, and feelings are determined by a combination of genetics and environmental influences that are themselves subject to rigid natural laws that serve no purpose beyond reproducing themselves and which humans have no capacity to resist in any way other than suicide. Zapffe suggests that this self-knowledge is "purchased with his harmony of soul, his innocence, his inner peace in life's embrace" (Zapffe 2). Upon attaining consciousness, humanity moved from a harmonious state, in which they lacked the capacity to desire anything more than to follow their biological imperatives and participate in this cycle of pointless reproduction, to a state in which that cycle began to feel like a kind of prison. This shift was caused by their newfound (and, according to Zapffe, fundamentally irrational) need to attach meaning and purpose to activities that were limited by the parameters of those imperatives and which therefore left people incapable of reaching beyond this cycle to find the sense of purpose their

consciousness craved. Consciousness, therefore, makes existence seem claustrophobic; the conscious subject feels trapped within their own body and their own mind, constrained by the biological imperatives that structure that body and mind.

All of this leads Ligotti to believe that consciousness is “a seditious agent working against us” to such an extent that “we need to hamper our consciousness for all we are worth, or it will impose upon us a too clear *vision* of what we do not want to see” (*Conspiracy Against the Human Race* 27). In other words, life becomes tolerable only by means of a strict mental discipline that prevents the fundamental truths Zapffe points out from penetrating into the realm of one’s everyday conscious existence. This is, for Ligotti, the titular conspiracy against the human race: the collective self-delusion through which “organisms with a nimble intellect that can deceive themselves “for their own good”” (*Conspiracy Against the Human Race* 42) prevent themselves from recognizing the pointless tragedy of their existence and continue “living with the pretense that being alive is all right” (*Conspiracy Against the Human Race* 49). The problem with this, for Ligotti, is that life is not “all right.” Life, he suggests, entails “decades of waking up on time, then trudging through another round of moods, sensations, thoughts, cravings—the complete gamut of agitations—and finally flopping into bed to sweat in the pitch of dead sleep or simmer in the phantasmagorias that molest our dreaming minds” (*Conspiracy Against the Human Race* 228). For Ligotti, there is nothing “all right” about any of that. A world like this, in Ligotti’s view, is “a world that is MALIGNANTLY USELESS” (*Conspiracy Against the Human Race* 76). His insistence on attaching the word “malignantly” to the well-worn argument that life is meaningless or useless is what differentiates Ligotti’s rendition of this sort of cosmic pessimism from that of people like Albert Camus or Jean-Paul Sartre, figures he lambasts as “heroic pessimists” (*Conspiracy Against the Human Race* 47), with the word “pessimists” in scare-quotes. He shows a particular disdain for Camus’s injunction that we “think of Sisyphus as happy,” that we react to the absurdity of existence by imposing our own meaning on it through some combination of mental gymnastics and cognitive dissonance. This

injunction to heroically stand against the meaninglessness of existence by fabricating one's own meaning and adhering to that meaning for the duration of one's lifetime is, for Ligotti, a kind of optimism masquerading as pessimism. More damningly, it is a form of gas-lighting that emotionally and intellectually blackmails people into brute-forcing themselves to pretend that the intolerable circumstances of their existence are "all right."

This is where the anhedonia comes in. For the majority of people, especially those who are predisposed to enjoy their lives or who "like" being alive, responding to cosmic pessimism with that sort of heroism may not be too onerous or painful a burden to carry. Of those, however, who do not like living, such as anhedonic persons who are incapable of "liking" or "enjoying" anything, Camus is asking too much. At the most basic level, he is asking them not only to subject themselves voluntarily to the "malignant" force Ligotti describes, but to pretend to enjoy it as well. Keeping up this charade is both mentally and emotionally exhausting, and moreover forces the anhedonic individual to maintain a false persona just to get through the day-to-day minutia of social and economic life. The greatest crime in all of this, for Ligotti, is that it prevents people from recognizing the harm they do by engaging in procreation. Ligotti resides firmly in the anti-natalist camp, regarding procreation as an "egoistic compulsion to send emissaries into the future who will certify that their makers once lived and still live" (*Conspiracy Against the Human Race* 178). By engaging in this compulsion, these optimistic procreators rip unborn children "from the radiant mist of their nonexistence" (*Conspiracy Against the Race* 46) without their consent, since they are incapable of consent, and force them not only to endure the abject suffering that characterizes the bulk of human existence, but to live with the persistent fear of their own mortality and eventually to suffer the agony of death.

To be clear, it is not my intention in this chapter to argue for or against the merits of anti-natalism, nor do I seek to affirm or deny the truth or validity of Ligotti's particular enunciation of cosmic pessimism. I have rehashed a few key aspects of his argument here only for the sake of providing insight

into his intellectual worldview. This worldview is incredibly important to him, pervading his fictional works to such an extent that it is almost impossible to account for the *intention* behind these works without this intellectual context. In some cases, this influence is quite overt and straightforward, as in the story "The Clown Puppet." This story revolves around a man who has, at certain moments in his life, experienced what he calls "*visits*" from a sentient clown puppet with "eyes that did not seem able to fix or focus themselves upon anything but only gazed with an unchanging expression of dreamy malignance, an utterly nonsensical expression of stupefied viciousness and cruelty" (Teatro Grottesco 57). During these visits, the puppet simply engages in mundane tasks, such as filling a prescription, and then departs.

The symbolism here is not particularly subtle: when the narrator stares into the eyes of this puppet, he is staring into the void, forced to confront and acknowledge the meaninglessness of his existence in a manner which, to him, seems excessively vicious and cruel. Jason Marc Harris has suggested that "the clown in Ligotti is not simply a marker of reversals, disorder, and chaos in the universe but rather exemplifies the fragmenting dynamic of Ligotti's misanthropic metaphysics where entropic madness disintegrates rational identity" (Harris 1250). The figure of the clown, a recurrent motif throughout Ligotti's fictions, appears in these stories in order to make a mockery of the characters' attempts to make sense of the chaotic maelstrom of images and occurrences they encounter and distill them into a coherent form that might confer upon them, and by extension upon the characters' lives, some semblance of narrative meaning. Where some people might conjure and project out into the world some reified confirmation of the purposefulness of their lives, of the validity of their identities, and then encounter it there as if it were an external object that had existed there all along, the narrator of Ligotti's story sees only this malevolent clown puppet. Of course, the story is not attempting to suggest that there is anything triumphant or revelatory about seeing a clown puppet instead of the external manifestation of one's purpose in life. Rather, the clown puppet represents the fundamentally malignant

nature of the meaningless existence the narrator is forced to endure, reminding him that “every place I had ever been in my life was only a place for puppet nonsense” (Teatro Grottesco 64). The narrator initially believes that these visits are a unique aspect of his own existence which, therefore, make his existence unique, until he finds out that the manager of the medicine shop at which he works also receives such visits. At that point, he begins to wonder “how many others there were who might say that their existence consisted of nothing but the most outrageous nonsense, a nonsense that had nothing unique about it at all and that had nothing behind it or beyond it except more and more nonsense” (Teatro Grottesco 63). Thus, the narrator is condemned to endure an existence that is not only “malignantly useless,” but malignantly useless in exactly the same way that every other person’s existence is malignantly useless and thus entirely redundant.

This story essentially makes the same point as *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, often even using the same language, but no matter how overt or obvious the metaphor of the clown puppet is, its presence, and most importantly the way Ligotti *describes* its presence, causes the expression of this idea to produce a different effect upon the reader than the same point made in a philosophical treatise. Ligotti is keenly aware of the necessity of translating abstract ideas into concrete experiences in order to make them communicable to others. He confesses in *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* that “to express with any adequacy a sense of the uselessness of everything, a nonlinguistic modality would be needed, some effusion out of a dream that amalgamated every gradation of the useless and wordlessly transmitted to us the inanity of existence under any possible conditions” (Conspiracy Against the Human Race 76). This is what Ligotti’s fictional works manage to do. That is to say, Ligotti’s fictional oeuvre creates a form of expression that can communicate an experience or phenomenon, such as anhedonia, that cannot be adequately articulated through direct language. With that objective in mind, the narratives of his stories, and the themes expressed within those narratives, are of perhaps less importance than the mood and the atmosphere these stories create. The suffocating atmosphere of

Ligotti's stories are very much like "some effusion out of a dream," jettisoning any conventional notions of causality in order to allow all the irrational dream matter that lies dormant in the subconscious mind to come to the surface and attain a horrifying, irrepressible physicality. That is why his stories are populated with puppets and clowns, as well as dark, ethereal forms upon which the eye cannot properly focus, and which therefore remain perpetually amorphous. The claustrophobic nature of existence becomes much more tangible when presented in the form of an encounter with a malevolent clown puppet in a confined space within which it is impossible not to acknowledge the clown puppet's presence and also impossible to escape the interaction. One must simply allow the encounter to run its course and endure whatever claustrophobia and existential horror it produces. This type of discomfiting, uncanny, claustrophobic experience is what Thomas Ligotti's fictions can bring to the table as a way of augmenting clinical descriptions of anhedonia, which lack precisely this sort of experiential tangibility. That is to say, Ligotti's stories communicate the experience of anhedonia in a legible way not by explaining what anhedonia is, as a patient might explain it to a psychotherapist, but by immersing the reader in the body-mind-worlds of anhedonic subjects. The next section will examine how these stories produce this immersion through the creation of an oppressive, claustrophobic atmosphere that mirrors the anhedonic subject's affective experience of the physical world.

III.

In order to create a persistently anhedonic atmosphere, Ligotti frequently returns to certain types of settings: dilapidated shacks, derelict factories, abandoned movie theaters, deserted streets in the middle of the night, and the back-rooms of cluttered shops in ghost-towns wherein nothing else seems to be open and no one seems to be living. Of course, if the atmospheric nature of Ligotti's fiction does in fact function as a "nonlinguistic modality" for expressing certain ways of feeling and ways of being that are nearly impossible to convey in an expository sense, then it will of course be quite difficult to define exactly what the term "atmosphere" even means in this context. It is related, though not

equivalent, to the concept of “tone” in literature as that concept is elaborated by Sianne Ngai. Ngai describes tone as “a global and hyper-relational concept of feeling that encompasses attitude: a literary text’s affective bearing, orientation, or “set toward” its audience and world” (Ngai 43). As Ngai suggests, affect is an integral aspect of literary tone, but what is particularly enlightening about her definition of tone here is the idea that it is a “global” concept that is simultaneously “set toward” both its “audience” and its “world.” This is an apt description of what atmosphere does in Ligotti’s fictions. Whatever type of affect is made manifest by these clowns, abandoned buildings, and amorphous shadows is so pervasive that it is expressed in each and every phenomenon presented in these stories, saturating every aspect of the setting and the plot, and enveloping the characters and even the reader within its milieu. The atmosphere in these fictions is, therefore, all-encompassing in a way that transcends and perhaps even erodes the boundary between the world portrayed in these texts and the world the “audience” encounters outside the text.

This function of atmosphere as an oppressive milieu that structures the affective orientation of the text, toward both the world it depicts (along with the entities that populate that world) and its audience, is particularly evident in “The Bungalow House.” That story begins with the narrator describing his discovery of “a series of tape-recorded dream monologues by an unknown artist (Teatro Grottesco 203) which contain nothing but the description of the interior of a decrepit bungalow house. These tapes are perhaps one of the most overt representations in Ligotti’s fictional oeuvre of “some effusion out of a dream,” as they offer literally nothing but a stream-of-consciousness expression of dream phenomena, completely devoid of narrative or even context. The first few pages of the story are preoccupied primarily with this tape-recorded monologue, which generally goes like this:

The moonlight fell upon the lampshades without shining through them, so I could see that none of the lamps was equipped with a lightbulb, and each time I turned the switch of a floor lamp or a table lamp or one of the tiny lamps on the mantel, nothing changed

in the dark living room of the bungalow house: the moonlight shone through the dusty blinds and revealed the bodies of insects and other vermin on the pale carpet (Teatro Grottesco 203).

Certain images and motifs recur multiple times throughout the monologue: “the moonlight through the dusty blinds, the bodies on the carpet, the lamps without any lightbulbs” (Ligotti 204). The only narrative that can be gleaned from these tapes is this constellation of images and the atmosphere they evoke. In this sense, there is no distinction between plot and atmosphere in “The Bungalow House,” either on the tape or in the story Ligotti has written. That is to say, the atmosphere, indeed the very idea of “atmosphere,” is the subject of both the tapes and the story itself.

The narrator of the story, a librarian who discovers these dream-monologue audio-tapes at a hole-in-the-wall art gallery he visits during his lunch breaks, is, like the voice on the tapes, singularly preoccupied with the atmosphere of this bungalow house. He notes that “by the time the tape had ended I was in another world – that is, the world of the infested bungalow house, with all its dreamlike crumminess and foul charms” (Teatro Grottesco 207). Yet this narrator also makes a point to describe his surroundings in the “real” world, such as the art gallery in which he discovers these tapes: “the display window was so filmy that someone passing by could barely make out the paintings and sculptures behind it (the same ones year after year)” such that “from the street outside, this tiny front window presented the most desolate hallucination of bland colors and shapeless forms” (Teatro Grottesco 205). The atmosphere of the art gallery mirrors the atmosphere of the tapes- the same dinginess and desolateness pervades both of them. The narrator himself articulates these similarities explicitly, observing that: “much of my commute from my home to the library, and back home again, took me past numerous streets lined from end to end with desolate-looking houses, any of which might have been the inspiration for the

bungalow house audiotape" (Teatro Grottesco 209). The distinction between the tapes and the "real" world collapses- a singular atmosphere floats across both of them, enveloping the narrator and the reader within it.

It is impossible to say whether this is the actual state of the environment the narrator inhabits, or a subjective impression of that environment refracted through the narrator's own affective disposition, which may itself have been influenced by the tapes. The ambiguity here produces an affinity between the "atmosphere" of the text and the "mood" of the story as expressed by the narrator. Martin Heidegger has suggested that "mood" is something that "assails us," and which "comes neither from 'outside' nor from 'inside', but arises out of Being-in-the-world, as a way of such Being" (Heidegger 176). While Heidegger's more general interventions into ontology are well outside the scope of the present argument, this idea of mood as something that "assails us" is useful for understanding the function of mood in Thomas Ligotti's writings and its relation to atmosphere. To begin with, it identifies mood as a violent phenomenon, in which mood aggressively inflicts itself upon a person against their will, often by surprise. Mood is, after all, in large part an affective phenomenon, and affect often manifests as a violent experience, being an involuntary physiological response to some stimulus, which can be uncomfortable, inconvenient, embarrassing, or even painful.

The other aspect of Heidegger's definition of mood that is informative vis a vis its relation to the function of atmosphere in Ligotti's stories is that mood is derived neither from a person's interiority nor from external, environmental factors, but is instead simply immanent to the condition of a subject existing in a particular space in a particular time, and in a particular way. Heidegger suggests that "the mood has already disclosed, in every case, Being-in-the-world as a whole, and makes it possible first of all to direct oneself towards something" (Heidegger 176). That is to say, mood is not a state of mind but a state of being, flowing through not only

the mind, but through the body as well and, moreover, through the space that body presently inhabits at the exact moment when that body inhabits it. It is the prefigured condition of the body-mind-world that inscribes the body-mind's encounters with its world and with phenomena within that world. In that sense, mood is reducible neither to affect nor emotion, nor even a confluence between the two. Rather, mood is the set of conditions that determine a person's affective, emotional, and even physiological response to any given situation. These conditions are multifarious, but include, among other things, the social organization and physical construction of a particular space which determine the ways that space responds to the body-mind in question. This is why, for example, one can utter phrases such as "the mood in this house has been rather tense lately" (one might also use the word "atmosphere" in place of mood in that sentence to convey the same idea). But these conditions also include the general disposition of the person encountering that space, which is itself determined by a series of factors, such as the person's intellectual/moral worldview and the specific sequence of experiences and circumstances (which could also include neurological, psychological, and physiological illnesses) leading up to this encounter. In short, mood is the system of relations, both real and imagined, between a person's body, mind, and world (including both the physical and social world) which therefore enframe that person's subjective experience and perception of reality. As such, mood delimits the range of thoughts, feelings, and actions that a person might think, feel, or perform within the context of that reality.

This capacity to delimit thought, feeling, and action makes mood a particularly useful term for explaining why the experience of anhedonia, which is a subjective mental experience, might best be elucidated through atmosphere, as it is in Ligotti's stories. In "The Bungalow House," for instance, *all* houses resemble the "infested bungalow house" on the audiotapes, to such an extent that the narrator speculates that any one of them could actually be that same

bungalow house. Even the description of the art gallery mirrors that of the bungalow house. In fact, all spaces described in the story appear to be quite similar to the bungalow house. With this in mind, the term one might use to describe the mood or atmosphere of “The Bungalow House” is “the bungalow house.” At first glance, this may seem to be a tautological statement. But within the context of this story, “the bungalow house” refers not to a specific location or object, but rather to a particular type of atmosphere that cannot easily be reduced to a list of descriptive characteristics, and which is thus best identified as “the bungalow house” because it can only be expressed as the totality which emerges from the descriptions on the audiotape. Both the voice on the tape and the narrator of the story describe the atmosphere in which they are mired as “the infinite terror and dreariness of an infested bungalow house” (Teatro Grottesco 204). The persistent association of the phrase “bungalow house” with these types of affects, and also with the recurrent motifs of the carpet littered with insect bodies and the dark room in which the lamps have no lightbulbs, allows the “bungalow house” to function as a master signifier that communicates not only these affects and impressions, but also the condition of being enveloped within the atmosphere produced by these affects and impressions and the omnipresent dread that this envelopment evokes. The bungalow house is thus a kind of spatiotemporal affective immanence that delimits both the types of encounters a body-mind might have within the world of this story and the parameters within which that body-mind will be able to perceive and interpret these encounters.

The function of atmosphere in “The Bungalow House” is thus to align the audience’s orientation toward the world depicted in the text with that of the narrator, who experiences all spaces in exactly this way, by limiting the spectrum of emotional and affective responses the audience can have to those available to a person with anhedonia. In other words, the story generates an anhedonic atmosphere by restricting the parameters within which spaces and

objects in the story are described to those which emphasize their unpleasant features, such as their worn-down decrepitude or the fact that they are in a state of decay. In doing so, the atmosphere is able to communicate, in a tangible way, the notion that the affective orientation of many (though not necessarily all) persons with anhedonia toward those phenomena which psycho-normative people may find appealing, such as libraries, art galleries, and residential neighborhoods, approximates the affective response a psycho-normative person might experience should they find themselves in a decaying, rat-infested bungalow house.

In this sense, the bungalow house is a “global and hyper-relational concept” of the type Ngai describes in her definition of tone. But the resonance between Ngai’s idea of “tonality” and what I call “atmosphere” in Ligotti’s fictions is not limited to the fact that both invoke affect in this global and hyper-relational manner. Also of particular relevance is what Ngai calls the “unfeltness” of affect in literary works. She argues that “tone is a feeling which is perceived rather than felt and whose very nonfeltness is perceived” (Ngai 76). Tone always conveys some kind of affect or, more accurately, establishes the notion that one is supposed to experience a certain kind of affective response to whatever idea, situation, or phenomenon is being represented. But it does not necessarily produce that affective response in the reader as a genuinely felt feeling. As such, that feeling becomes conspicuous in its absence, to such an extent that its absence is disruptive of the general affective flow of conscious existence. This disruption also manifests in an affective way, which can cause one to question *why* that feeling remains unfelt, or possibly even cause anxiety in response to its absence.

While Ngai’s central argument is that *all* literary works possess this kind of felt unfeltness, “The Bungalow House” utilizes it to a very specific effect: to illustrate the way that the absence of certain feelings or sensations, namely pleasure and excitement, is itself a kind of feeling which produces profoundly disturbing effects upon the subject in whom such feelings are

absent. This tonal “unfeltness” of affect therefore has a very tangible presence in that story. The voice on the tape, in describing his sensory experience of the bungalow house, notes that “it was not the absence of sounds that I sensed, but the stifling of unnumerable sounds and even voices, the muffling of all the noises one might expect to hear in an old bungalow house in the dead of night, as well as countless other sounds and voices” (Ligotti 204). These sounds and voices are made noticeable, a phenomenon worthy of attention, only in the context of being stifled. They materialize as violently suppressed sounds and voices; they are suppressed in the very moment that they come into existence. In that sense, they have no existence prior to their suppression. These sounds, which are, after all, sensory experiences, are perceived specifically as something which cannot be heard. Yet the tape-recorded voice’s inability to hear them is precisely what makes them worthy of notice for him. His suggestion that these sounds and voices are “noises one might expect to hear” implies that it is not the sounds and voices themselves that disturb him but rather the fact that he cannot hear them. Furthermore, like all the other phenomena present in the bungalow house, this muffling of sounds encompasses the body-mind of the speaker as well, who notes that “in the moonlight that shone through the blinds of that bungalow house I was as still and as silent as everything else” (Ligotti 204). It is thus through a kind of “felt unfeltness” that the voice on the tape renders legible the feeling of not being able to feel something, which is a core aspect of the affective experience of anhedonia. Sensations like joy or pleasure or any other sensation to which anhedonia prohibits access are not merely absent, but instead maintain a relentlessly present absence, an absence of feeling which is, paradoxically, experienced as an intensely visceral feeling.

It is important to note, once again, that it is not true that a person with anhedonia cannot feel *anything*, but rather only that they cannot feel *certain things*, such as joy and pleasure. Numbness is a feeling that is much easier to communicate or represent aesthetically

than the more discriminate unfeltness of anhedonia. The narrator of “The Bungalow House” feels a strong sense of affinity with the speaker on the tapes for exactly this reason. It is important to emphasize that the bleak atmosphere of the bungalow house, replete with these violently suppressed sensory experiences, is perceived by the narrator not as something to be afraid of or to avoid, but rather as something that is eminently *desirable*. The narrator emphasizes “the satisfaction I felt at hearing that monotonal and somewhat distorted voice speaking so intimately of scenes and sensations that perfectly echoed certain aspects of my own deepest nature” (Teatro Grottesco 214). There are a number of things in this statement on the part of the narrator that indicate an anhedonic affective orientation toward the world. First, the fact that the narrator finds the “monotonal” quality of the voice appealing indicates that part of what draws him to these tapes is, in fact, the lack of enthusiasm, indeed the lack of affective expressiveness in general, in the tone the voice employs in its description of his experience in this bungalow house.

Second, there is the fact that these “sensations” and “scenes” make up the fabric of the narrator’s “deepest nature.” This begs the question: how could the description of a dark, dank, rotting bungalow house littered with insect bodies somehow directly represent a person’s deepest nature? After all, there is no suggestion that these images and impressions are meant to be taken metaphorically, as symbolic representations of some more generic kind of affect or emotion. Instead, the appeal of the tapes comes down once again to the question of tone, of atmosphere, of the pairing of these specific scenes with these specific sensations, and the way these pairings are enunciated. The narrator asserts that “I wanted to believe that this artist had escaped the dreams and demons of all *sentiment* in order to explore the foul and crummy delights of a universe where everything had been reduced to three stark principles: first, that there was nowhere for you to go; second, that there was nothing for you to do; and third, that

there was no one for you to know” (Teatro Grottesco 214). The italicization of the word sentiment here reveals much, not only about the narrator’s state of mind but also about the ways he has rationalized his state of mind. It can be inferred from the context that “escaping” sentiment means recognizing the exclusively “foul and crummy” nature of reality, i.e. ridding oneself of the pleasant emotions and object attachments associated with sentiment. Those emotions and attachments merely lead a person to a misguided admiration of certain aspects of the world around them. And so, by framing the lack of sentiment as an “escape,” the narrator can reframe his inability to recognize anything other than foulness and crumminess in the world around him as the achievement of some higher state of consciousness in which he refuses to be deluded by sentiment. From his perspective, the world is, in actuality, nothing more than an infested bungalow house, and the voice on the tapes has, like the narrator, managed to perceive and accurately convey this reality, this real, actual state of things.

The most important part of the narrator’s claim about sentiment, however, is his elucidation of the three “stark principles” that define what he believes is his worldview: that there is nowhere to go, nothing to do, and no one to know. The first two of these principles fall very much in line with his notion of escaping from sentiment, but the third principle suggests something much more complex. There is an obvious irony in the satisfaction, which he himself acknowledges, that the narrator feels at having finally encountered another person who feels the way he does, who recognizes that there is no one else for one to know, and that their agreement on this point makes the narrator feel as though he has finally been understood, or “known,” by another person. This is, in essence, a very sentimental thought, underwritten by a very sentimental longing for comradeship. Indeed, the narrator states that “for as long as I can remember...I have had an intense and highly aesthetic perception of what I call *the icy bleakness of things*” while “at the same time I have felt a great loneliness in this perception” (Teatro

Grottesco 221). The phrase “the icy bleakness of things,” a phrase which recurs multiple times throughout the story, always italicized to accentuate the importance the narrator places upon it, seems to be a rather abstract, almost metaphysical concept, difficult to pin down with a concrete definition. Yet it always appears in reference to the narrator’s deeply held, and more importantly deeply *felt*, worldview. This is precisely why the tapes have such a profound effect on the narrator: they render legible, in a vivid, concrete, tangible form, an idea that he has intuitively and viscerally understood to be the ultimate truth of his existence but that he has hitherto had trouble articulating in a concrete way, such that he has always had to resort to this abstract phrase: “the icy bleakness of things,” the connotation of which no one else ever seems to understand. That being said, this phrase, no matter how abstract it may be, has clear anhedonic undertones: the icy nature of the bleakness of things freezes these things in that state of bleakness, because the narrator’s anhedonia prevents him from being able to muster the kinds of positive affects and emotions that would enable him to register these things in a way that would make them appear any less bleak.

There is once again a strong resonance here with Heidegger’s concept of mood. Heidegger argues that the act of being-in-the-world is, for that being, a process of “finding itself in the mood that it has” (Heidegger 174). Things which exist in the world are, for the narrator, always already in a state of icy bleakness, because that is the way that they are, to use Heidegger’s word, “disclosed” to the narrator by virtue of his mood. For the narrator of “The Bungalow House,” anhedonia is the affective situation which structures his body-mind-world and, as such, freezes all things in their state of icy bleakness. For a moment, however, this affective situation does not seem so frozen, so inevitable, as the tapes seem to offer the possibility that another person exists who can perceive this feeling, or more accurately absence of feeling, that the narrator has thus far been unable to express. As such, the tapes offer a

possible remedy to this loneliness, and more importantly to the “killing sadness” (Teatro Grottesco 221) this loneliness induces in the narrator. This fuels an obsessive quest on the part of the narrator to seek an introduction to the artist who made the tapes. The remainder of the story recounts his attempts to facilitate a meeting with that artist. Again, the irony here is palpable: the narrator seeks to know a person with whom he feels a sense of kinship on the basis of their shared understanding that knowing a person is impossible because there is no one to know. When he does eventually meet the author of the tapes, he becomes painfully aware of this paradox, and the futility of his quest becomes clear to him at last. This leads him to lash out at the artist, declaring that: “if your artworks had really evoked the true bleakness of things, then I would not have felt this need to know who you are, this killing sadness that there was actually someone who experienced the same sensations and mental states as I did and who could share them with me in the form of tape-recorded dream monologues” (Ligotti 221). In that moment, the narrator realizes that, merely by instilling in him the hope that he might find, somewhere out there in the world, someone to know, the artist has severed any possibility of such a connection by betraying the very principle on which that connection was to be founded in the first place.

As it turns out, there really is no one for the narrator to know, as the only person with whom he speaks during his meeting with this artist is “a figure in silhouette” (Ligotti 220) which may or may not be human and may or may not even be real. In the end, it turns out that the “artist” is none other than the narrator himself, who had recorded these dream-monologue audiotapes in the midst of a drunken stupor and provided them to the owner of the art gallery under the condition that the anonymity of the artist be preserved. At first glance, then, it would seem that his goal was to play a nasty and somewhat sadistic trick on himself. I interpret the story differently, however. According to my interpretation, the tapes, which the narrator had

mistakenly perceived as the totality of the art object with which he was engaging, were in fact only a part of a larger performance piece, the grand finale of which was this meeting with the artist. For it is that meeting that finally succeeds in communicating, in full force, the “true bleakness of things” by offering the narrator the hope that he may not be entirely alone in the world, that there may in fact be someone else for him to know, only to yank that hope away from him in the end. As a result, the narrator’s certainty regarding the “icy bleakness of things,” and the loneliness that certainty produces, is cemented permanently in his psyche as the structuring condition of his experience of the world. Indeed, the narrator admits after this encounter with the artist that “I know in a way I never knew before that there is nowhere for me to go, nothing for me to do, and no one for me to know” (Ligotti 225). Thus the “artist,” such as he is, succeeds in offering to the narrator, by means of this elaborate performance piece, definitive, concrete, and quite literal proof of the three principles which the narrator initially admired the audiotapes for conveying metaphorically. The narrator has nothing to do because all of his endeavors with this art piece accomplished nothing but to solidify even further the unpleasant existential position in which he already found himself. He has nowhere to go because he now knows for certain that every place in the world is just another rendition of an “infested bungalow house.” And there is no one for him to know, because the first person with whom he felt any semblance of an intimate connection turned out to be a drunken version of himself with whom he could never interact because they could never occupy the same place at the same time.

The result of all of this, for the narrator, is the permanent entrenchment within his body-mind-world of “this killing sadness that feels as if it will never leave me no matter where I go or what I do or whom I may even know” (Ligotti 226). This is the final line of the story, and it allows “The Bungalow House” to present a vision of anhedonia as something that is not merely a lack

or an absence of some other affect, but a wholly unique affective situation: a “killing sadness” that is “global and hyper-relational” in the way Ngai describes, in that it prefigures the manner in which the anhedonic is “set toward” all things that might be done, all places that might be gone to, and all persons that might be known. The “killing sadness” is precisely the embodiment of the “unfeltness” of the relation between the subject and those three crucial elements of existence. Because regardless of what a person may or may not be capable of feeling in an affective sense, those three elements *are* crucial aspects of human life, and so one cannot help but experience their absence as a kind of lifelessness. This is perhaps why so many characters in Ligotti’s stories seem oriented primarily toward death, or even toward nonexistence. And so, if one were to try and describe concretely the affect embodied in the relationality, or more accurately non-relationality, that defines the body-mind-world of the anhedonic subject, one need only consult the descriptions of the bungalow house in Ligotti’s story, with its lamps that don’t work, its carpet littered with writhing insect bodies, its muffled voices, and, above all, the unyielding silence and stillness of all who find themselves trapped within it. Because without the possibility of pleasure, or joy, or human connection, that kind of world becomes infinitely intolerable. But the fact that anhedonia presents an affective situation that is intolerable under current conditions creates an ethical imperative to imagine a way to make those conditions less intolerable. With that in mind, the final section of this chapter will explore the way that Ligotti’s stories might be used to imagine a starting-point for an anhedonic ethics.

IV.

If Ligotti’s fictions embody the experience of an anhedonia that makes mundane reality infinitely intolerable, then it would not quite be correct to interpret these fictions as strictly nihilistic. Though Ligotti himself might perhaps disagree, I would assert that, within the worlds he imagines throughout his fictions, the notion that existence is completely meaningless can

only possibly make sense in the most abstract sense. Because while it is certainly true that the events and phenomena that present themselves in Ligotti's stories persistently undermine and often even mock any attempt to instill a positive, self-validating purpose to human existence, these events and phenomena also produce a very real effect upon the characters who encounter them: that is, they render that existence intolerable. This points to one of the most crucial acts of violence that anhedonia, and indeed many other forms of mental illness, inflict upon the human psyche: they make it extremely difficult, and sometimes even impossible, for mentally ill and/or neurodivergent persons to respond to situations in a neutral manner- emotionally, mentally, or even physiologically. That is to say, background phenomena that many may find easy to ignore or perhaps even passively appreciate instead actively exacerbate an already oppressive atmosphere. It becomes much more difficult for a person to simply screen out any of this external sensory information when their core affective state, i.e. the affective state they occupy under the typical conditions of their everyday life, is already one of discomfort, anxiety, or even anguish. Furthermore, the number of things which might provoke worse anxiety or trigger a depressive episode (or a panic attack for that matter) is significantly higher for mentally ill and neurodivergent persons. That is why, for example, the thought of the infinite chemical complexity of a single droplet of blood is so triggering to the narrator of "The Spectacles in the Drawer," why it continues to haunt his dreams for the rest of his life.

It would therefore be a mistake to suppose that a person suffering from anhedonia does not care about anything. If anything, they care *more*, at least when it comes to mundane, everyday events and situations, because the potential negative stakes of those situations are much more drastic for them. What differentiates the affective state of an anhedonic person from that of a non-anhedonic person is not that the anhedonic cares less about things, but rather that their caring is not motivated by the pleasure principle or by the pursuit of self-fulfillment. They

lack access to the affective structures that make painful or unpleasant experiences tolerable by incorporating them into some larger metanarrative in which pain always promises some future reward (material, social, emotional, etc.). Feelings like fear, ennui, anxiety, and despair are intensified when there are no enjoyable or hopeful feelings to offset them. Rather than temporary unpleasant experiences which can be alleviated by the prospect that they will eventually be substituted by something better, these painful feelings become the permanent affective situation for the anhedonic subject. Nor is this “negative caring” a purely selfish affective orientation. Ligotti’s anti-natalism, for example, is the type of negatively oriented caring from which he himself cannot possibly derive any personal benefit because he has already been born, already become mired in the tragedy of existence. It is oriented exclusively toward others—a kind of ethical commitment, and an expression of solidarity, made by a depressed person toward those other depressed people who will inevitably follow in their wake.

Ligotti’s fictions uphold this ethical commitment by dwelling exclusively on negative experiences, without allowing them to be offset, clouded, or redeemed by considerations of positive experiences. That is to say, by creating a world in which only negative experiences are possible, in which potentially positive experiences are themselves twisted into aggressively unpleasant and often horrifying experiences, Ligotti’s fictions provide a space in which anhedonic experiences and perspectives can be evaluated on their own terms. These experiences are not persistently undermined by reference to joyful or life-affirming affective attachments that are outside the domain of the anhedonic experience and thus only serve to obscure or dilute the relentless unpleasantness of existence. It recalibrates the scale according to which suffering is evaluated, so that the only consideration is whether or not it is bearable, without allowing the calculation of bearableness to be counterbalanced by considerations of putatively positive outcomes resulting from that suffering. That is why Ligotti’s characters are

frequently drawn to worn-down, broken things and derelict, dilapidated spaces. This is a recurring trope throughout Ligotti's fictions. The narrator of "The Bungalow House," obviously, was obsessively fixated upon his decrepit, rat-infested bungalow house. The narrator of "The Spectacles in the Drawer," meanwhile, makes certain to note that he spends his leisure time perusing useless junk at antique stores, because, in his words, "what the mystical rarities of this earth were for Plomb, the most used-up and dismal commodities had become for me" (Grimscribe 303). This type of affective attachment abounds throughout Ligotti's fictional oeuvre.

Perhaps the most noteworthy example of this comes in Ligotti's novella *My Work is Not Yet Done*⁹, whose protagonist, Frank Dominio, whiles away his off-hours exploring abandoned warehouses. Frank offers arguably the most comprehensive explanation for this sort of affective attachment that can be found in Ligotti's work, stating: "I'm drawn to these old buildings and junk because (voice beginning to seethe)...because they take me into a world (the seething builds)...a world that is the exact opposite of the one (voice seething to a pitch)...the one I'm doomed by my own weakness and fear to live in (uncontrollable, meta-maniacal seething)...to live in during my weeks, my months, my years and years of work...work...work" (*My Work is Not Yet Done* 41-42). He expresses here the idea that his adherence to normative structures of daily life and work, indeed to the very idea of having a job and being a part of a society, is driven exclusively by negative emotions: "his own weakness and fear." In other words, these structures hold no real appeal to him, contribute nothing positive or meaningful to his life. He clings to

⁹ Though my reading of this novella does not focus on the plot, I am providing a brief summary of it here to provide necessary context. The plot of *My Work is Not Yet Done* is as follows: Frank Dominio is a disgruntled and alienated office worker who ends up being fired from the corporate middle-management position he has worked at diligently for years after being conspiratorially framed by his boss and coworkers for stealing office supplies, all of which was staged, apparently, solely to find a plausible excuse to fire him. In response, Frank buys a bunch of guns with the intention of committing an office shooting, only to get hit by a truck before he can carry out this plan. Rather than dying, however, he enters a liminal space between life and death wherein he is granted demonic powers which he proceeds to use to undertake his vengeance in the most brutal and violent ways he can imagine. In the end, he fails to complete his vengeance and takes his own life.

them solely out of fear of what may be in store for him should he disconnect himself from these structures. This is a perfect example of an anhedonic affective attachment. He persists in the drudgery of his everyday life as a dehumanized drone eking out his existence in a run-down apartment while working a degrading middle-management position at some nameless, faceless corporation, but without deriving from this anything like a life-sustaining hope that some future reward will make all this drudgery worth it. For him, there is nothing to look forward to aside from the continuation of such drudgery- it is merely fear-driven inertia that keeps him rooted to that life.

Frank's visits to abandoned warehouses, then, are his own personal form of escapism from these dehumanizing, life-draining anhedonic attachments. It is the same for the protagonists of "The Bungalow House" and "The Spectacles in the Drawer," for whom the audiotaped dream monologues and the junk stores, respectively, offer a similar form of escapism. In each case, the attributes of these spaces that make them appealing or liberating for these characters are exactly those attributes that psycho-normative people would likely find most off-putting and even repulsive: their uselessness, their brokenness, the fact that they are in a well-advanced state of decay. So why, then, do Ligotti's protagonists seek refuge in the very objects and spaces most people go out of their way to avoid and perhaps even put them out of their minds entirely?

Frank Dominio offers a plausible answer to this question when he describes his impression of the corporation he spends his days, and often his nights, working to support: "the company that employed me strived only to serve up the cheapest fare that its customers would tolerate, churn it out as fast as possible, and charge as much as they could get away with," adding that "if it were possible to do so, the company would sell what all businesses of its kind dream about selling, creating that which all our efforts were tacitly supposed to achieve: the

ultimate product – Nothing” (Ligotti 43). At its most basic level, such a statement could be interpreted as a rather straightforward, perhaps even overly simplistic, critique of the wastefulness of consumer capitalism: companies expend vast amounts of human labor and material resources to produce useless commodities for the sole purpose of generating abstract “value” which can be used for nothing other than generating greater quantities of the same kind of abstract value. All of which is undergirded by a perverse incentive to create as little as possible of anything that might be practically useful. But Frank Dominio has no interest in that kind of political or economic critique, nor does the novel attempt to frame his conflict with his corporate bosses in terms of class warfare. Instead, what Frank resents most about this situation is that he is being asked both to cultivate and to demonstrate a positive affective investment in this pointless, actively wasteful process, and is stigmatized for being unable to do so. This affective burden becomes especially onerous and self-destructive for affectively atypical people, such as the anhedonic Frank, who are unable to muster, much less to express, the kind of excitement and enthusiasm about the type of work he is involved in or, indeed, any type of work at all.

All of this is compounded by the endless accumulation of frustrations and indignities to which Frank is subjected on a daily basis in his workplace, in which his “competence had been questioned by buffoons,” his “messages ignored by morons,” and in which “he had been railroaded into the status of a non-person” (Ligotti 65) by bosses and coworkers whom he perceives as “a pack of beasts whose deeds were performed somewhat haphazardly, directed by a low animal instinct that sniffed out creatures who were not of their breed and marked them for a mindless savaging” (Ligotti 85). And indeed, their behaviors toward Frank would seem to reinforce this, as, in addition to summarily rejecting all of his ideas without even considering them (while simultaneously trying to steal those ideas from him), these bosses and coworkers deliberately mispronounce his name, calling him “Domino,” an act of performative bullying

designed to reinforce their in-group solidarity with one another by designating Frank as a kind of office outcast whose basic humanity they need not recognize. Frank's outsider status is reinforced by the rhyming names of his colleagues: "Barry, Harry, Perry, Mary, Kerrie, Sherry" (My Work is Not Yet Done 10). What they have in common, and what Frank lacks, is the type of positive affective attachment to the normative social milieu of the corporate workplace that allows them to fit in seamlessly with a type of environment in which people are expected to consistently display a "positive attitude" without being given any real, material reason to do so.

For Frank, then, the corporate workplace creates a suffocating, oppressive atmosphere due to its oversaturation with this kind of toxic positivity. This obligatory positivity is particularly alienating for a person with anhedonia, who has trouble generating, and sustaining, authentic versions of the emotions they are being asked to display on a near-constant basis. It is no wonder, then, that anhedonic subjects like Frank would seek refuge in places like abandoned warehouses and derelict factories. Those are the only kinds of spaces in which they can encounter a world that validates their affective disposition and allows them to rest a while in an emotional state which feels natural to them and does not actively grate against their psyche. The problem for Frank, of course, is that the only spaces that facilitate this kind of escapism are those places that have been abandoned by other humans and are thus devoid of the possibility of human contact. In other words, the only way for Frank to achieve even a momentary modicum of peace is to remove himself from society entirely.

The type of escapism provided by abandoned warehouses is, obviously, not infinitely sustainable. Eventually, a person with anhedonia must return to society, to work, to a situation that is fundamentally intolerable and which, due to their anhedonia, offers them no possibility of salvation in the form of future rewards which will make all of their suffering "worth it." In the end, the only solution to this dilemma that Frank Dominio can come up with is to commit

suicide. For him, this is the only possible way that he can become an agential subject, to both claim and deliver on the claim that: "I hereby refuse to be a swine living in a world of swine that was built by swine and belongs only to swine" (My Work is Not Yet Done 136). From this perspective, Frank's solution appears almost triumphant or, if it is not triumphant, it at least offers him a permanent escape from this "world of swine." He perceives suicide as a much more effective solution to his problems than murdering his enemies, not because he is opposed to violence, but because "by killing myself I felt that I would also be killing all of you, killing every bad body on this earth" (My Work is Not Yet Done 136). By destroying his own conscious existence, he prevents himself from ever having to encounter any of these people again, in a much more complete way than if he had merely murdered them. Even dead, these people would still eke out an existence in his memory, their "swinish" thoughts and actions permanently imprinted on his psyche. The only way to rid himself of them completely is to make "himself" cease to exist as a conscious being.

For those reading Ligotti's fictions as embodiments of the experience of anhedonia, with an eye toward understanding those experiences enough to engage in the type of imaginative work necessary to turn this world into a world more tolerable for anhedonic persons, it will not be sufficient to accept Frank Dominio's triumphalist interpretation of his suicide at face-value. Rather, we should understand that by committing suicide, Frank is not merely providing a final solution to his own personal problems but issuing a challenge to those who witness his suicidal act, whether they be clinical psychologists or laypeople who cohabit this world with anhedonic persons and sympathize with their plight. This is not a challenge to devise some miracle cure for his anhedonia that will allow him to see the world, and the other people in it, in a different light, and thereby somehow desire to live. And it is certainly not a challenge to devise some convoluted method of therapy that might convince anhedonics to like the things they do not like,

or to feel pleasure from the sources from which they do not derive pleasure, or even to find a way to increase their proximity to some other theoretical set of objects that might somehow evoke those positive emotions which have hitherto eluded them. Instead, it means expanding the parameters of what constitutes a life “worth living,” such that a life bereft of joy and pleasure, and perhaps even of “meaning” in an abstract, metaphysical sense, may become worthy of dignity and respect. The mere fact that many anhedonics continue to pursue a variety of endeavors that require them to expend significant amounts of energy alone demonstrates the feasibility of such a project. It also means imagining spaces other than abandoned warehouses and derelict factories where anhedonic people can feel comfortable expressing their joylessness, their sour disposition, and their lack of enthusiasm for the various aspects of life most people take for granted as being purposeful or significant, without being subjected to harassment. It means not being offended by someone who never smiles, not projecting into the consciousness behind their unsmiling face some type of animosity or ill intent. And it certainly means not asking those people to try and plaster on a fake smile in order to maintain a “positive atmosphere.” Above all, it means creating a world that does not constantly produce the conditions that might prompt a person like Frank Dominio to utter, with complete conviction, the words “I cannot wait to be dead” (*My Work is Not Yet Done* 138).

Chapter Two: Depression as Self-Annihilation: The Sociality of Suicide in Randal

Kenan's A Visitation of Spirits

One of the most painful aspects of depression is the way that it warps one's affective, emotional, cognitive, and even physiological orientation toward one's own self. Often this sense of loss mutates into self-hate, a hatred of what one has become. It can lead to a desire to mutilate one's body, to destroy one's mind, to sabotage one's life. In this sense, one might describe depression as a process of self-annihilation. In this chapter, I offer a reading of Randal Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* that examines the suicide of its central character, Horace Cross, as the result of a form of depression that manifests as self-annihilation. The novel's depiction of Horace's psychic fragmentation offers a compelling representation of an individual trapped in this type of depressive state. It also draws attention to the historical forces that push him toward self-annihilation by imposing impossible demands upon his behavior, his affect, and through these, his entire psychic reality. Horace's psychic reality takes the form of a violent clash between two conflicting self-narratives. In one, Horace is a homosexual black teenage boy who would rather read comic books than play sports. In another, Horace is the son of a fundamentalist Baptist family and community that valorizes heteronormative hyper-masculinity as the only acceptable form of blackness. Both self-narratives are indispensable to his understanding of who he is and who he wants to be, such that the tension between them leads Horace's body-mind-world to splinter into multiple incompatible pieces which he cannot reassemble. To embrace one of these crucial aspects of himself, he must destroy the other.

I read this clash of self-narratives as an integral aspect of the depressive experience for many persons. I show that this tension is, in large part, a symptom of the socially-enforced optimism characteristic of what Sara Ahmed has called the "the happiness turn," an ethos that enthrones collective happiness as the ultimate social virtue and, through that, pathologizes behaviors and affects

that do not project a positive orientation toward the social world and the norms that structure it. On the surface, *A Visitation of Spirits* may not seem to be about depression at all, as the main character's inner conflict, along with the psychic pain this conflict produces, stems largely from the incompatibility of his sexual and racial identities. It is this incompatibility that causes the rupture of his sense of self. But I show that it only seems that way if one adopts a narrowly medicalized view of what depression actually is. The feelings of self-hatred Horace endures throughout his entire life, the psychotic break he suffers when these feelings become impossible to handle any longer, and his ultimate decision to take his own life, comprise a sequence of psychic events that can usefully be understood as depression. Just as importantly, they demand a recalibration, or perhaps a widening, of the lens through which depression is interpreted and understood. The psychic pain Horace experiences cannot be bracketed as an isolated psychological phenomenon with a singular, biomedically legible cause. It is, certainly, a psychological phenomenon unfolding within Horace's body-mind, the existential anguish of a young man who cannot find a place in his social world where he can be fully accepted for who he is. But it is also the collateral psychic damage of a dysfunctional family structure and the psychological complexes of the other persons within that structure; *and* it is also the result of an entire community's inability to accept what it perceives as a deviant affect in one of its members; *and* it is also an expression of a collective historical trauma inherited by each generation of a family whose ancestors were slaves; *and* it is the consequence of a racialized form of emotional biopolitics which uses the concept of "happiness" to turn an implicitly white structure of feeling into a social and moral imperative. In this chapter, I explore the ways that *A Visitation of Spirits* invites us to consider the essentiality of all of these "ands" to the representation of depression, and consequently to view Horace's depression as the culmination of an unendurable confluence of these various forces converging upon a single body-mind-world. I show that Kenan's novel is, ultimately, a representation of a body-mind forcing itself, every second of every day, to try and feel things it cannot feel, to prevent itself from feeling the things it does feel, in an attempt to resolve an

irresolvable conflict with the world it inhabits. In other words, it is a novel about how the racialization of affect, and of desire, can produce, for an “aberrant” black subject such as Horace, a body-mind-world that is so antagonistic to itself that it coerces him into consenting to a form of self-annihilation which I argue is a product just as much of external social forces as of internal conflicts.

To be sure, the novel makes no attempt to diagnose Horace’s experiences in terms of neurodivergence, nor does it explicitly frame Horace’s experiences in terms of mental illness. However, it is my intention to show that by thinking about Horace’s conflict as a depressive state, it is possible to develop a broader understanding of depression as not merely an internal psychic phenomenon, but one that emerges within, and as a byproduct of, a set of social relations between multiple people and which traverses the psychic realities of each of them. To begin with, the rupture of Horace’s sense of self, and the apparent psychotic break he suffers shortly before his suicide are, on their own, worthy of discussing in terms of mental illness. More importantly, however, while *A Visitation of Spirits* is ultimately a story about one person’s suicide, it tells the story of this suicide through the viewpoint of not only Horace, but also of various members, across multiple generations, of Horace’s family, including his uncle Jimmy, his grandfather Zeke, and his great-aunt Ruth. As such, the novel manages to represent depression not as an individual problem produced by and contained within a singular psyche, but as a psychosocial phenomenon that is dispersed throughout a social field, in this case the Cross-family structure and the larger black community of Tims Creek, a small rural community in North Carolina, enveloping the lives of multiple persons within this field. By characterizing depression here as a distributed social phenomenon, I am in no way attempting to assert that the pain of depression is equally distributed between these different actors. Rather, I seek to foreground those causes of Horace’s depression, and his unique experience of that depression, which cannot be understood in isolation from the thoughts and experiences of those others who cohabit his social milieu. With this in mind, I examine throughout this chapter the methods through which Kenan’s novel makes visible not only the invisible forms of

psychosocial violence that drive the subject toward self-annihilation, but also the limitations of a singular subject's ability to resist that violence, along with its most damaging effects, alone. In doing so, I hope to counteract the individuating, and by extension isolating and marginalizing, logic immanent to clinical paradigms of depression.

The problem with clinical paradigms of depression that understand it as an internal phenomenon produced by a combination of chemical imbalances and flawed cognitive and behavioral responses to these imbalances, is principally one of scale. Clinical discourses on mental illness seem to have no problem reducing the scale of analysis, consulting with cognitive neuroscientists and neurobiologists to zoom in on the biochemical and genetic factors that contribute to depressive symptoms. Zooming out beyond the scale of the individual human often seems to be outside the scope of what these discourses are reasonably able to do. Dominant narratives about mental illness, both in popular and clinical discourses, paint depression as an internal psychic struggle against one's inner demons. And certainly, this is an indispensable part of the story. But it is not the whole story. Implicit within this depiction of depression is an assumption that this struggle is a strictly internal one, some combination of psychology, personality, biochemistry, and learned bad habits. While some may acknowledge that there may be environmental factors that influence this state of psychic being, the core problem is presumed to be the unhealthy ways the depressive subject internalizes and reacts to these problems. It is perhaps for that reason that a key aspect of most contemporary psychotherapeutic treatment regimens for clinical depression is a dialectical technique called "thought-challenging." The depressive patient writes down any pessimistic and ostensibly self-defeating beliefs they hold about their life, their family, the world, and then lists as much counter-evidence to these beliefs as they can brainstorm. Thought-challenging can be a very empowering exercise, but two of its underlying assumptions must be addressed here as potentially contrary to its own aims. The first is that the depressive person's negative thoughts are fundamentally incorrect, the product of so-called cognitive

distortions, or as they are more colloquially known, “thought-errors.” The second is that depression is a self-contained emotional and behavioral phenomenon confined within the body-mind of a singular subject. From this perspective, the pain and suffering the depressive endures derive from flawed internal cognitive processes which must be rectified through individual mental discipline and emotional labor. The implicit assumption is that once this is done, the depressive will be able to see things more clearly, and thence adopt a more positive and purportedly realistic outlook on life. They will be able to see their problems as transient and resolvable and move past them.

The larger social and historical context within which depression emerges in *A Visitation of Spirits* necessitates a reevaluation of many of these assumptions to reveal normally unseen or even repressed elements of not only the depressive psyche, but of the collective psyche of an entire social formation. These elements can lead a subject within that formation to experience the most severe depressive symptoms, notably suicide. I assert that the clinical framework, by focusing exclusively on the cognitive, emotional, and psychological, fails to provide a full account of the complex psychosocial processes through which antipathy to one’s own self emerges. The psyche does not become antagonistic to itself of its own volition. To fully comprehend the source of this antagonism and excavate the buried layers of psychosocial violence immanent in the depressive experience, it is necessary to look beyond the bounds of the depressive’s own interiority. In other words, it is necessary to examine depression not merely as an internal mental state belonging to a single individual, but as a type of configuration of the myriad intersecting, intertwining elements of that individual’s body-mind-world.

A Visitation of Spirits demonstrates how this type of psychic polyphony can be utilized as a narrative technique within literary works to draw attention to the connections, both empowering and violent, that emerge within the social field between different psyches inhabiting that field. With that in mind, I pose the following question: what might we learn about depression if we were to try and understand it not as a psychological consequence of a negative or pessimistic outlook on life, but rather

as an understandable and unavoidable reaction to an excess of positivity in one's social environment? More specifically, might depression be understood not as a negative orientation toward the world as such, but instead as a contingent form of relationality within which the subject fails to internalize and outwardly express a positive affective orientation to those specific objects that are codified as positive within their social milieu?

I.

One of the key developments in mental health discourse throughout the past few decades has been the ascendance of positive psychology, which frames the objectives of medical interventions into mental health within a utilitarian teleology oriented toward a vague, white-washed conception of collective happiness. In 1998, Martin Seligman, who was president of the American Psychological Association (APA) at the time, attempted to redefine the core mission of clinical psychology through the framework of positive psychology. He denounced what he perceived to be clinical psychology's exclusive focus on mental illness, proposing instead that the field focus on cultivating positive traits that would produce happier individuals who were more optimistic about life. Positive psychology emphasizes "the benefits of relying on cultural norms and values," positing that "if psychologists wish to improve the human condition, it is not enough to help those who suffer," insisting instead that "the majority of "normal" people also need examples and advice to reach a richer and more fulfilling existence" (Seligman 10). Here, the president of the APA, the largest and most influential professional organization of psychologists in the United States, explicitly advocates redirecting psychiatric and psychotherapeutic resources, and refocusing the intellectual energies of clinical psychology as a discipline, away from the previous objective of assuaging the suffering of mentally ill individuals by alleviating negative feelings and resolving life problems. Instead, positive psychology wants to reorient those energies and resources toward preserving the happiness of putatively normal people.

I do not claim that this type of social exclusion is Seligman's intention or that positive psychology, and clinical psychology writ large, harbor some secret agenda to stigmatize and marginalize mentally ill subjects. Rather, Seligman's ideas suffer from a naïve utopianism. His objective, it would seem, is for clinical psychology to model the kinds of social and behavioral norms that both enable people to live their lives in a fulfilling way and produce a collective empathy and understanding that can foster a more inclusive social environment. Indeed, the specific attributes Seligman wants to cultivate include: "courage, future mindedness, optimism, interpersonal skills, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, perseverance, and the capacity for flow and insight" (Seligman 7). In a vacuum, these values are inoffensive, if perhaps overly vague and a bit generic, and could be interpreted in such a way that one might imagine them contributing to greater inclusivity and understanding.

The problem is that these values, for Seligman, are supposed to "articulate a vision of the good life that is empirically sound while being understandable and attractive" and to "show what actions lead to well-being, to positive individuals, and to thriving communities" (Seligman 5). For any of this to be "empirically sound," subjective concepts such as "positive individuals" and "the good life," as well as the abstract qualities Seligman hopes to cultivate, must be reified as quantifiable variables that can be measured through empirical metrics. In practice, this means that they are defined within the context of the larger biopolitical project of late capitalism, within which they are meant to be emblematic of a life governed by prosociality, economic productivity, and conformity to social norms. For instance, future-mindedness, work ethic, and perseverance are among the core values that sustain the myth of the American Dream, of pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps, working hard to achieve future financial success. Hope and faith, in this context, might mean maintaining a positive attitude, continuing to believe and invest in the current state of affairs and the prospect that doing so will bring future success. The references to the importance of optimism, interpersonal skills, and the capacity for flow all signal an

emphasis on accepting and fitting in seamlessly with one's social world and adapting to the norms that govern that world.

Interestingly enough, positive psychology does, in contrast to the DSM-5, articulate an understanding of mentation as something that emerges within a social context. However, it does so only within the context of a marginalization of mental illness as a core psychosocial problem that must be collectively addressed, and by extension, the social marginalization of mentally ill persons. Mentally ill persons, especially those with depression, are very often not participants in the forms of sociality positive psychology envisions because of their negative orientation toward those forms of sociality. Participation in the social world is dependent upon one's ability to adhere to a certain set of psychological and behavioral norms. For any person for whom these norms are not validating or empowering, but merely alienating, attempting to mold oneself in accordance with them can be tremendously harmful to the psyche. In practice, positive psychology doubles the harm caused by these norms by framing deviation from these norms as negative and anti-social, foreclosing the possibility for the types of behaviors and perspectives unique to neurodivergent persons to be understood as a positive and vital part of the social world. Instead, it ultimately collapses into the same assimilatory logic of the DSM-5, wherein being a positive, prosocial individual is, for persons with mental illness, only possible through the regime of cure, through which these unique behaviors and perspectives are purged. In other words, persons with mental illness may attain access to the social world only through a disavowal of their neurodivergent traits or, in other words, through the excision of a core aspect of themselves.

What positive psychology reveals, then, is the disciplinary nature of the teleological framework imposed upon human activity by the imperative to cultivate a positive lifestyle or, in simpler terms, to be happy. At its core, the ideological maneuver enacted by positive psychology is to frame the pursuit of happiness as a practice of developing and honing the types of traits that lead one to become a normative, prosocial, productive member of society. It identifies as "positive individuals" those who, by

virtue of exhibiting those traits, are in the best position to contribute to social and economic production, and to the reproduction of the currently hegemonic social order. Sara Ahmed has argued that “positive psychology involves the instrumentalization of happiness as a technique” (Ahmed 10). In other words, happiness is not a feeling or a passive state of being, but a tool that individuals, and more importantly groups, utilize to achieve certain kinds of social goals. One might then think of not only positive psychology, but the larger cultural emphasis placed on happiness and optimism as positive social values, as a kind of emotional biopolitics that serves to instrumentalize emotions as means of regulating human behavior at both the individual and collective levels.

For Ahmed, the ascendance of positive psychology is merely one facet of what she calls “the happiness turn,” a term she uses “to describe what kind of world takes shape when happiness provides a horizon,” specifically a “horizon for experience” (Ahmed 14). This identification of happiness as a “horizon for experience” directs human activity, individual and collective, social, cultural, economic, and even cognitive, toward the production of something called happiness, which is here reified as a concrete, attainable, and hence commodifiable object. In other words, it transposes onto the social world, and onto the range of experiences that are available within it, a utilitarian teleology in which progress takes the form of the maximization of individual and collective happiness and, by extension, the elimination of unhappiness. But because happiness is such an abstract and subjective concept, this teleology, in practice, depends upon a value judgment, whereby “happiness describes not only what we are inclined toward...but what we should be inclined toward” (Ahmed 200). This is not a neutral value judgment. It is historically and culturally specific value judgment and it is racialized, gendered, embodied, and heavily politicized, aiming to orient social, cultural, economic, and affective energies toward the production of specific objects, specific persons, and specific states of being and ways of living that are designated by the hegemonic culture as positive. When I speak of an “excess of positivity,” then, I am speaking of the

excessiveness of the social demand to maintain a positive orientation, and a happy emotional relation, toward such objects.

Reading *A Visitation of Spirits* as a novel that narrativizes the psychosocial violence administered against those who either cannot or will not attain this happiness ideal through proximity and attachment to such culturally-valued objects reveals, among other things, how this “happiness turn” ends up racializing emotions. Furthermore, it shows how the affective demands of happiness, which Ahmed refers to as “the happiness duty” (Ahmed 2), along with the violence and stringency through which these demands are administered, are not evenly distributed across all persons or groups. In describing the “happiness duty,” Ahmed suggests that “happiness is used to redescribe the social norms as social goods” (Ahmed 2) to “make the world cohere around, as it were, the right people” (Ahmed 13). This coherence is maintained by limiting the range of emotional states that can be expressed publicly and thus turning negative or deviant affect into an offense punishable by social exclusion. While the happiness duty may be empowering for some people, presenting them with guidance for how to lead fulfilling lives, for others, it presents itself as a form of emotional violence that constrains their abilities to express themselves authentically and, ultimately, to achieve the self-fulfillment it offers to others. Kenan’s novel shows how certain identity-based factors, in this case race and sexuality, overdetermine what types of object attachments are considered socially appropriate, what types of avenues are available for people to seek out these object attachments, the level of intensity of the emotions people are expected to express toward specific objects, and the specific kinds of life-trajectories through which an individual can pursue happiness without being socially and/or ontologically erased.

For Horace Cross, ontological erasure is a perpetually imminent threat. It presents itself to him, within the social milieu he inhabits, as an ultimatum: that he either actively destroy one core aspect of himself, the part of him that feels and expresses romantic love and sexual desire, or consent to the loss of another core aspect of himself, the part of him that loves his family and identifies as a member both

of the Cross family and the black community of Tims Creek. The violence this ultimatum inflicts upon Horace is perhaps most clearly reflected in his inability to reconcile the simultaneous desire and enmity he feels toward the only other young, gay, black male he knows, a fellow classmate named Gideon. Gideon is presented in the text as Horace's doppelganger, a person who looks and acts like him, a person he could be if his circumstances were different, but who, ultimately, is not him.

The first description the text offers of Gideon is a comparison to Horace, when Emma Dobson, a girl Horace asks out in school, rejects him on the basis that he's "weird...like Gideon" (Kenan 97). Specifically, "weird" means: "All you do is read books and stuff. You don't play ball like the other guys" (Kenan 97). Emma Dobson cannot accept Horace because he fails to perform the type of masculinity that is expected from the normative black male subject and, more specifically, because he wants the wrong things. From a young age, Horace is symbolically emasculated because he derives no enjoyment from the things from which young black schoolboys are supposed to derive enjoyment. The fact that he has a picture of "the Sorcerer" (Kenan 17) on his wall rather than a picture of a professional athlete already stigmatizes him, even before his sexuality is taken into consideration. But even if he did not have the picture of the Sorcerer on his wall, he would be condemned for not having the picture of the athlete or going out to "play ball like the other guys." Horace becomes alienated from his peers, and from himself, not only for deriving happiness from the wrong objects, but also for not deriving happiness from the right objects. By asking out Emma, Horace tries to force himself to want what one is supposed to want, but even elementary school children can detect the insincerity of his desire. This episode reveals an insidious form of emotional violence which the broader social field, when oriented toward particular structures of happiness, inflicts upon those persons who cannot find happiness through the avenues available within that field. More accurately, it exposes the emotional violence the imperative to be happy in the right ways obligates such persons to exact upon themselves, so that they can at least appear as if

they harbor the proper feelings toward objects within their social milieu that are afforded positive and negative affective values.

Because Horace associates Emma's rejection of his romantic overtures with this comparison to Gideon, Gideon comes to function as a substitute self, an external object onto which Horace can project his self-hatred so that he can avoid having to consciously direct that hatred toward himself. Yet, at the same time, he has a romantic and sexual relationship with Gideon and feels an affinity toward him that goes beyond even their shared sexuality. Despite the depth of his feelings for Gideon, the part of Horace that is the beloved son and the pride and joy of his family, of his religious community, and of the rural black town in which he was raised will not permit those feelings to exist. It will not permit his relationship with Gideon, nor even his desire for a relationship with Gideon. Horace must repress this desire, but because that is impossible, he ends up lashing out against Gideon, irrevocably terminating their relationship by punching him in the face. In doing so, he illustrates how easily ambivalence descends into self-annihilation.

Before expanding outward to examine the larger social formation that scaffolds the self-hatred Horace demonstrates in this scene, it will be useful to extrapolate from Horace's ambivalent affective orientation toward Gideon a theory of depression that can explain, phenomenologically, what is unfolding within Horace's psyche. Horace's *experience* of his body-mind-world may be characterized in terms of what I described in my introduction as affective "disorientation." That is to say, the conflicts and contradictions between various components of the Horace's body-mind-world create a kind of psychic confusion whereby the self is unable to determine what kind of affective orientation it should have to each of these components, whether it should love or hate them, embrace them or violently cast them out. This confusion becomes intolerable when the level of attachment to these objects is significant enough that any relation one develops toward those objects must inevitably be extreme and emotionally intense.

It is informative to examine this subject-object disorientation, and the affective responses it provokes within the subject, in terms of Kleinian object-relations theory, as a disruption of the subject's ability to work through what Melanie Klein calls "the depressive position," and a subsequent reversion to what she calls the "paranoid-schizoid position." According to Klein, "object relations exist from the beginning of life, the first object being the mother's breast, which is split into a good (gratifying) and bad (frustrating) breast" (Klein 164). What Klein calls the depressive position is a developmental stage in which the child recognizes this "good breast," the external object that provides instant gratification of their needs, and the "bad breast," the external object that refuses to provide this immediate gratification, as part of the same object. Upon achieving this realization, the infant develops ambivalent feelings toward that object. In contrast to the earlier paranoid-schizoid position, this new perception of the wholeness of the object allows for the development of a coherent, bounded self that recognizes itself as a distinct subject separate from others. At this point, she suggests, "object relations are molded by an interaction between introjection and projection" (Klein 164), that is to say, by the absorption of certain elements of external reality into the self (introjection) and the casting out of elements of oneself onto external objects (projection).

On the other hand, Klein suggests, when "persecutory fear, and correspondingly schizoid mechanisms, are too strong, the ego is not capable of working through the depressive position" (Klein 173). Klein suggests that "this in turn forces the ego to regress to the schizoid position and reinforces the earlier persecutory fears and schizoid phenomena" (Klein 173). A psychic fragmentation ensues when these persecutory fears and schizoid phenomena prevent the ego from cohering. A failure to work through the depressive position, then, might be understood as a failure to resolve or accept the ambivalence one feels toward an object, either internal or external, causing the "good" and "bad" parts of that object to split in two. When this unresolvable, unacceptable ambivalence is directed toward an aspect of the self, it can result in "the violent splitting off and destroying of one part of the personality

under the pressure of anxiety and guilt” (Klein 176). That is to say, when some aspect of the self or object attachment that is vital to the self becomes a source of anxiety and guilt, and these feelings of anxiety and guilt become so overpowering as to be intolerable, the psyche develops an aversion to that aspect of themselves and attempts to destroy it because that is the only way to escape these intolerable feelings. It is in this sense that depression can be understood as a form of self-annihilation. Crucially, Klein argues that “even if these objects are felt to be external, they become through introjection internal persecutors and thus reinforce the fear of the destructive impulse within” (Klein 166). In other words, the inability to resolve one’s ambivalence toward external objects in which the self has a deep investment also results in this same violent splitting of the self into separate, irreconcilable fragments. In this situation, the ego attempts over and over to work through this ambivalence and integrate these psychic fragments into a coherent self, perpetually failing to do so because the fragments do not fit together.

For Horace, this psychic disintegration takes the form of what Julia Kristeva has described as “melancholy cannibalism.” Kristeva, drawing from classic Freudian psychoanalytic theory regarding the relationship between melancholia and depression, has observed that “depression conceals an aggression toward the lost object,” such that “the complaint against oneself would therefore be a complaint against another” (Kristeva 11). Indeed, after he punches Gideon, Horace wonders: “had he wanted to hit Gideon, or himself for not wanting to hit him?” (Kenan 163). In theory, hitting Gideon is supposed to be a means of hitting himself, a means of expressing his revulsion toward an object attachment about which he feels ashamed, and hence his rejection of the part of himself that loves that object. Yet, because Gideon represents the potential and desire for romantic love, an integral aspect of Horace’s psyche that he can never permanently disavow or annihilate, he cannot completely dissociate from this attachment. What results is a painful ambivalence whereby he performs a violent dissociation from this loved/hated object even while holding it close. Kristeva describes melancholy cannibalism as “holding in the mouth

the intolerable other that I crave to destroy so as to better possess it alive. Better fragmented, torn, cut up, swallowed, digested...than lost" (Kristeva 12). To think about this in Kleinian terms, the depressive subject is involved in a perpetual oscillation between loving and hating the object attachment, in this case a core aspect of their body-mind-world, but this is worse than if they simply hated it. Instead of permanently destroying the intolerable part of themselves and experiencing it as a final loss that can be mourned, the subject cannot fully sever this part of themselves. The object attachment thus remains with him permanently, endlessly generating intolerable feelings of self-abasement and self-hate.

This oscillation between projection and introjection fills a particularly damaging role within Horace's depressive psyche because it impels him to revile and reject those who are most similar, namely Gideon. When he teams up with the other school boys to "join in on the queer-baiting" (Kenan 99) of Gideon in an attempt to perform this rejection by calling him a "sissy," an "abomination," and, ultimately, a "faggot" (Kenan 100), he merely exacerbates his own feelings of alienation and pushes himself further toward self-annihilation by pushing away the one person who might accept him for who he is and thus give him the sense of belonging he so desperately craves. Furthermore, the substitution does not even work as intended, as Horace can't help but see his own reflection in Gideon and thus feel the pain of the blow he delivers. Because he cannot reconcile his love for Gideon with the hatred he feels for the part of himself he recognizes in Gideon, and because he cannot let go of either this love or this hatred, he endlessly repeats this process of violently casting out the loved object, only to reach out and grab it once again, to cling to it, because he cannot live without it: a continuous alternation between projection and introjection. In doing so, he experiences the pain of this loss, the violent splitting that sunders him in two, over and over again. This repetition makes it impossible to move beyond the depressive position. Instead, the self endlessly destroys itself, an act of suicide repeated *ad infinitum*. But each time this happens, the pain becomes more and more intolerable, breaking down his spirit, his will to live. It is in

this sense that I understand the irresolvable conflict within Horace's body-mind-world as a form of depression manifesting as self-annihilation.

In order to understand Horace's affective disorientation in these terms, however, it will be necessary to reframe the depressive position, and the ego's inability to work through it, as a psychosocial phenomenon. The depressive position, here, is not merely an unresolved stage in an infant's psychological development temporally fixed within this developmental stage. Instead, it is a *contingent* phenomenon which can emerge at any time in a person's life in response to a configuration of the body-mind-world that produces unresolvable antagonisms between two aspects of the subject or between the subject and other objects which are vital to the maintenance of that body-mind-world. This can occur many times throughout a person's life. Often it occurs within a biopolitical frame, as in the case of the "happiness turn" described by Sara Ahmed. Within that framework, the psyche exists within a psychosocial milieu in which access to the social is contingent upon its ability to maintain the correct kinds of affective orientations toward the correct kinds of objects. Indeed, Ahmed observes that "we become alienated – out of line of an affective community – when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are attributed as being good" (Ahmed 41). Because the kinds of attachments that are expected and desired are contingent upon social, behavioral, and neuropsychological norms, this process is inherently marginalizing to individuals whose affections and attachments are not oriented toward those objects that are codified as "good" within the social spaces within which they circulate. The corollary of the enthronement of positive affect as the ultimate social good is necessarily the demonization of negative affect as a social evil. More specifically, it is a demonization of those who don't feel good about those objects that are designated as good.

In a psychosocial sense, then, it is *neurotypical* subjects for whom the norm produces an inability to reconcile putatively good and putatively bad aspects within the same object. There is a social demand that normative social spaces, such as the school or the workplace or the social gathering, be inundated

with a *purely* positive energy so as to maintain the ability of neurotypical subjects to view these places as exclusively positive. As a child, Horace's peers, such as Emma Dobson, read his inability to exhibit positive feelings for *one* aspect of the normative black male adolescent experience, namely playing sports, as a rejection of adolescent black masculinity writ large. It is precisely this social imperative toward absolute positivity that has led to the codification of negative affect as "toxic." Sara Ahmed has observed that the demonization of negative affect tends to operate through a language of contagion, whereby visible, persistent unhappiness or otherwise deviant affect threatens the emotional health of the social body, such that "you might refuse proximity to somebody out of fear that you will be infected by unhappiness" so that "unhappiness is pushed to the margins, which means certain bodies are pushed to the margins" (Ahmed 97). In this sense, the anxiety and guilt associated with the failure to maintain the correct kinds of object attachments are weaponized to enforce a positive orientation toward those objects by socially and morally shaming those who cannot maintain them. This leaves neurodivergent persons with two options: to suppress certain powerful feelings and key aspects of their personalities and force themselves to perform the correct kinds of emotionality or exclude themselves from society altogether.

This is a choice Horace is forced to make not because of his own failures to work through certain stages of psychic development, but because of the conditions under which he is allowed to retain his position within the social field that matters most to him: the one inhabited by his family. What Horace most resents about Gideon is not his homosexuality, but how easily he, along with his loved ones, seems to have managed to accept his homosexuality, an acceptance Horace desperately needs but is not permitted to attain. He hates Gideon not only for loving him but also for loving himself, "developing an arrogance that he wielded as a weapon against all outsiders" (Kenan 98), deriving self-love from the same source from which Horace derives only self-hate. Furthermore, he has the love of his family, who consider Gideon "their godsend" (Kenan 98). Worst of all, Gideon loves both himself and, more

significantly, Horace for the very characteristics Horace himself can never embrace, for to do so would be interpreted, within his own familial structure, as a betrayal so severe that his family would disown him.

This threat of disownment is expressed quite clearly to Horace when he arrives late to Thanksgiving dinner with a pierced ear, and his aunt Jonnie Mae accuses him of being “like some little girl. Like one of them perverts” (Kenan 184). Meanwhile Horace’s grandfather, Ezekiel (Zeke) Cross, when reflecting later upon the incident, worries that Horace is “trying to be like them white folks” (Kenan 64). These three transgressions: being “like some little girl,” “like one of them perverts” and “like them white folks” are conflated in the Crosses’ interpretation of this gesture and its moral implications. They see the piercing of Horace’s ear as a dangerous violation of the sexual and gender taboos prescribed by the Baptist church, a moral violation that they associate with what they perceive to be the moral degeneracy of whiteness. This violation compromises the Cross family historical narrative, which is based on a complex amalgamation of their tight-knit family structure, their identification as members of the black community, their history of struggle against white oppression, and the moral prescriptions of the Baptist church. Zeke’s interpretation of this violation, and of Horace’s eventual suicide, is that “he was ungrateful, that’s what the matter was” because “life had been too easy for him” (Kenan 63). This is a common evaluation that senior, high-ranking, authoritative figures within a toxic family structure often make of younger members who find themselves unable to abide by the expectations or meet the demands of their position within that structure. The intense suffering of any one member exposes possible limitations or fallibilities of the entire family structure, and so that suffering must be minimized, and the blame for that suffering must be offset onto the suffering individual. The phrase “life had been too easy for him” is almost a cliché in terms of the frequency with which it is used by older members of a family to denigrate and invalidate the problems of their younger relatives (and sometimes vice versa). The family member’s problem cannot possibly be caused by abuses from the family itself, so it must be their own fault, the actions or perspective of a spoiled child who did not appreciate all the great things

his family did for him. The idea that Zeke's own actions, along with the ideology that undergirds the Cross family, may have driven Horace to suicide is far too traumatic, in a deeply existential sense, for Zeke to acknowledge, and so in lieu of acknowledging these uncomfortable and potentially traumatic truths, Zeke's investment in his own family structure means he has no choice but to direct his anger and resentment toward Horace, even after Horace is dead.

II.

At this point, it will be useful to consider in greater detail what is at stake for both Horace and his family members in this confrontation over Horace's piercing. It is principally the historical, social, and familial context in which this conflict occurs, more than the particular sensibilities of any of the individuals involved, that causes it to escalate so abruptly and catastrophically. For the older Crosses, witnessing Horace arrive at Thanksgiving dinner with a pierced ear brings them face-to-face with the possibility that they might confront their own kind of ontological erasure, which might be understood in terms of what Orlando Patterson refers to as "social death." Patterson uses the term "social death" to describe the unique form of social violence imposed upon a person through enslavement. Patterson defined social death as "the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated persons" (Patterson 13). Within the context of slavery, natal alienation referred to the severing of all connections between an enslaved person and their history, ancestry, and the kinship structures through which access to the social is established. This meant an absolute segregation from the social order, including, among other things, the forced separation of individuals from families, homes, and the systems of rights that inscribe a free person's social existence. Though *A Visitation of Spirits* is not a novel about slavery, it is very much a novel about a particular psychosocial legacy of slavery upon one family, and the omnipresent threat of social death that lingers over their family sociality as a result of this ongoing trauma.

For the Crosses, social death means losing their connection to both their family's history of struggle against slavery and racism and to the Church, from which they draw both their moral identity

and their strength to persevere through the myriad hardships that slavery and the racialized violence that succeeded it inflicted upon them. The historical trauma they experience as the descendants of slaves, a trauma that manifests both within the individual members of the Cross family and the structure of the family as a whole, is not merely psychologically damaging; it is, ultimately, the foundation of their familial identity, and hence a psychic burden they all have to bear in order to preserve this foundation. For the Cross family, and especially for the older members of the family whose own parents or grandparents were survivors of slavery, forgetting this history, or even refusing to preserve it at the forefront of one's mind at all times, would be tantamount to turning their back on their familial identity, their community, their faith, and their race. Bearing this trauma thus becomes a familial obligation. One crucial role of men in the Cross family is to carry the burden of this traumatic history, to be "the source of the church's memory, the link to the terrible past they all had to remember" (Kenan 71-72). The duty of every male in the Cross family is to nurture a historical legacy defined by their perseverance through the violence of slavery, a legacy they understand as inextricably linked to their role in the black community as spiritual leaders, so that this legacy passes through future generations of Crosses.

For the elder Crosses, Horace arriving at a family dinner with a pierced ear is perceived as a betrayal of this history and hence a dereliction of his duty as the heir to his family's legacy. Anything but the complete and definitive rejection of whiteness compromises the entire historical narrative that undergirds this legacy, such that the other Crosses are offended and threatened by Horace's choice to socialize with his white classmates: "after all the white man's done to us, you gone take up behind him and do everything he tells you to do" (Kenan 186). They perceive his decision to pierce his ear as an attempt to appease these white classmates. The importance of their identity as the descendants of slaves prevents the older Crosses from recognizing any kind of relationship with white people outside the context of subjugation and enslavement. From that perspective, Horace's ear-piercing is interpreted as voluntary submission to the power structure of white supremacy, and thus an unforgivable betrayal of

both his blackness and his family's history of struggle. Thus, while Jimmy, a younger member of the family whose identity is not as tightly attached to that particular historical narrative, perceives the gesture as "no big deal", because "boys pierce their ears nowadays all the time" (Kenan 184), it threatens the older Crosses with their own kind of social death by signaling a weakening of their already tenuous grip on the past from which they derive both their identity and their strength to continue living with their trauma.

Of course, Horace's ear-piercing would not be considered a serious threat if the Crosses were not already insecure about their own ability to carry on this legacy. This is particularly true for Horace's grandfather Zeke, who lives with a persistent feeling that he has failed to honor the legacy of Thomas Cross, his own father and the symbolic patriarch of the Cross family. When Horace asks about Thomas Cross, Zeke can only describe him as "a big, strong, hardworking, Christian man, who walked in the way of righteousness" (Kenan 53). Thomas Cross functions as the embodiment of the strength, virility, tenacity, and morality of the entire family structure. These are not separate, individual traits, but merely different facets of one cohesive model of ideal black manhood, such that failing to correctly demonstrate any one of these traits is proof that a person possesses none of them. Zeke recalls how he "would imitate him- his way of standing, his walk, his talk, trying to make my voice deep and booming" (Kenan 53). What Zeke remembers most vividly about Thomas Cross is his affect: his ways of outwardly expressing, even performing, these inner qualities. Here, Zeke makes a direct correlation between visible affect and moral character. Yet Zeke himself laments that "his father's songs were different from his," such that "he'd sit up late in the evening studying on it...because, in the end, he didn't grow up to be more like him, just like him, and that was a hard thing for him to settle square with himself" (Kenan 52-53). Zeke, then, feels emasculated by the very legacy he has devoted his life to carrying forth.

Zeke's feelings of inadequacy are amplified by his failure to mold his son and grandson into the image of Thomas Cross to which he himself aspires and believes that they too should aspire. In

particular, he recalls the “wickedness” (Kenan 56) of his own son Sammy, who is Horace’s father. Like Horace, Sammy’s ostensible wickedness is sexual in nature. Unlike Horace, however, Sammy is not homosexual. Zeke reflects that “that boy loved him some pussy more than any man I know” (Kenan 55), and this, for Zeke, is the source of his “wickedness.” Here, Sammy’s sexuality, despite being heteronormative and virile, is still emasculating because it demonstrates an inability to overcome one’s own physical desires to embody the viceless, incorruptible asceticism and willpower Zeke associates with his father and hence with the image of a proper moral paragon and community leader. The fact that this is the case suggests that the idealized image of masculinity that undergirds the ontological aspirations of the Cross-family men, including both Zeke and Horace, is more complex than a simple retrograde rural homophobia, as a discourse of gay rights viewed through the prism of white urban gay culture and politics might imagine it to be. To wit, the memory of Sammy that is most firmly entrenched within Zeke’s ruminations is a confrontation between Zeke and Sammy after Sammy came home drunk at 3 A.M. after a night of debauchery. Zeke admonishes him for his wickedness, to which Sammy replies: “I’m grown, old man” (Kenan 56). Zeke then tells him to “get your own damn house” and Sammy says: “goddammit I will” (Kenan 56), a response that he would follow up by abandoning the Cross household and never returning.

The phrase “goddammit” is particularly triggering for Zeke, because it crystalizes his greatest existential fear, about his son, and vicariously, about himself: that the righteousness of Thomas Cross had not been inherited by his descendants and that the reason for this was Zeke’s own failure to adequately emulate this righteousness and model it for his son and grandson as his own father had done for him. Indeed, Zeke himself recollects, about his relationship with his own deceased wife, that: “I ain’t ashamed (oh yes, I am ashamed) to admit I snuck behind her back and carried on like I done- yes, and I did enjoy it, too” (Kenan 60). But even that is not the core of Zeke’s anxieties. For not only has Sammy refused to carry on the legacy of Thomas Cross- he also thinks of it as a joke. When Zeke tells Sammy not

to “take the Lord’s name in vain in this house,” Sammy replies: “I’m sorry I took your precious massa’s name for granted” (Kenan 56). From Zeke’s perspective, Sammy seems to be saying that Zeke’s belief in strict adherence to the moral laws of the Baptist church appears as a submission to authority that Sammy equates, explicitly, to the submission of a slave to a master. But what Sammy is really saying is that Zeke’s reverence for his father amounts to a kind of psychological enslavement to his own idealized image of his father and to his own myopic narrative about Thomas Cross and his family’s history, and hence he has become enslaved to the trauma embedded within that history. Sammy would like to move on from both this history and this trauma. But for Zeke, this trauma is integral to the mythos of the Cross family: a narrative of overcoming slavery and the hardships that followed it through an unwavering faith in God and loyalty to the church. From his perspective, it was this faith that allowed them to take on a leadership role within the church and offer spiritual guidance to the rest of the black community in Tims Creek. As far as Zeke is concerned, this is not merely a narrative; it is how their family survived. For Sammy, the heir to the family legacy, to frame that entire narrative as a kind of voluntary slavery is a direct ontological threat to the entire Cross-family structure.

To Zeke, these failures coincide with a more largescale decay of the sense of community among black people in Tims Creek. He recalls a time, in his childhood, when his family first built their house in Tims Creek: “everybody round Tims Creek made it their business to come and help us put up the house, the foundation” (Kenan 54). For Zeke, his house, his land, and his family, as heads of the church, are the foundation of their community, such that a disruption to their integrity signals the dissolution of the black community in Tim’s Creek as a whole. Indeed, he muses that “people was more willing to help back then than they are now. I spect if somebody had to put up a house that way now, he’d be there by hisself” (Kenan 54). Within Zeke’s psychic reality, the Cross-family’s standing within the black community, and indeed the community itself, has been eroded by the fact that the Crosses, especially Zeke, have

failed to replicate the model of stoic, resolute Christian leadership and moral righteousness that Thomas Cross created for them.

The ontological trap within which Zeke has imprisoned himself is that the greater his insecurity about failing to live up to his father's legacy becomes, the more dogmatically he clings, and demands his family cling, to the idealized, static, and ultimately one-dimensional image of Thomas Cross that has rooted itself within his anxious memory. In a sense, he might be said to suffer from his own kind of melancholy cannibalism, one driven by a pervasive racial insecurity in which his idealized memory of Thomas Cross becomes an indispensable object attachment by virtue of being the only image he can recognize as a proper figuration of black masculinity. He feels both emasculated and deracinated by this image because of his deviations from it, while, at the same time, imposing this affective legacy of emasculation and deracination upon his son and grandson for their own failures to live up to that same image.

Yet the primal scene through which Zeke's idealized vision of the Cross family came into existence is itself a ritual of emasculation. Zeke reflects that "folks like to say how we got our land cause we belonged to the Cross family who was given almost half North Carolina in the eighteenth century" (Kenan 51). Even Thomas Cross himself is emasculated by the fact that he inherited his name and his land from the white, slave-owning Cross family, in whose household he had been enslaved. Zeke tells himself that "what we got today, we built up out of sheer hard work," such that "ain't nobody give us nothing" (Kenan 51). Regardless of whether this is true or not, Zeke cannot bring himself to fully believe it, and the idea that it might not be true haunts him even into his old age, as he begins to worry about what kind of legacy he will leave behind.

I believe it might be enlightening to consider Zeke's anxieties about his family's place in his history and his own role in shaping that history through an existentialist lens, particularly through the lens of terror-management theory, a theory I addressed in my introduction. Terror-management theory

was devised initially by the social psychologist Ernest Becker, and essentially states that “man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation” (Becker 66). According to Becker, human behavior, at both the individual and group levels, is motivated first and foremost by the individual's fear of her/his own mortality, of a complete annihilation of their presence in the world via the eradication of this world's memory of them. The sociocultural institutions and self-narratives humans create are desperate attempts to alleviate this death-anxiety by achieving at least a figurative immortality, whether through reproduction, creative expression, or any other means of cementing one's legacy for posterity. The most salient form of figurative immortality for Zeke pertains to his family and their place in both their community and in history, factors which form the bulwark of what Becker describes as “a collective or cultural immortality as part of a social group of some kind” (Becker 170). If the elder Crosses have devoted their entire lives to preserving the legacy of Thomas Cross, then the possibility of that legacy disappearing with the next generation is existentially horrifying. To be clear, this familial obsession with Thomas Cross is perfectly understandable and perhaps even strategically necessary. The Cross family found the strength to survive and even thrive in the aftermath of slavery by reinventing their family narrative, counteracting the social death slavery inflicted upon them by creating a new primal myth, a new origin story for the Cross clan, one defined by stoic and resolute perseverance in the face of nearly insurmountable odds and soul-crushing hardships and setbacks. In order for Thomas Cross to continue to function in this powerful signifying capacity, the integrity of his character must remain unimpeachable and hence unquestioned. All of this is complicated further by the racialization of that legacy: for Zeke, the failure to follow in the footsteps of his father means to fail not only his family, but also his community and, ultimately, the black community more broadly. It is for the preservation of these communities that he invests so much of himself in preserving his family's ability to replicate, amongst themselves and amongst their community, the visage of the legendary Thomas Cross.

In the end, all of these anxieties and insecurities get projected onto Horace. Sammy's abdication of his supposed responsibility to carry on the legacy of Thomas Cross, and to bear the weight of the traumatic history within which this legacy is inscribed, places even more pressure on Horace to carry that responsibility in his place. Horace is now obligated to make up for his father's shortcomings, and this amplifies the intensity of the demands placed upon him to embody the moral ideal exemplified by Thomas Cross, an ideal he cannot internalize without destroying himself. The emotional burden this places upon Horace cannot be overstated. Because Thomas Cross, according to Zeke, is someone who "didn't look at you, he looked inside you, saw everything...looked into the very place where you locked your stinkiest secrets" (Kenan 53), there is no safe, private interiority to which Horace can retreat to escape this obligation and the judgment which accompanies it. The intrusiveness of the patriarch's gaze here indicates the depth of the affective demands placed upon Horace. The family structure regulates not only the external self, but also the internal self. It governs not only Horace's outward behavior, but also his thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires, through a combination of religious guilt and the shame of betraying the family. Horace feels the intensity of this gaze more than the other Crosses because its regulation of his inner self is more overtly coercive in terms of the extent to which it obligates him to repress his sexuality. It is not enough to act the right way; he must *be* the right way down to his core. Rather than merely expressing false desire outwardly, he must force himself to feel that desire in his heart, to find happiness in the pursuit of that desire.

III.

In light of this, it may be enlightening to consider Horace's psychosis as, at least in part, a consequence of his untenable position within the complex system of psychosocial relations Ronald D. Laing calls the "family nexus." By way of describing the family nexus, Laing explains that "the close-knit groups that occur in some families and other groupings are bound together by the need to find pseudo-real experience that can be found only through the modality of phantasy" (Laing 24). In other words, the

family nexus refers to a real set of relations amongst a group of individuals that is structured by a fantasy that is held collectively by the members of the “family.” It manifests in the relations between members of the group as a form of relationality defined by the objective of maintaining and reproducing this fantasy for the benefit of the family as a whole, as well as for each of its members. Crucially, however, Laing notes that “the family is not experienced as the modality of phantasy but as ‘reality’” (Laing 24). It would not be accurate, therefore, to describe the fantasy structuring the family nexus as not real; in fact, for those within the family nexus, this fantasy is not only experienced as real but is the sole mechanism through which reality can be experienced, phenomenologically speaking. That is to say, real objects, of a physical or psychical nature, can only be perceived and encountered through the prism of the collective fantasy that inscribes all subject-subject and subject-object relations within the context of the family nexus. To put it succinctly, this fantasy *is* the experiential reality of these subjects’ collective existence as a family unit.

Within the family nexus, Zeke’s anxieties are projected onto Horace and constrain him within a social role determined by his relational position within the nexus. The family nexus itself is an organizational structure imposed upon the forms of relationality that exist between the members of the Cross family in order to preserve the collective fantasy that structures their social existence. Within this context, Laing proposes that “all identities require an other: some other in and through whom self-identity is actualized” such that “the other fulfils or completes the self” (Laing 66). The identity of each person depends upon their positionality in relation to each other within the nexus, and hence upon their *perception* of the role of the other within the fantasy structure underlying the nexus. Zeke’s sense of self is actualized within the context of the fantasy underlying the Cross-family nexus in which his own role is to preserve the ethno-religious legacy of Thomas Cross by bestowing it upon his heirs so that they may themselves carry on that legacy. Horace therefore plays a vital role in the construction not only of Zeke’s sense of self, but in the maintenance of the fantasy holding the family together. But to fulfill that role,

Horace must perform a black hetero-masculinity that is antithetical to his actual desires. As such, his position within this fantasy-system is untenable.

If one were to examine Horace's situation from within the ideological context of a whitewashed, urban-focused discourse of LGBTQIA+ liberation, one might be inclined to propose certain options for Horace: to openly perform his homosexuality so as to challenge the restrictive parameters of the ideological structure of this religious, rural black community or, alternatively, to follow in his father's footsteps and simply leave Tims Creek and his family behind to start a new life in another place where his homosexuality might be more normalized and accepted, such as, for example, a large city. Yet, to propose either of these options would be to negate an integral aspect of Horace's being, and thus to perform the same act of ontological erasure upon him that his family's elders, through the medium of the anti-gay strictures of the Baptist church, have performed. Horace does not wish to extricate himself from the Cross-family nexus or the fantasy that underlies it, because his own sense of self is also constructed through his relationality to other subjects within this fantasy-system. When he admits to Antonio, his secret, casual, and thoroughly temporary lover: "I often think of how I'm going to make my family proud of me" (Kenan 224), Horace acknowledges just how entangled his own life-goals, and his own self-narrative, are with this family nexus. To deny him this, or worse, to dismiss his attachment to this fantasy-system as some kind of false consciousness, would be to refuse to understand him on his own terms. To abandon his current position within the family nexus would be to experience his own form of social death, for it would, in practice, mean being deracinated and cut off from all his kinship ties and the community structures within which they are embedded. It would mean being ripped from his loved ones and from the black community of Tims Creek and, ultimately, erased from the "proud" Cross family historical narrative of racial struggle and self-empowerment.

This is the ontological erasure Horace faces should he either abandon or fail to fulfill his role within the fantasy-system. Under such conditions, Laing observes that "the choice in phantasy comes to

be to suffocate to death inside, or to risk exposing one's self to whatever terrors there may be outside" (Laing 27). Horace cannot retain his position within this fantasy-system without erasing his sexuality, a kind of symbolic castration, nor can he leave the fantasy-system without effectively sacrificing his entire social existence, which is instantiated through his connections with his family members and the other members of the Tims Creek community. For any subject, Laing posits that "when his position, or positions in the social fantasy-system become such that he can neither stay in or leave his own fantasy, his position is untenable," such that "what is called a psychotic episode in one person, can often be understood as a crisis of a particular kind in the *inter-experience* of the nexus, as well as in the behavior of the nexus" (Laing 25). Horace finds himself in exactly this untenable position. Yet this is not a crisis that exists solely within Horace's own psyche; it is a crisis that has manifested within what Laing calls the "inter-experience" of the nexus. By "inter-experience," Laing means the dependence of each individual's experience of the family nexus upon their perception of the other's experience thereof. This means that Zeke needs to feel, by observing Horace's behavior, that Horace holds the same perspective toward the fantasy system underlying the nexus as Zeke does, and Horace needs to feel that his family members recognize him as enacting, not only outwardly but also inwardly, the role of the beloved son and heir of the Cross-family legacy. That is to say, the crisis of the nexus manifests within the forms of relationality that emerge between Horace and the other members of the Cross family as a consequence of their enmeshment within their social fantasy system, as well as within their respective perceptions of how these relationalities are experienced by the others.

Even someone like Horace's uncle Jimmy, who does not, at a personal level, subscribe to the dogmatic moral norms that are so important to Zeke and that underpin the ideological structure of the fantasy system, is constrained by those norms by virtue of his enmeshment within his particular social field, which lies at the intersection of the Cross-family nexus, his rural black community, and the Baptist church. The moral norms that govern these social spaces also delimit the boundaries of his relationships

with other members of the Cross family, including Horace, and prevent him from being able to provide Horace with support in his moment of greatest need. Jimmy reflects that Horace “was flawed as far as the community was concerned” due to the fact that he “loved men; a simple, normal deviation, but a deviation this community would never accept” (Kenan 188). Here, Jimmy seems to demonstrate both an understanding of homosexuality as a perfectly normal sexual orientation and a cognizance of the social dynamics within the Tims Creek community that stigmatize Horace for being gay. One would expect him, therefore, to be the sympathetic ear that Horace needs- someone within his community, and within his family nexus, who can understand what he is going through and accept and love him for who he is. Horace himself seems to view him that way, as it is Jimmy to whom he first confesses his homosexuality. He asks Jimmy: “can it be okay...to go on...being...like this” (Kenan 113). Rather than giving Horace the acceptance and validation he needs, however, Jimmy attempts to minimize and rationalize away Horace’s sexuality, claiming it’s “just a phase” in which he is “experimenting” (Kenan 113). When Horace insists that “it’s not experimenting. I like men. I don’t like women” (Kenan 113), Jimmy responds that “you know as well as I what the Bible says” (Kenan 113), telling him that “in the end this is a very serious matter” and advising him to “pray and ask god to give you strength and in no time...these feelings will go away” (Kenan 113-114). On the surface, this is a surprising reaction given Jimmy’s later reflections that homosexuality is “a simple, normal deviation.” But just like Horace and Zeke, Jimmy is mired in the Cross-family nexus, and his ability to offer empathy and support to Horace is constrained both by his position within that nexus and by his own anxieties regarding that position.

Jimmy’s anxieties stem, in large part, from his own feelings of fraudulence. As the principal of the local high school and a spiritual leader of the community who obtained a degree in theology from a university in the northeast, he has an ambivalent relationship with the rurality of Tims Creek. His own brother, Franklin, claims he should have stayed in the north, and that he returned to Tims Creek not for his own reasons, but rather merely at the behest of his wife, Anne, a light-skinned northern girl Jimmy

met at university. Franklin lambasts Jimmy's decision to return home to Tims Creek, claiming that "what had kept me here in "Klan country" was not my high-minded clerical desire to keep God's will and shepherd his flock among the tobacco patches and hogpens, but one high-minded, high-yalla, rich, militant-talking northern girl with sweet poontang, who had descended from her mighty chariot and declared for herself the South, the big bad, bloody South, to be her mission field, and had sweet-talked, brainwashed, and pussy-whipped me into believing that this was my place as well" (Kenan 35). In other words, it was one light-skinned northern woman's self-appointed mission to "civilize" Jimmy's "backward" rural black community, rather than Jimmy's own sense of purpose, that determined the trajectory of Jimmy's life, including his return to Tims Creek after university. Indeed, Jimmy reflects that "the way she made the transition from urban radical to backwoods hausfrau...fit a little too perfectly, as if she had had some preplanned scenario worked out in her head, her personal myth, down to her death" (Kenan 37). Rather than an independent actor pursuing his own goals, Jimmy has been reduced to an object within someone else's urban-savior mythos.

Not only does Jimmy fear that Franklin might be on to something with his characterization of Jimmy's life, but these fears are entangled with his own experiences of racialized emasculation within his marriage. Jimmy reflects that Anne "kept me around...to demonstrate her willingness to associate with those of less sophistication and worldliness...almost like a lapdog" (Kenan 175). Despite his education, Jimmy feels imprisoned within a condescending stereotype of black rurality: "to her I was a smart, though naïve, country boy, with fresh chickenshit between my toes, hayseeds in my hair, and hands callused from hoeing" (Kenan 175). For Anne, Jimmy is merely the reified image of her own fetishistic stereotype of black rurality. Furthermore, the emphasis both Franklin and Jimmy place upon Anne's light skin implies that there is a racial dynamic to her infantilization of Jimmy, in that, within her mythos, Jimmy's darker complexion signifies his ignorance and backwardness. As a result of all this, Jimmy feels insecure and fraudulent in his position as spiritual leader within the Tims Creek community, as if he

obtained this position not because of his own moral principles, but because of his wife's political motivations, which themselves are couched in patronizing, infantilizing language. It is due to these insecurities that Jimmy feels he must adhere strictly to the values and moral norms of the Tims Creek community, even when those values and norms include a homophobia that Jimmy does not personally advocate. These insecurities prevent him from recognizing Horace's distress and preclude his imagining any response to Horace's cry for help other than that which would be sanctioned by the moral framework of the Tims Creek community, within which homosexuality is a sin. Jimmy's investment in the Cross-family mythos and its underlying moral framework is compounded by his ambivalent relationship with his identity as a rural black man, which is itself overdetermined by the northern and putatively white urban elitism that surrounded him both within his marriage and throughout his education. In other words, Jimmy's understanding of his own black, rural identity is inscribed within this implicitly white, paternalistic fantasy of urban intellectual progressivism wherein the rural black man exists only as a passive object that must be protected from the ostensibly retrograde ideological systems that govern life in the south. The only way for Jimmy to counteract this objectification, which is reproduced constantly within the context of his relationship with his northern, light-skinned wife, is to retreat fully into this competing fantasy system wherein homosexuality is marked as an unforgivable sin. Thus, while Horace himself may not have any direct contact with the northern white paternalism Jimmy has battled throughout his life, that fantasy system nonetheless intercedes in his life at a pivotal moment and robs him of a crucial support system that may have saved him. For Jimmy, it is the ideological threat posed by this competing fantasy system that leads him, in the moment Horace reaches out to him for help, to fall back on the generic homophobic narrative supplied by his community and family structures, rather than genuinely engage with Horace, as a mentor and family member, and provide him with potentially life-saving guidance in his moment of crisis.

It is Horace's Aunt Ruth, Zeke's sister-in-law, a member of the Cross family through marriage rather than blood, who finally spells out the aporia of this fantasy system in plain terms. She tells Zeke that "the problem is that you, and all Crosses, is too high and mighty for your own good...set yourself up as God's holy counselor. Heaven walking on earth. Jesus himself" (Kenan 196-197). In other words, the Cross family has tied their identity to an image which is impossible to live up to, and, as Ruth reflects, this has brought them nothing but misery. For Ruth, the Cross-family legacy in which Zeke is so invested is permeated with her own experiences of intense emotional pain and betrayal. The image in her mind of Cross masculinity is not the stoic Thomas Cross, but her unfaithful husband Jethro. She reflects: "Had he been a good man...a righteous man...a man who cared for his children...a considerate man...a faithful man" (Kenan 126-127), but in the end, his actions give her no choice to acknowledge: "but he wasn't" (Kenan 134). What Ruth's memories reveal is that, for the Crosses, the fantasy underlying the family nexus is merely a mechanism for repressing and denying the facts about themselves they do not wish to acknowledge, including the suffering they have inflicted upon others.

Hence Ruth asks Zeke: "see what you and your family, your evil family have wrought...it's on this boy here. It was on your grandboy" (Kenan 197). Her suggestion here is that the impossible hetero-masculine that which has enframed the male Crosses' ontological understanding of themselves was the "evil" that led Horace to commit suicide. But what is this evil, if it is understood to emerge within the family nexus? The core function of the family nexus is to produce a form of consciousness which, through the mechanism of fantasy, allows for the possibility of a shared experience of the world between multiple body-minds operating within that nexus. Yet because of the fraught racial dynamics of the social field within which the fantasy system undergirding the Cross-family nexus operates, it is necessary to interrogate the ways in which their inter-experience of the nexus is itself influenced by these racial dynamics. To this end, I will use Sylvia Wynter's conception of the "sociogenic principle" as a framing device for explicating the psychosocial processes through which the consciousness that emerges

within the family nexus becomes racialized, and what the implications of this racialization might be for the Crosses, especially Horace. Wynter argues that the work of Frantz Fanon draws attention to a “mode of sociogeny, in whose terms, both black and white are socialized” such that “the black man must experience himself as the defect of the white man-as must the black woman vis a vis the white woman” (Wynter 40). The key is that this is a phenomenological observation: the sense of completeness the white man is able to experience by recognizing himself, and by being recognized by others, as a bounded, autonomous human subject is dependent upon a complex system of relationality whereby the black man is denied that experience of completeness. According to Wynter, this is a function of a (racist) process of socialization: “although born as biological humans (as human skins), we can experience ourselves as human only through the mediation of the processes of socialization effected by the invented tekhnē or cultural technology to which we give the name culture” (Wynter 53). For the Crosses, the family nexus is the key social structure through which it is possible for them to experience themselves as human, but this depends upon an *inter*-experience of the world shared by the different members of the Cross family.

By using the sociogenic principle as a framework for interpreting the dynamics of the Cross-family nexus, it might be possible to understand the older Crosses’ deep investments in the historical legacy of Thomas Cross and the hyper-masculine figuration of black subjectivity that underpins it as an ontological resistance to “the normative order of consciousness generated on the basis of their own ontological negation” (Wynter 58). It is for that reason that Horace’s experience of the world, which they can understand only through their observations of his behavior, must at least appear to mirror their own, particularly when it comes to the way he experiences himself as a black subject among other black subjects and white subjects. His refusal to do so threatens not only to dismantle the family nexus, but to introduce into it the possibility for the negation of their humanity, this ontologically negating gesture of the white supremacist sociogeny against which they have spent over a century steeling themselves.

What Wynter's elaboration of a black consciousness defined by this sociogenic principle reveals is that the family nexus of a family like the Crosses, who have inherited a legacy of racial trauma from ancestors who were enslaved, emerges within the context of a larger social structure governed by a white supremacist fantasy system that offers black subjects the opportunity to recognize themselves as human only through a performative gesture of opposition to whiteness.

So, when Horace arrives late to Thanksgiving dinner with that pierced ear, and then responds to their criticisms by saying: "you all don't understand! You're all bigots!" (Kenan 186), it is unsurprising that his family would react in an explosive manner. His great-aunt Jonnie Mae asks him: "do you have any idea how many white men have called me girl and aunt? Out of disrespect? Out of hatefulness?" (Kenan 187). The elder Crosses have experienced white bigotry in the form of a negation of their own humanity, a persistent refusal to recognize them as autonomous human subjects with basic human rights. Within the context of those experiences, the prospect of their honored son/grandson/nephew, in whom they've invested the future of the Cross-family legacy and name, flipping the script to accuse them of bigotry for being resentful of this dehumanization is beyond the pale. Yet, at the same time, they have also misunderstood the point he was trying to make; he is really accusing them of bigotry not because of their hatred of white people, but because of their intolerance of his own homosexuality and their conflation of that homosexuality with whiteness. Having this complaint firmly and unambiguously rejected as illegitimate is, for him, evidence that he himself is somehow illegitimate, a fraud, both as heir to his family's legacy and as a black man.

IV.

Horace's feeling of fraudulence, along with the shame that accompanies it, is the catalyst for the irreparable rupture of his sense of self. Elspeth Probyn, in examining the etymology of the word "shame," suggests that it derives from the word "sham," arguing further that "the crucial element that turns sham into shame is the level of interest and desire involved" (Probyn 131). Because Horace's interests (in

science fiction and comic books) and his desires (for romantic and/or sexual relationships with other men) are codified as deviant, he is required to live his public life as a “sham.” This means rejecting the affective attachments and objects that bring him joy and fulfillment, instead performing a false interest in and desire for objects that do not bring him those feelings. The greater the intensity of his desire, the guiltier he feels about it and the more he strives to suppress it. This is an act of emotional abuse that Horace is obligated to inflict upon himself daily, by his position within the complex system of psychosocial relations that constitute his body-mind-world, including the social fantasy system that undergirds his family nexus and the sociogenic principle that frames homosexuality as implicitly white. This self-inflicted abuse thus becomes a permanent aspect of his everyday social existence. In that sense, shame drives his movement toward self-annihilation. Not only are Horace’s libidinal interests and desires the source of immense shame for him due to their deviation from cultural norms, a cardinal sin in a social environment driven by strict conformism, but he is doubly shamed by a constant awareness of the fact that the face he wears in public, amongst his family and his peers, is a mask: an imitation of an ontological wholeness he does not truly feel.

It is perhaps for that reason that, of all the scenes from his past that Horace revisits during his hallucination: “all the ghouls and ghosts and specters,” the one that “shook him the most” is the image of his own reflection in the mirror: “a black man, dressed in a sun-bright costume, orange and green and blue and red, like a harlequin’s” (Kenan 219). His self-recognition of his blackness, as well as his manhood, coincides with a recognition of himself as a clown, a performer who mimes affects for the amusement of others. The fact that a harlequin performs without speaking indicates that Horace sees himself as an actor who is forced to remain silent and allow himself to be defined by other people’s impressions of his outward self-presentation. Brannon Costello suggests that Horace’s “horror of an uncontrolled body is integral to his self-image” and that “that lack of control extends not only to the actions his body takes but also to the things it signifies” (Costello 133). Horace’s persistent abjection of

his homosexual desires can be read as an attempt to reassert control over his body, to control others' impressions of him and appear to his family and his community as the model of black manhood they demand from him. Yet, the fact that this figure's "entire face was obscured" and "finished in white like porcelain" (Kenan 220) highlights the artificiality of Horace's outward expression of blackness. This makes it impossible for those around him, including his loved ones, to acknowledge him, to truly see him. Their stringent, trauma-driven conceptions of blackness and masculinity cause them to project onto him assumptions about his inner self, such that when those assumptions clash with the reality of who Horace truly is, he becomes unrecognizable to them. His black skin means that he can only be recognized as a black man, but since he does not act how a black man is supposed to act, he cannot even be recognized as a black man, meaning he cannot be recognized at all. Humans recognize other humans primarily by their faces, but Horace's is obscured to the point that it prevents recognition. The mask that disguises his face is "finished in white porcelain" not because he signifies as white, but because his shame forces him to perceive himself as a clownish mimicry of whiteness that is so blatantly artificial that no one can even recognize the face behind it as real.

The only way for Horace to maintain any control over his body is to try to fashion his self-image after the model others project onto him to fit him into their own social narratives, reducing himself in the process to a mere reflection. No matter where he goes, he becomes ethereal, just like the ghostly figures of his hallucinatory memories, unseen by any but himself and his demons. In this light, his ultimate rejection of the tube of white grease-paint his mirror-self offers him can be interpreted not as a rejection of his homosexuality, or even an embracing of rural blackness, but as a final and definitive refusal to allow his true face to be obscured by a mask that forces him to choose between the two: to be either a heterosexual black man or a homosexual man who has betrayed and denied his blackness. Horace's rejection of the white grease-paint is a decision to allow his own sense of self to determine the

judgments of others rather than allow the judgments of others to determine his sense of self, even knowing that this will bring about his social death.

The only way out of this double-bind that Horace can see is to renounce his own humanity. As he asserts at the beginning of the text: "There are no moral laws that say: you must remain human. And he would not" (Kenan 12). The basic condition for being recognized as human requires making this false choice Horace can no longer consent to make, so he decides that "no longer would he be bound by human laws and human rules that he constantly tripped over and frowned at" (Kenan 12). He endeavors to perform a ritual of "black magic," involving the sacrifice of a cat, to effect a transformation whereby he might "spend the rest of his appointed time on this earth...not as a tortured human, but as a bird free to swoop and dive, to dip and swerve over the cornfields and tobacco patches he had slaved in for what already seemed decades to his sixteen years" (Kenan 12). Suicidal persons often view suicide as a means of escaping a trap that appears inescapable within the context of their lived existence. With that in mind, the logic behind Horace's decision to renounce his humanity makes sense: if his corporeal existence cannot be recognized so long as he remains in human form, then perhaps he could achieve that recognition, or else be relieved of the need for recognition, if he were to take a different form. The morally shameful act of ritual cat-sacrifice in which he is engaged when he makes this statement is itself a denunciation of his humanity and of his concession to a moral system that forces him to disavow an indispensable part of himself simply to be recognized as human.

By looking into the mirror, then, Horace is finally able to look his whole self in the face, to "stare at his own reflection, seeing him and him and him" (Kenan 219). The multiplicity of Horaces: "him and him and him," who had for his entire life had an antagonistic relationship with one another, become defragmented, concentrated for the first time in one image. This allows Horace, finally, to recognize them for what they are: simulations of personhood rather than actual personhood, the absence of self and its replacement by the projection of a false self, or, more accurately, many false selves. The

simulated nature of these various “hims” becomes all the more painful on account of its familiarity: “Horace could recognize the face, the nose folks said to be just like his grandfather’s, the lips rumored to be like his grandmother’s, his father’s determined chin, his maternal grandmother’s sad eyes” (Kenan 220). In his own reflection he sees his family’s proud history reduced to a clownish spectacle, such that merely being inside his own body feels like a betrayal not only of his family, but of his blackness, of the history of struggle and suffering his family and community have endured. And so his own body becomes a source of deep shame for him. Because he cannot escape his body, he cannot escape the shame it imposes upon him, and the depression engendered by that shame, so shame becomes his permanent emotional state.

I would like to return briefly here to Elspeth Probyn’s work on shame. Probyn provides an explanation for the sort of bodily shame Horace experiences by suggesting that “shame arises from a collision of bodies, ideas, history and place” (Probyn 149). This notion of collision is key to understanding the relational nature of Horace’s depression. His rootedness in the community of Tims Creek, the Cross-family nexus and the fantasy system that underlies it, along with the conformity of his friends and family to an ideology of which homophobia is an integral aspect, renders his bodily experience of everyday life a constant violent collision with the very structures through which he establishes his sense of self. The only way to survive this state of constant collision is through a melancholic splitting whereby he separates the contradictory aspects of his sense of self, creating a multiplicity of Horaces that never coalesce into one cohesive human subject that he can identify as a “self.” Due to this entrenchment in the paranoid-schizoid position, certain key aspects of his psyche split off from his body depending on what kind of space that body is inhabiting at any given moment.

This persistent splitting takes the form of a melancholia which Anne Cheng describes as “the ontological and psychical status of a social subject who has been made into an “object,” a “loss,” an “invisibility,” or a “phantom”” (Cheng 14). Horace’s demonic hallucination places him in a phantomic

state between life and death in which he experiences his loved object(s) not as a loss, but as a perpetually imminent loss. Throughout his hallucination, Horace's perpetually imminent loss takes the form of what Cheng calls a "spectral drama, whereby the subject sustains itself through the ghostly emptiness of a lost other" (Cheng 10). This "spectral drama," for Horace, consists of re-experiencing the childhood memories that most contributed to his schizoid sense of self. These memories become, in Horace's hallucination, literal phantoms- "the ghosts of the past" (Kenan 73). They are both familiar and foreign, such that he must ask himself: "did he know them? Had they known him?" (Kenan 73). They knew someone named Horace, but he is unsure whether the Horace they knew was the real Horace or a sham Horace. This renders his perception of his relationship with them painfully ambiguous. On the one hand, he recognizes them as "his folk, his kin," and yet at the same time, "it was from them he was running" (Kenan 73). This simultaneous attraction and repulsion toward the people in relation to which he has constructed his identity disturbs his ability to recognize himself as one person: a singular, cohesive individual named Horace.

The "phantomic" nature of the racial melancholia Cheng describes is crucial in understanding how some states of melancholy cannibalism, such as Horace's, and the depressive position in which it mires him, are both more constricting and less escapable for some subjects than for others. While Horace's "spectral drama" may indeed be populated by ghosts and phantoms, Kenan's text refuses to provide a clear bifurcation between the world of Horace's phantasmagoric visions and the "real" world, just as it refuses to dismiss the fantasy system of the family-nexus as a delusion or a form of false consciousness. These phantoms are very real. They are tangible psychic remnants of the past, Horace's past, his family's past, and his community's past, the history of racialized violence that perpetually haunts his and their present existence. In this way, the text presents Horace's depression as a fusion of multiple traumas operating at multiple temporal scales: historical trauma driven by the legacy of slavery and racism in the South, familial traumas that have fractured the Cross family over multiple generations

and threatened them with a racialized emasculation, and Horace's personal traumatic experiences, which are driven by the persistent fracturing of his sense of self. All of these complex figurations of trauma coalesce within Horace's psychic reality in every moment of his waking life and, in doing so, cause Horace to experience these traumatic wounds over and over again. He must bear the weight, and the pain, of not only his own personal trauma, but also of the trauma he has inherited, and he must bear it for the rest of his life. This is perhaps why, upon viewing this spectral precession, Horace notes that "here was community, not a word but a being" (Kenan 73). It is a community that simultaneously includes and excludes him, leaving him unsure of his place in the world, and confused about who or what he is. A part of him, the part that identifies with the Cross family, is welcomed into this community, but another, equally important part of him, the part that desires a romantic connection with others, is not.

The fact that these apparitions take the form of a Church congregation listening to a fire and brimstone sermon suggests that their role in Horace's psyche is to pass moral judgment. In this sermon, Reverend Barden denounces "men and men, women and women- help me, Jesus- living together in sin," contrasting them with "men and women living and loving together as our Lord prescribed it" (Kenan 78). This parallel binary opposition of heterosexuality/homosexuality and moral/immoral is a permanent fixture within Horace's self-evaluative process. Due to the perpetual presence of this "ghostly congregation," this process repeats itself over and over, a repetition that takes the form of rumination for the depressed Horace. This past over which Horace is constantly ruminating is presented to him as a choice between two unacceptable losses: he can either accept the moral judgment of these ghosts and renounce his desire and the possibility for romantic love, or he can reject their judgment and thus lose his connection with the past they represent and the love of his family, which is embedded within that connection. Either way, Horace sacrifices a love without which he cannot live. As such, the act of love, for Horace, is always also an act of suicide, an impossible choice to consent either to a kind of castration via

the violent excision of his own sexual and romantic desires, or to a social death wherein he is severed not only from his family and his community, but from the identity and sense of purpose he derives from his connection with them: “his reason for existing, it would seem, was for the salvation of his people” (Kenan 188). His indecision to completely renounce one or the other of these essential loves freezes him in a static state in which he experiences both losses as always imminent. This state of perpetual indecision mires him in place at a fork in the road, looking forward to the many possible futures unfolding before him that he can never pursue because each one would require him either to deny the very basis of his sexual identity or to endure an unending state of moral shame.

If the “ghosts of the past” who seek to forestall the movement of history are “the presence of the present” (Kenan 73), then simply living in the present, the only moment in which deliberate action is possible, means being imprisoned within a past that precludes the possibility of change. Wade Newhouse draws attention to the ability of Kenan’s fiction to “get beyond a simplistic view of history as linear and “progress” as teleological” (Newhouse 239), and yet getting “beyond” teleology does not grant Horace any sense of triumph, self-affirmation, liberation, or newfound personal agency. Rather, it strictly delimits the boundaries for personal and community growth, because “this blurring of distinct temporal labels ensures that the prejudices and repressive gendered norms of one era become fixed and reincarnated (so to speak) in each new generation” (Newhouse 239). Here, the rejection of teleology implies not a temporal flux that offers a freedom of movement between past, present, and future, but rather a temporal stasis in which the past, present, and future become indistinct, rendering movement between them impossible. It is precisely this absence of teleology that prevents Horace from moving beyond the depressive position.

Jose Munoz describes this frozen present, which he calls “straight time,” as an “autonaturalizing temporality” that “tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life” (Munoz 22). He emphasizes the myopic linearity of reproductive futurity, which reserves the future entirely for

heteronormative subjects by defining it as the horizon of a reproductive teleology, thus imprisoning queers within what he calls “the affective force-field of the present” (Munoz 25). This force-field forecloses the possibility for depressed queers to extricate themselves from the present reality in which they are depressed. Certainly, this characterizes Horace Cross’s experience of the present and the temporal dimensions of his depression. Yet Munoz’s description of “straight time” as an “autonaturalizing temporality” might also be used as a framework for understanding the temporality of depression more generally, at least as it relates to historical and racial trauma. The static temporality of depression transforms everyday life into a negative feedback loop in which every action an individual takes to mitigate the suffering imposed by the intolerable conditions of their present existence merely reproduces those conditions in a more intense state. The intolerable present extends outward infinitely, enveloping both the past, whose traumas are reified and amplified by cyclical rumination, and the future, which appears only as a projection of the worst fears those traumas instill within the imagination. Because of the circular nature of this feedback loop, it offers no possibility to move outside of it- the only options that present themselves are to remain stuck in an unending decision paralysis or to put a stop to the suffering through literal suicide, as Horace does.

It is, I argue, the happiness imperative that prevents the depressive subject from escaping the frozen present of depression, and I would point once again to positive psychology, which is really more of a cultural paradigm than a therapeutic technique, as a reification of this imperative. The goal of positive psychology is not just to make people happy, but to make them happy within the present conditions of their social reality. It is about helping people foster and maintain a positive attitude about the world as it currently is, assuming that adjusting one’s attitude can allow one to experience the world in a more positive and empowering way. Mental illness is thus understood as a failure to maintain a positive orientation toward the social world as such. According to this logic, it is not the world that has failed to accommodate the mentally ill, but the mentally ill who have, by virtue of some internal barrier that must

be broken, failed to align themselves correctly with the natural flow of social life. The teleology of positive psychology, if it can be said to have one, is oriented toward preserving present social conditions by fostering greater reliance upon and attachment to them¹⁰. In that way, the temporality of positive psychology parallels the static temporality of depression, so that like depression, positive psychology merely serves to trap the mentally ill subject within an intolerable present.

Of course, this imperative to “make happy” inevitably manifests, as Sara Ahmed points out, as a *demand* that people be happy, that they make themselves happy or force themselves to perform an affective expression that signifies to others that they are happy. Positive psychology might therefore be understood as part of a larger biopolitical paradigm aimed at reproducing the currently hegemonic social order and cultural norms by managing people’s emotional relations to this order and to these norms. It becomes, perhaps unintentionally, an instrument of white supremacy when it asks black, queer subjects like Horace to express positive feelings toward the very objects and conditions which instill in them the feelings of despair and hopelessness associated with their depression. The worst act of emotional violence positive psychology inflicts upon black subjects, queer subjects, neurodivergent subjects, and any other subjects whose life experiences do not put them in a position from which dominant “cultural

¹⁰ The concept of emotional biopolitics I discuss here owes much to Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*, which draws attention to the fantastic nature of these types of attachments. Berlant observes that “the affective structure of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way” (Berlant 2). This weaponization of (false) hope, through which neoliberalism compels individuals and groups to continuously reinvest themselves emotionally, and by extension socially, economically, and politically, in myths, institutions, norms, and forms of social organization that are actively harmful to them is mirrored in positive psychology. From the perspective of positive psychology, a person’s inability to see a silver lining in a bad situation is not evidence of the absence of such, but merely indicative of a need for that person to reorient themselves to that situation, to see it from a different angle. Rather than empowering individuals to cultivate a more authentic relationship with the empirical elements of their reality, it does precisely the opposite: subsuming the individual’s relation to that reality into the domain of fantasy through an over-psychologization of perceptual experience that recasts genuine, external sources of pain and suffering as mere mental projections that can be counteracted through mental processes. If, for example, a patient claims they are depressed because they cannot find a job, this is assumed to be a kind of false consciousness: their failure to find a job stems from their own self-fulfilling belief that they cannot find one rather than from any real political, economic, or social conditions.

norms and values can guide them toward what they consider to be “the good life” (Seligman 5), is to keep moving, incessantly, the affective goalposts for what a person must do to remain an ostensibly prosocial, upstanding individual. It is no longer sufficient merely to tolerate painful life circumstances and the structures which produce those circumstances; they must also smile while doing so. What positive psychology, and the larger structure of the happiness imperative that it scaffolds, demands of black, queer, and/or neurodivergent subjects is that they force themselves to love, or at least appear to love, the very objects, structures, and norms that make their social existence intolerable in the first place.

Chapter Three: Detached (Non)Subjectivity: Derealization and Dissociated

Consciousness in Anna Kavan's *Asylum Piece* and *Ice*

One of the key representational challenges dissociative states present for literary storytelling is that they are defined in large part by a lack of subjectivity. A person who is dissociating becomes detached not only from the world around them, but also from their own body and even their own thoughts and feelings. The question I wish to pose in this chapter is: what types of attachments are still available to the dissociating person, through which they might ground themselves and maintain some semblance of a sense of reality? If the self cannot be located in the mind, or the body, or even in the world, then what locus of subjectivity remains from which to tell a story about a uniquely subjective experience? Moreover, what kinds of thoughts and feelings define this experience of being in the world in a physical sense, but *feeling* outside it? This chapter will address these questions through a sustained analysis of two literary works by Anna Kavan: a loosely connected collection of short stories titled *Asylum Piece* and her final novel: *Ice*. Rather than merely providing insights into the interiority of a person struggling with dissociation, these texts embody the experience of dissociation at the narrative level in such a way that the psychic reality presented in these stories can only be metabolized via a kind of dissociative experience. In doing so, they show how dissociation manifests not merely within the mind of the dissociating subject, but rather in the forms of relationality, and sometimes non-relationality, which emerge between the dissociating subject and the body-mind-world.

Anna Kavan's own experiences with mental illness, which included a lifelong struggle with depression and heroin addiction that was accompanied by a lifelong use of psychiatric services, must be acknowledged, especially if one seeks to read these texts as fictional embodiments of an experience of mental illness. The extent to which either *Asylum Piece* or *Ice* should be read as autobiographical or

semiautobiographical is difficult to answer in any definitive way. Notably, Kavan wrote *Asylum Piece*, a text which deals explicitly with the psychosocial dimensions of asylum life, while she herself was hospitalized in a mental asylum in Switzerland. It was also during this time that she adopted the pen-name "Anna Kavan," which was not her given name but rather the name of the protagonist of two of her previous novels. At the very least, this name-change blurs the boundaries between the lives of her fictional characters and her own life. It is essential to remember, however, that regardless of any similarities one might draw between the author's life and the lives of the characters in the text, *Asylum Piece* is written as a work of fiction, not an autobiography, and demands to be read as such. Carole Sweeney has drawn attention to the tendency of some Anna Kavan critics "to reduce her creativity to pathology, whereby her work is entirely subsumed into her construction as an 'addict writer'" (Sweeney 324). So as not to replicate this disempowering gesture, I will not read any of the characters in these works, or their experiences, as explicit, one-to-one analogues for the author or her own experiences. Instead, I consider that Anna Kavan's own life experiences, including her heroin addiction and her extended internment in a mental asylum, grant her a greater insight, both intellectual and visceral, into the effects of mental illness upon a person's body, mind, and world, and thus lend greater thickness to her representations of the experience of mentally ill life.

With these considerations in mind, I will not analyze dissociation as an empirical, clinical construct, wherein it might be defined as Dissociative Identity Disorder, Depersonalization Disorder, Derealization Disorder, or another clearly delineated biomedical category. Though this chapter does address literary depictions of depersonalization, derealization, and other dissociative experiences, it does not do so from the position of the psychiatrist or psychoanalyst, meaning that diagnosis and etiology are not among its objectives. That is to say, I will not presume to diagnose any of Anna Kavan's characters with any particular dissociative disorder. Instead, I will be investigating how Kavan's literary oeuvre represents dissociation, and along with it, depersonalization and derealization, as a non-

delineated *experience*, which may or may not be a symptom of one or another of the many mental disorders of which it is considered a symptom. To that end, rather than examining dissociation within an etiological framework, this chapter examines the representational and ontological aspects of dissociation that are often neglected by scientizing approaches. The problems this chapter attempts to address involve, first, the question of how to represent dissociation as a physically grounded, embodied, and mental experience, which is principally a phenomenological problem, and second, how the dissociating subject understands their own positionality vis a vis the body-mind-world and how this understanding impacts their sense of self, which is principally an ontological problem. These problems present themselves, in Kavan's work, within her representations of the complex relationality, and often indistinction, between the body, mind, and world of the dissociating subject. To attend to this representation of dissociation as a phenomenon that moves across bodies, minds, and worlds, I draw not only from psychoanalytic criticism, but also from strains of ecocritical thought that attend to the agency of the nonhuman, an agency that manifests throughout Kavan's work in ways that are both surprising and integral to her construction of dissociative body-mind-worlds.

It is my contention that both *Asylum Piece* and *Ice* embody the experience of a derealization within which the impossibility of distinguishing between reality and fantasy presents itself to the dissociating subject not as a mental and/or physiological problem that can be resolved through curative practices, but rather as a permanent, or at least semi-permanent, state of being to which this subject must adapt. Furthermore, to the extent to which reality and fantasy do exist as distinct concepts, they have a reciprocal influence upon one another: in Kavan's fiction, what manifests in the realm of fantasy is projected onto real bodies, minds, and landscapes, warping them, while, simultaneously, real-world phenomena penetrate fantasies, reconstructing them from within in ways over which characters have no control, and of which they often have no awareness. In that sense, the question of whether or not something is real or imagined, whether a phenomenon exists in the domain of reality or the domain of

fantasy, is impossible to answer for the dissociating subjects in Kavan's texts. As the viewpoint character in *Ice* observes: "reality had always been something of an unknown quantity to me" (*Ice* 6). For these characters, the "realness" of any given event, interaction, person, object, or phenomenon is always subject to doubt. By extension, it is impossible for the dissociating consciousness definitively to dismiss anything as not real since the division between the real and unreal is perpetually mired in a haze of uncertainty. It is precisely this type of dissociating consciousness which I will explore throughout this chapter.

I.

Before delving into an analysis of Kavan's representations of dissociative experiences, it will be useful to provide a sort of baseline, working definition of dissociation as I will be using it in this chapter. To that end, I point to what Harry Stack Sullivan has called the "not-me," and his elaboration of its relation to dissociative experiences. Sullivan theorizes three aspects of the self, which he calls "personifications": the good-me, the bad-me, and the not-me. The good-me, broadly speaking, is an amalgamation of those aspects of the self that are perceived as good because they are met with social approval, while the bad-me encompasses those aspects of the self that induce feelings of anxiety or shame because they have been met with the type of social response that provokes those emotions. Consequently, one attempts to externalize the good-me and suppress or disguise the bad-me, to protect oneself from anxiety and other unpleasant feelings. Within this formation, anxiety is purely a social phenomenon, produced by social interactions and, moreover, the subject's perception and interpretation of these interactions.

The not-me is also a social phenomenon, but it is qualitatively distinct from the good-me and bad-me in that the individual is unaware of it and also unaware of the social phenomena which trigger its existence. Sullivan posits that "the not-me is literally the organization of experience with significant people that has been subjected to such intense anxiety, and anxiety so suddenly precipitated, that it was

impossible for the then relatively rudimentary person to make any sense of, to develop any true grasp on, the particular circumstances which dictated the experience of this intense anxiety” (Sullivan 314). In other words, the not-me encompasses those memories, feelings, interactions, and experiences that are so traumatic and/or anxiety-inducing that neither repression nor denial nor any other kind of ego-defense mechanism proves sufficient to manage them in a way that alleviates the overwhelming distress they provoke. As a result, the only way the mind can deal with them is to banish them entirely from the subject’s conscious existence, confining them to an inaccessible, unconscious part of the psyche called the “not-me.” In practice, the not-me does not, must not, exist as a part of the self.

Regarding the actual psychic content of the not-me, Sullivan suggests that the subject “will show a sort of hole in that area,” and that any experience that approaches it “will ultimately lead to the appearance of a feeling which has scarcely evolved beyond sudden, intense, all-encompassing anxiety” (Sullivan 315). This is a profoundly visceral experience, which Sullivan likens to “a blow on the head” (Sullivan 315). This overpowering, uncontrollable, essentially instinctual fear-response, which is primarily physiological, is itself a kind of barrier preventing the not-me from entering the subject’s consciousness. As Sullivan describes it: “one is, as it were, lifted entirely out of the context of life” (Sullivan 315). Because of this, the not-me emerges almost exclusively within the context of dissociative episodes, though Sullivan acknowledges that it can occasionally present itself in dreams, albeit couched in metaphor. When it does appear, the one to whom it appears must perceive it as something happening to someone else, which necessitates a disconnection from one’s environment (derealization) if it presents itself there, or from one’s own body-mind (depersonalization) if it presents itself there. If, as I argued in my introduction, the absolute cleavage of the body, mind, and world is a Cartesian fallacy, and these three components are actually inextricably imbricated within one another, then the emergence of the not-me prompts a dissociation from the body-mind-world writ large. This again raises the question: how might literary narrative create the space for subjectivity and consciousness to exist even when one is

dissociating, so that the violence of dissociation can be understood, in concrete terms, as something that happens to, and is experienced by, an actual person?

To that end, it may be helpful to return to the notion of personification. Sullivan's use of that term to describe the good-me, bad-me, and not-me suggests that these three figures might be understood as three distinct persons coexisting within the same body. This means that, rather than a triangulation of these three personifications that produces a totalizing subject as an amalgamation of all of them, they remain separate, such that each of these three parts of the person is substituted for the whole person in any given situation in which they emerge. Within Sullivan's self-system, the integrity, and even the survival, of the psyche is actually dependent upon this self-fragmentation. This is especially true of the not-me, which by definition cannot be acknowledged as part of the self because it is too traumatizing. That is why, for instance, the clinical understanding of dissociative identity disorder posits that the psyche creates a separate personality to whom those memories and experiences which comprise the not-me are assigned. This produces, essentially, an entirely new person dwelling in the same body but living a completely divergent existence.

Yet the utility of personification as both a psychological and narrative concept is not limited to the description of "dissociative identity disorder" or any other particular clinical construct. At its most basic level, personification allows for entities that are not persons or are not understood as persons to nonetheless be represented as persons. As a literary device, personification might therefore assist in representing, concretely, the perspective and the lived experience of a person who has come to perceive themselves as nonhuman or even as an abstraction. A person who is dissociating may find other people's recognition of them as a distinct, individuated subject to be a kind of personification, whereby those people attribute to them, or perhaps project onto them, some concrete, clearly-defined identity which they themselves feel to be false. These personifications produce, for the dissociating subject, a kind of reversal of what Lacan has called misrecognition: rather than mistaking a false image of the self, such as

one's reflection in the mirror, for one's real self, the dissociating subject recognizes their own body-mind as a false image, almost a kind of impostor. But from the dissociated perspective, it is the other person who is guilty of misrecognition when they perform this personifying gesture.

To be clear, I am attempting neither to lend credence nor to dismiss the perspective of either party, as to do so would, in either case, entail misrecognizing an entirely subjective valuation as an objective truth-claim. Instead, I seek to highlight three key roles personification might play in the literary portrayal of dissociated consciousness. First, because the very act of personification presumes that the thing being personified is not literally a person, it exposes the artifice which, from the perspective of the dissociating subject, is integral to the construction of their own personhood. Second, it makes room for the representation of the not-me as an independent, agential subject that exerts influence upon the world. In Kavan's fictions, psychic trauma is externalized and projected onto other entities, human or nonhuman, who then become personifications of that trauma. This is particularly evident in *Ice*, wherein the girl's entire psychic reality is enveloped by the not-me, that is to say, immersed entirely within a set of conditions which her conscious self cannot, for the sake of its own protection, recognize as real. The girl is always not herself.

The third, and perhaps most important, role of personification in Kavan's work is to enable the many animate forces that define personhood to be distributed across a multitude of nonhuman entities that are, by virtue of this gesture, transformed into persons. By virtue of this personification, these entities attain the myriad forms of animacy, agency, and even intentionality that are often presumed to be exclusive to human persons. At the same time, the human figures that appear throughout these texts are often given qualities that are normally associated with nonhuman entities or, in many cases, inanimate objects. Both *Asylum Piece* and *Ice* use personification as a strategy for bringing these aspects of distributed consciousness into the same frame in order to tell a story about a singular psychic experience. This projection of various aspects of the internal self outward onto both external objects and

other subjects, along with the reciprocal absorption of aspects of those objects and subjects into the internal self, brings to light associations between some of these other entities that might not otherwise reveal themselves. This provides space to imagine dissociation not as a bounded psychic phenomenon contained within a single person's mind, but rather as a form of relationality that emerges between the body, the mind, and the world, and which traverses multiple subjects and objects.

All of this fluidity is integral to the representation of mental illness, in both *Asylum Piece* and *Ice*, as an undifferentiated, unbounded, and somewhat amorphous phenomenon. There are obvious symptoms of depression, anxiety, drug addiction, and schizophrenia, among other things, but none of these are segmented into separate, individuated categories of experience that might be labeled as distinct "disorders," "diseases," or even "disabilities." Instead, they are all part of the general inertial flow of mentally ill life. Dissociation, both in Kavan's texts and in real life, is often a product of these conditions, and it also exacerbates these conditions. Furthermore, at the same time as mental illness, as represented in Anna Kavan's work, cannot be contained within a singular diagnostic category, it also transcends other boundaries that are crucial for the process of individuation. Not only does her work erode the boundaries between body, mind, and world, often in a violent manner, but her work also creates a spatiotemporal confusion whereby phenomena, including subjects, objects, and relations between subjects and objects, become dislocated in space-time. As a result of this confusion, it becomes impossible to pinpoint where or when something happened, and thus difficult to extrapolate coherent causal relations between different phenomena. Neither *Asylum Piece* nor *Ice* presents the reader with a single traumatic event or primal scene that can function as the origin point of any given character's dissociative episode. This means that there is no temporal bifurcation between a putatively normal state in which the subject is firmly grounded in reality and a dissociative state in which the subject's sense of reality has become eroded. A consequence of this is that these two texts offer the reader no choice but to inhabit the dissociative reality of the viewpoint character and, by extension, to experience as real the

associations this character perceives between external phenomena, even when the causal logic behind these associations is not entirely clear.

II.

The story “Machines in the Head,” which appears in *Asylum Piece*, offers a useful metaphor for imagining the subject-position of a dissociated consciousness. The story begins with the unnamed speaker engaged in conflict with her own body-mind, which has forced her to awaken when she wished to remain asleep. She describes this conflict thusly: “I am awake now for good, or rather, for bad; the wheels, my masters, are already vibrating with incipient motion; the whole mechanism is preparing to begin the monotonous, hateful functioning of which I am the dispirited slave” (Kavan 115). Notably, this speaker does not identify herself with her body and brain; instead, the body and brain are externalized as wheels in some complex machinery that controls her. There are at least three levels of dissociation at play here. First, she disidentifies with her own body-mind. Second, she mechanizes that body-mind, turning it into an inhuman machine that acts with all of the empathy and compassion with which one might expect a machine to act. Finally, she personifies this machine as a separate being with its own intentionality by attempting to bargain with it: “only let me have a little more sleep – an hour – half an hour – that’s all I ask” (*Asylum Piece* 115). Yet this act of personification merely serves to emphasize the fact that her body-mind is *not* a person, that it becomes a person only through her own anthropomorphic projection. As such, she resigns herself to being unable to reason with her body-mind, asking herself: “what’s the good of appealing to senseless machinery?” (*Asylum Piece* 116), thus returning the body-mind to its status as an object that is animate but lacks intentionality. In this moment, the only path she can see out of her immediate state of distress is to beg this uncaring, unthinking machinery to allow her a brief moment of reprieve, and she is well aware that even this is a futile endeavor. From her perspective, her relationship with her body-mind is one of a “dispirited slave”

to its “master,” which, given the pain this relationship evokes within her, might be analogized to a relationship between a victim of abuse and the perpetrator of said abuse.

This story begs the question: if the speaker is neither her body nor her mind, nor the combination of these, and if both the body and mind have been relegated to the not-me, then who, what, and where is the entity that is speaking? Certainly, there is a subjectivity here, as the narrator refers to herself in the first person, but it is clear that this subjectivity cannot be identified with the body-mind it occupies. How, then, might she be identified? The difficulty of answering this question is highlighted by her reaction when she sees a reflection of her own face: “it wears a pale, beaten, lonely look, eyes looking out at nothing with an expression of fear, frightened and lonely in a nightmare world” (*Asylum Piece* 118). While most people tend to identify others through their face when they are attempting to identify them visually, and to recognize themselves upon seeing their own face, this does not happen for this speaker, who sees her face only as an “it.” She recognizes the affect expressed in this face and is able to infer from that the emotional state of the subject behind this face as well as its relationship to the world it inhabits. At a basic physiological level, she feels these feelings, she dwells within this “nightmare world,” yet she nonetheless cannot recognize this face as herself, nor its affect as an expression of her own emotions.

Of course, there is more than identity at stake here, as the “machines in the head” cause her intense pain and even influence her behavior: “this morning it drives me to rebellion, to madness; I want to batter my head on the walls, to shatter my head with bullets, to beat the machines into pulp, into powder, along with my skull” (*Asylum Piece* 115). She feels this desire to hurt herself, this inclination toward violent self-destruction, yet these feelings are not *her* feelings- they are the machinations of her body-mind, which, again, is not a part of her, but rather a part of the not-me, the not-her. The dissociated consciousness may be able to acknowledge, in a detached, strictly intellectual sense, that this body-mind is, within the context of normative social relations, identified as her. However, the body-

mind does not *feel* like her- she feels no association with it nor attachment to it. For the dissociated subject in this story, the thoughts she has and the sensations she experiences do not grant her the feeling of embodied personhood. Yet, despite her dissociation from these thoughts and sensations, she cannot disconnect herself from their cognitive and physiological effects, such that the violence they inflict upon her is very tangible and real. Her experience of everyday life is thus one in which she is constantly forced to feel painful, violent feelings that are not her own, but instead merely the negative externalities of the operations of an inhuman machine that are offset onto her.

This extended metaphor opens a path to imagine dissociation not strictly as a state of mind or mental process, but as a contingent form of relationality triggered by a specific confluence of events that are variously internal and external. For example, the speaker in “Machines in the Head” is initially awoken by “some quite trivial, distant noise,” which she acknowledges “has nothing to do with me, to which there is not the slightest need for me to pay attention” (*Asylum Piece* 115). On the one hand, her body-mind forces her to pay attention to this noise against her will, but on the other hand, the noise seems to possess an agency of its own: “it suffices to awaken me, and in no gentle way either, but savagely, violently, shockingly” (*Asylum Piece* 115). Like the machines in her head, the noise is personified as an agent with its own violent intentionality and, in a sense, this outside force conspires with the machines in her head to force her out of her peaceful slumber and subject her to the unending pain of her waking existence. The form of relationality that exists between the speaker and this noise is the same as that which exists between her and her own body-mind. She is equally disconnected from both while, at the same time, they are all connected with each other in a conspiratorial manner.

This notion of the body-mind as a kind of antagonistic machinery, separate from the subject but contiguous with the other external forces that act upon the subject, is integral to understanding the representations of dissociation that occur throughout the rest of *Asylum Piece*. I should note here that I read the viewpoint characters in each of the stories throughout this collection, with the exception of the

titular story, as being the same person. A number of secondary characters recur throughout multiple stories in which they maintain the same kind of relationship to the speaker, and the speakers in these stories possess a singular voice and use similar metaphors and motifs to describe their experiences. With that in mind, the best way to understand this text's representation of dissociation in terms of relationality would be to examine the ways that this particular person perceives and relates to both human and nonhuman others.

For the most part, the human figures that appear in *Asylum Piece* all share certain characteristics: coldness, deceitfulness, and a penchant for arbitrary cruelty. The strange woman who visits the speaker's apartment in the Kafkaesque "An Unpleasant Reminder" is an archetypal example of this figure. When questioned about the purpose of her visit, the visitor says: "you know, I'm really sorry to give you this," and then, without any further clarification, hands the speaker a pillbox with "four white pellets inside" (*Asylum Piece* 109). The speaker perceives this as a disciplinary gesture, deducing from it that "the judgment which I had awaited so long had at last been passed upon me" (*Asylum Piece* 109). No further information is provided regarding the specifics of this judgment but, considering she ends up taking the pills into the bathroom "like a doomed person" (*Asylum Piece* 110) and then swallowing them "in despair" (*Asylum Piece* 111), it seems safe to conclude that she was sentenced to commit suicide, a sentence which she laments "was conveyed to me in such a casual, unostentatious way" (*Asylum Piece* 108). This disjuncture between her own acute, suicidal despair and the casual, unconcerned demeanor of the woman witnessing and actively compounding that despair reinforces the speaker's disconnection and exclusion from the world around her. Throughout *Asylum Piece*, none of the people around the narrator, whether they be her caretakers, her doctors, her friends, or even her family react to her distress with surprise or concern or any other emotion that would suggest that they had registered her distress in any way. This lack of reaction fosters the perception that her affect, emotions, and state of mind are illegible, perhaps even alien, to other human beings. This makes identification with these other

people impossible, and furthermore, makes it seem to her as though it is impossible for them to identify with her. To perceive herself as one of them would be to disavow her own feelings and perceptions, while acknowledging those feelings and perceptions means isolating herself from other humans, and perhaps, within her own self-narrative, from the ontological condition of being human.

This visitor in "An Unpleasant Reminder" thus functions as an extension of the "senseless" machines in the head. The narrator describes the woman as "an official messenger whose words had acquired a fatal portentousness" (*Asylum Piece* 109), a description which coincides with the description of the body-mind in "Machines in the Head." The fact that the speaker seems to have no choice but to take the pills suggests that the sentences passed by this woman possess a rigid, unappealable finality, something they have in common with those passed by the machines in the head. Both figures display complete indifference to the speaker's suffering, while, at the same time, wielding absolute control over her life and completely marginalizing her own agency. Indeed, the speaker's entire encounter with the strange woman ends up serving no purpose other than to reinforce her sense of powerlessness, as the pills end up being placebos and the stranger vanishes without a word, leading the speaker to conclude that "the whole episode had been a cruel hoax, just a reminder of what is in store for me" (*Asylum Piece* 111). As such, the woman ends up representing nothing but the embodiment of an act of pointless cruelty, and that is precisely the role nearly every other human figure in *Asylum Piece* plays in the speaker's life. The only form of relationality that exists between the speaker and other human beings is an entirely arbitrary and unidirectional application of disciplinary violence. But this relationality cannot be identified as merely a consequence of the speaker's own perception of other people, when the actions of those other people constantly reinforce that perception.

This perception of humanity underlies the speaker's dissociation from the very concept of the human. It would not be accurate, however, to assert that this dissociation is exclusively a product of the behaviors of others. The dissociative subject also plays an active role in it. For example, the speaker in

“An Unpleasant Reminder” wonders whether the strange woman “told [her] in so many words” or whether “[she] simply deduced” that she was to commit suicide with the pills (*Asylum Piece* 108). There is a level of ambiguity in the story’s representation of the encounter that makes it impossible to discern which of these two interpretations of the events is correct. In actuality, it is not an either/or situation; the visitor makes certain insinuations, and the speaker fills in the blanks. The dissociative relation, in this case, might thus be understood as a co-production of the two subjects which are brought into relation. On the one hand, the visitor initiates the encounter and, whether out of active cruelty or passive insensitivity, creates the conditions that trigger the speaker’s suicide attempt. On the other hand, the speaker’s expectations regarding how others will regard her, and how they will treat her, also play a role in coloring her interpretation of the situation and hence her response to it. Yet these expectations are themselves, at least in part, the product of the cruel, callous behavior of other humans she has encountered in the past, such that these expectations are not entirely unwarranted. If the entire story essentially serves to portray a specific moment in which a subject is acutely experiencing mental illness, then the story presents the phenomenon of mental illness as a convoluted interaction between the subject’s own mental processes and the actions of an external agent. Both of these are mutually reinforcing, to the point that it is almost impossible to parse these things as separate phenomena or influences.

If this ambiguity obscures, to some extent, the immediate causes of these dissociative experiences, it does not obscure their effects or, more importantly, the way those effects are experienced by the dissociating subject. One of the advantages of examining dissociation from a phenomenological perspective rather than from a strictly etiological one is that one can recognize the ways that dissociation interacts and overlaps with other forms of mentation without needing to draw any conclusions regarding the causal relationships between them. The central viewpoint character that recurs throughout *Asylum Piece* harbors a deep mistrust of other humans, which often manifests in the

form of paranoia or persecutory fears, and these fears coexist with, and sometimes enframe, her dissociative experiences. In "The Enemy," the speaker reflects that "somewhere in the world I have an implacable enemy although I do not know his name" (*Asylum Piece* 31). She posits that "it seems quite impossible for me to make any decision – even concerning such a trifling matter as visiting a friend for the evening – without my enemy knowing about it and taking steps to ensure my discomfiture" (*Asylum Piece* 31). Her fear of this unknown enemy thus pervades every aspect of her social life and inscribes her social relationships with others within her own existential conflict. Indeed, she acknowledges that "the fact that I know absolutely nothing about him makes life intolerable, for I am obliged to look upon everybody with equal suspicion" (*Asylum Piece* 32). She is thus perpetually mired in a state of unresolvable and paralyzing uncertainty regarding the extent to which her fears match the reality of her immediate situation, such that every moment of her life holds within it the maximum potential for mortal danger. Yet this paranoia does not exist in a vacuum; her fears are very specific and explicitly related to her social and legal status as a person with mental illness. She imagines this omnipresent existential threat, and its endpoint, thusly: "there will be no revolvers, no handcuffs; everything will be quiet and orderly with two or three men in uniform, and one of them will carry a hypodermic syringe" (*Asylum Piece* 33-34). In short, her greatest fear is to be committed, against her will, to a mental asylum where she will be stripped of her rights and her dignity as a free person. While this scenario is her greatest fear, her assertion that this "will" happen suggests that she has accepted it as an inevitability, as if all her life experiences were merely the prelude to this eventuality.

The unknowability of her "enemy" means that every social interaction carries with it the threat of involuntary commitment. Individual humans become inextricably entangled with the myriad formal institutions and psychosocial power structures involved in the persecution of the mentally ill to such an extent that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate between persons and institutions. The various human figures that appear throughout *Asylum Piece* thus function as personifications of all of

these oppressive forces converging upon mentally ill persons. At the same time, each of these figures acts as the embodiment of the persecutory fears of the speaker, which are based on her broader perception of humanity. I use the term “personification” here much in the same way as it is used by Harry Stack Sullivan. Just as the “good me” and the “bad me” are personifications of certain aspects of a person’s sense of self, these figures are personifications of certain aspects of (the speaker’s perception of) humanity. The paranoia the speaker in “The Enemy” demonstrates is thus linked to her dissociation in that both emerge in response to her inability to escape the mental and environmental conditions which precipitate her trauma. For her, the trauma derived from her experiences with psychiatric institutions, including those which stem from previous involuntary commitment to a mental asylum, combined with the failure of those around her to understand this trauma or to protect her from those who instigated it, leads to an estrangement from humanity writ large and a mistrust of individual humans. The humans she encounters betray a callous indifference to her predicament at best, and, at worst, act as agents of the very institutions that seek to return her to the site of her most intense traumatic experiences. One prime example is the so-called friend in “The Summons.” This friend not only fails to protect her from the “man in uniform” (Asylum Piece 92) who arrives during their friendly dinner to forcibly return her to the mental asylum, but actively encourages her to submit to that man and even insinuates that he was the one who called the man in the first place.

But perhaps the most egregious example of this entwinement of paranoia and dissociation emerges in her relationship with her psychiatrist, whom she refers to as her “advisor,” and in whom all the various cruelties she associates with humanity seem to coalesce. The term “advisor” is used ironically here: his ostensible job description is to assist her in managing her mental illness. In practice, however, he is the gatekeeper who prevents her from obtaining this kind of assistance. She asks of him a question which many patients ask of their therapists: “why won’t you tell me what I ought to do...why can’t you give me a definite line of conduct and save me from all this suffering and uncertainty?”

(*Asylum Piece 75*). In response to this plea, she is accused of “avoiding responsibility” (*Asylum Piece 75*). So, rather than receiving the concrete, actionable advice she has requested, she is shamed for asking for it, which only compounds her suffering and self-loathing. This weaponization of shame is, unfortunately, all too common in the therapist-patient relationship. At the same time, however, this advisor is her only point of access to any and all forms of psychotherapy which she hopes might help her. So, when he informs her that “he was just about to start on a holiday of indefinite length and would undertake no further work until his return” (*Asylum Piece 70*), she is deprived of this access entirely.

One of the speaker’s primary concerns regarding her advisor is that his face reminds her of a mugshot of a murderer she had once seen in a newspaper. After one session with the advisor, she retrieves this old newspaper, and notices that: “the face of the young assassin, gazing darkly at me from the page, was, in all essentials, the same black-browed face that had confronted me a short time previously in the curtained seclusion of his handsome room” (*Asylum Piece 59*). As a result of their apparent similarity, these two figures: the advisor and the assassin, fade into one another, blending together into a single figure. This can be understood as a dissociation of sorts: because the viewpoint character cannot understand herself as a singular, bounded human subject in full possession of her body-mind, she cannot view others that way either. She cannot perceive her advisor as a singular, individual human being. She understands, at an intellectual level, that her advisor and this assassin are two separate people. As such, she attempts to question the association she has made between them, asking herself: “is it possible for a man to resemble a certain murderer in his outward appearance without possessing himself any violent tendencies?” (*Asylum Piece 59-60*). But they do not *feel* to her like two different people. This separation between what one *knows* and what one *feels* is a defining aspect of dissociation. This is a key distinction between dissociation and delusion. The dissociating subject is not delusional. They do not fully believe in the objective truth of everything they sense and feel when their feelings contradict what they can logically discern to be true in a given situation. On the

contrary, their senses are subject to extreme doubt. But even if the dissociating subject knows something to be true, this knowledge does not always integrate into the reality they experience in such a way that would enable them to act strictly in accordance with that truth. That is to say, the dissociating subject knows that certain aspects of the reality they are experiencing are not real, but because they *feel* real, it seems impossible not to act in accordance with the presumption that they are real. Even though the viewpoint character realizes that the association her mind has created between these two people is irrational, the association insinuates itself into her psychic reality and takes root there. As such, she feels a need to approach her present circumstances as if there were a genuine affinity between her advisor and this murderer, and thus feels the need to request reassignment to a different advisor.

There are of course other factors, beyond the similar appearance, that strengthen this association- namely, her advisor's role as a mental health care practitioner. Within the viewpoint character's psychic reality, the advisor functions as the personification of the entire institution of medical psychiatry. This perspective has some basis in reality, as he is the only interface through which she, as a mentally ill person, can access that institution and the structures of care it offers. This means that her relationship with him is, from her perspective, infused with all of the possibilities, fears, and abuses that have, throughout her experience as a user of psychiatric services, become associated with that institution. On the one hand, this advisor is the vessel into which she places all her hopes of discovering some means of relieving her mental suffering and extricating herself from the unlivable situation in which she finds herself. Indeed, she acknowledges that "he has been the only source of advice and assistance available to me, the only person with whom I could discuss my affairs: in fact, the only person to whom I could speak openly about the intolerable situation in which I have been placed" (*Asylum Piece* 55). At the same time, however, he is the embodiment of the threat that she may be permanently deprived of this help by some institutional decision or, worse, that she might be sent against her will to an asylum where she will be imprisoned and perhaps subjected to violent forms of treatment such as

shock therapy or lobotomy. These fears turn out to be quite justified, as when she later applies to be transferred to a different advisor, she is denied and told that she can either continue with her current advisor or “dispense altogether with the services of an advisor” (*Asylum Piece* 62). Moreover, she actually does end up being institutionalized later on and subjected to “therapeutic” violence: “an iron band has been clamped round my head, and just at this moment the jailer strikes the cold metal a ringing blow which sends needles of pain into my eye sockets” (*Asylum Piece* 100). For her, the advisor represents the imminent threat that these needles of pain will be sent into her eye sockets once again. In a sense, the violence she has endured, and anticipates enduring in the future, at the hands of the psychiatric-industrial complex have blended together with the violent acts committed by this murderer whose mugshot she encountered in the newspaper. And all of this violence, and potential for future violence, becomes concentrated in the figure of this advisor.

III.

If one is to truly inhabit the dissociating consciousness through which the stories in *Asylum Piece* are told, then one must be willing to accept these associations not merely as symbolic or metaphorical, but as literal. From this perspective, the myriad human figures that populate these stories cannot be understood as individualized human subjects. Instead, they must be understood in the way they are experienced by the viewpoint character: as a convergence of the myriad formal institutions and psychosocial power structures involved in the persecution of mentally ill persons bearing down upon her. Because every human being she encounters is, from her perspective, entrenched within this entanglement of threatening forces, there is a sense of unbreachable distance between the viewpoint character and all other human subjects she encounters. This drives her “to make the most of the natural world and to identify myself with non-human things, since they at least held no threat over me” (*Asylum Piece* 200). Here, she demonstrates a clear disidentification with the very notion of humanness, and a parallel desire to escape to a “natural world” free of human influence, a desire Angelos Evangelou has

argued “leads Kavan’s characters to seek (and receive) empathy from elsewhere – ultimately from alternative subjectivities, considered free of the danger posed by machine-like humanity” (Evangelou 229). What she seeks from the natural world, Evangelou suggests, is “the empathetic potential of the non-human” (Evangelou 229). This empathetic potential of the nonhuman manifests most clearly in the penultimate story in the collection, titled “The End in Sight,” in which the viewpoint character discovers that she is, finally, going to be committed to an asylum. As she suffers in anticipation, she notes that “no one around me even knows what is going on” (*Asylum Piece* 206). This includes her friends who “laughed and spoke together about the coming summer,” the gardener who questions her about “seeds for the summer,” and even her own daughter, “who also talks of the future, of the summer, and of what we will do together” (*Asylum Piece* 205). None of these human figures, regardless of their relationship with her, is able to detect her inner distress, to perceive that the coming summer represents not the endless potentiality for joyful experiences, but the destruction of that potentiality and the certainty of internment in a mental asylum. This brings back, once again, the feeling that her emotions are illegible to purportedly normal, neurotypical human beings, thus deepening her dissociation from humanity and her feeling of being inhuman. She finds that “only the dog seems to sense that all is not well with me,” as she sees “a dimness like tears in his lustrous brown eyes” (*Asylum Piece* 206). One might argue that this is an anthropomorphic projection triggered by her inability to find the comfort and solace she needs from the humans around her, but even if true, this hardly matters, because her interpretation of the dog’s behavior holds truth within the context of her subjective experience of the world, and it is that subjective experience that I am attempting to capture here.

I would argue, however, that her desire for empathy and her inability to find it in the human subjects around her is not the primary catalyst for this psychic deterritorialization from humanity and the subsequent affinity toward nonhuman animality. In the story “The Birds,” which focuses entirely on the viewpoint character’s experience standing in front of her window watching the birds in her garden, she

remarks that “while I am watching the birds I believe that I am comparatively immune from the assaults of life” on the grounds that “the very indifference to humanity of these wild creatures affords me a certain safeguard” (*Asylum Piece* 47). Here, the only positive identification she demonstrates vis a vis these birds is a shared dissociation from humanity. Her own dissociation from humans, by itself, facilitates an association with nonhuman entities. She envisions herself as part of a fellowship of nonhuman subjects whose perceived otherness from normative humanity she imagines as mirroring her own.

What is most revealing about this story, however, along with the few other encounters the viewpoint character has with nonhuman nature throughout *Asylum Piece*, is that her description of the birds possesses a vibrancy which is noticeably absent from the bleary, chiaroscuro depictions of all things she associates with the human. Upon first witnessing the birds, she reflects that “suddenly my aimless gaze, shifting about the muffled, uncoloured scene, was caught sharply and held amazed, incredulous, charmed, by an appearance so brilliant, so unexpected, that it was as if two tiny meteors had suddenly plunged through the dull atmosphere” (*Asylum Piece* 49). This is one of the few points in the collection when the narrator attributes any positive value or meaning to sensory information and, in sharp contrast to, for example, “Machines in the Head,” seems fully, mindfully present in her own body-mind-world. It is a phenomenological shift, to be sure, as she is now experiencing the world differently, but also an ontological one: she is one with her body-mind, and as such, becomes, momentarily, an embodied, enminded subject.

It is notable that the birds appeared to her specifically when she was mired in “a particularly hopeless mood of dejection” (*Asylum Piece* 48). The implication is that, somehow, the narrator’s despair actually summoned the birds into her presence in her moment of greatest need, which is why they exist for her alone. In this way, the birds might be interpreted as divine beings, either literal angels or metaphorical ones, who have come to offer the narrator some kind of salvation at the exact moment

when she reaches the point of pure hopelessness. If this sounds overly dramatic, then I would argue that the narrator is, in this moment, experiencing such intense emotional pain that no metaphor or analogy, no matter how dramatic, could accurately articulate the level of emotionality she is experiencing. In such a situation, a reference to the divine most accurately conveys both the intensity of the experience she is undergoing in that moment and the desperation underlying it. But what is most important to note here is that the birds in this story clearly act with intentionality, and moreover, possess a high degree of emotional intelligence beyond even what one might expect from most humans.

The anthropologist Eduardo Kohn has suggested that there are “representational forms that go beyond language” through which “nonhuman life-forms also represent the world” (Kohn 8), and this is a useful framework for understanding both the form and the significance of this encounter between the viewpoint character and the birds. He describes the network of relations between humans and nonhumans as an “ecology of selves,” which he defines as “an emergent and expanding multilayered cacophonous web of mutually constitutive, living, and growing thoughts” (Kohn 79). The word “thoughts” in this description presents a unique intervention in ecocritical conversations surrounding the imbrication of humans within nonhuman ecosystems. This “ecology of selves” is not an assemblage of entangled, undifferentiated material forms that all bleed into one another and thus cannot be individuated as distinct subjects. Instead, the ecosystem Kohn describes is populated by a multitude of lifeforms, human and nonhuman, each possessing their own unique interiority within which they *think* about the world and act in accordance with those thoughts. Each lifeform within this ecosystem acts with intentionality. In order to survive within such an ecosystem, these organisms must also recognize the other lifeforms which cohabit that ecosystem as thinking subjects in their own right, and moreover, they must understand the ways that those other lifeforms think so that they can predict their actions and reactions. That is to say, these actions and reactions are structured by a form of communication

whereby the intentions of other thinking subjects, human or nonhuman, must be inferred through a kind of empathic connection.

The birds in this story might be understood to be engaged in exactly this sort of thinking, for the purposes of engendering exactly this sort of empathic connection. If they have indeed chosen to appear before the viewpoint character right at the moment when she most needed them, then they must perceive that need. That is to say, they must perceive themselves from the perspective of the viewpoint character, to understand how they will look in her eyes, what their appearance will mean to her, how she will interpret it, and what kind of emotional impact it will have upon her in that exact moment. This is a deep, complex, and multilayered act of empathy which I argue is made possible, in this case, by the viewpoint character's dissociation. Kohn argues that the "self, at its most basic level, is a product of semiosis," that "it is the locus... of a living dynamic by which signs come to represent the world around them to a "someone" who emerges as such as a result of this process" (Kohn 16). That is to say, on the one hand, one's sense of oneself as a bounded, determinate self emerges from the symbolic order which structures communication amongst humans and through which they construct narratives about who they are as individuals. But on the other hand, by allowing one's imagination and sense of oneself to become too rooted in this symbolic order, one can cut oneself off from "the strange and hidden logics of those signs that emerge, grow, and circulate in a world beyond the human" (Kohn 16). In order to engage with the "nonsymbolic representational modalities" (Kohn 8) through which it is possible to communicate with the nonhuman, then, one must decenter one's own ego, dislocate oneself from one's immediate subject-position in order to imagine oneself from the subject-position of another. "The Birds" showcases how the process of dissociation produces this kind of dislocation and, in so doing, lends to the viewpoint character a kind of psychic vulnerability that opens a pathway for nonhuman subjects such as these birds to perceive and intervene in her interior life in potentially life-saving ways.

The key point here is that this particular empathic connection is contingent upon a dissociation not only from the viewpoint character's own sense of self, but also from her humanity. She immediately contrasts her excitement about the birds with the lack of excitement exhibited by her housekeeper: "the good woman's face expressed no particular interest, and it was clear that she did not see the two bright birds which were causing me such emotion" (*Asylum Piece* 51). She even thinks to herself that "I could only presume that the birds were visible to me alone" (*Asylum Piece* 51). From this perspective, it is not simply that the housekeeper is too cold, jaded, or detached to recognize the beauty of these birds. Rather, she literally cannot see them. Only the narrator can see these birds because they exist only in the narrator's reality. From her perspective, then, she is inhabiting a different reality than her housekeeper, because she is a different kind of being than her housekeeper, a being closer, in a phenomenological sense, to these birds than to the humans around her. The narrator thus perceives herself to be experiencing a reality that other humans cannot experience. Her own experiences are as invisible, as unimaginable, to those around her as the birds that only she can see. The human world, the world she physically inhabits, offers no possibility for her to achieve the kind of empowered subjectivity she experiences in this moment: only the intrusion of a radically inhuman force from outside the boundaries of the human world colliding into her own reality can offer her that possibility.

I should emphasize that my primary concern here is not with the authenticity or reciprocity of these empathic connections. Rather, I am interested in what this encounter with the birds illustrates about the ways that dissociating subjects may perceive and relate to the nonhuman within the context of their own psychic reality, and the importance this relation, and their perception of it, may come to have for them as they navigate a human world from which they feel completely disconnected. Above all, I certainly do not want to romanticize the dissociative experience. It is important not to lose sight of the heavy emotional, mental, and social cost of experiencing reality in this manner. With that in mind, I would like to turn my attention to the titular story of the collection: "Asylum Piece," which is actually a

series of vignettes representing different facets of asylum life. It is, in a sense, the centerpiece of the collection, but it also differs from the other stories in a few important ways. It is the only story narrated from a third-person perspective, and because of that, it is the only story in which the characters are named, and the only story that does not feature the viewpoint character of the rest of the stories in the collection. These differences are significant because, while none of these characters appear to be dissociating, their status as mentally ill subjects places them in a position where certain forms of institutionalized derealization are imposed upon them, in a way that would seem to suggest that derealization is, at least to some extent, a universal aspect of the experience of intense mental illness. That is to say, the implicit question posed throughout this story is: how can these patients not be expected to experience some form of derealization when they are subjected to forms of treatment that deliberately separate them from reality?

Perhaps the most overt example of this is in Part III of "Asylum Piece," which focuses on a male patient named Hans, who is in the midst of a panic attack brought on by the precarity underlying his present circumstances. The fact that no one has "come to investigate" his absence from the atelier at which he works as part of his daily routine at the asylum leads him to believe that "nobody seems to care how he occupies his time," and this lack of concern "strikes him as exceedingly ominous" (*Asylum Piece* 133). What worries him, specifically, is this: "My brother must have written to say that he cannot afford to keep me here much longer. Soon I shall be sent away from the clinic – and then what will become of me?" (*Asylum Piece* 133). His sudden, incessant dwelling on this idea that no one sees him or is paying attention to his whereabouts indicates a shift in his perception of the forms of relationality that currently exist between himself, the other persons in the asylum, and the asylum system itself. To put it more succinctly, he worries that he has become invisible. An outside observer might speculate that there is some amount of catastrophizing here. Indeed, as his panic increases, his estimation of the implications of this figurative invisibility grows more and more catastrophic, as he eventually declares that "it will be

the gutter for me next!" (*Asylum Piece* 140). The reduced level of attention the asylum staff has begun paying to his comings and goings signifies to him an inescapable fate in which he will live the remainder of his life in abject poverty.

Yet the story does not depict these worries as delusional or catastrophizing. On the contrary, the events that conclude the story lend credence to his perception that he has been, in a sense, erased from the social world. Hans visits the post office in the village within which the asylum is located, where he meticulously crafts a letter to his brother explaining his circumstances and requesting assistance. He takes great care to choose the best wording for this letter and then asks the postmaster to send it posthaste. The postmaster agrees, but as soon as Hans leaves, the postmaster "sets about tearing the form into small pieces, until nothing is left but a handful of shreds which he negligently tosses out of the open window" (*Asylum Piece* 141). The postmaster's behavior shows that Hans's life has become dislocated from the fabric of normative social existence, that he has no presence in the world of normal social affairs, the world where his brother lives, and where he himself lived most of his life. There is a very important difference between Hans's situation and the situation one might expect to confront under conditions in which their rights had been revoked by some disciplinary apparatus. In the latter situation, the postmaster would merely have refused to send the letter and informed him that he is not allowed to contact the outside world. He might even have torn up the letter in front of Hans. Hans would have known he was a prisoner and thus understood his position within the larger system of social relations within which the asylum operates. That is not what happens here. Here, Hans can walk into a post-office and deliver a letter to be sent to his brother, and no one will stop him from doing this. Yet, unbeknownst to him, the post-office is not a real post-office, but a simulacrum of a post-office, and the letter never reaches its destination. The postmaster allows him to maintain the illusion that he is in contact with the outside world, even goes out of his way to facilitate this illusion.

In this vignette, Kavan represents the mentally ill subject's disconnection from reality not as a consequence of an internal process of derealization, but as something imposed upon that subject by external forces operating at an institutional level. This is a reversal of the clinical understanding of derealization: rather than perceiving the real world as unreal, the subject perceives as real a world which has actually become unreal. Hans's experiences provide a compelling illustration of the ways that dissociation and derealization morph a subject's sense of place and time. Hans is imprisoned within what Marc Auge might call a "non-place," which Auge defines as "a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" and produces "a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral" (Auge 78). Auge uses the concept of the non-place to describe certain liminal spaces, such as freeways and airports, that are defined by their transience. A freeway, for instance, is not a destination in and of itself, but merely the space through which one must travel to get from one place to another. Above all, what makes it a non-place is that it effectively erases the identity of anyone who enters it, since they can do so only while enclosed in the atomized space of an automobile, moving too fast to be recognized by anyone. It is only the place one has left, and the place to which one travels, that supply the sociality and historicity through which one grounds one's identity. On the freeway, one is temporarily no one.

Dissociation produces the same isolating, anonymizing feeling as being stuck perpetually on a freeway, but much more intensely, and without the certainty that one will eventually arrive at a place and time wherein one's individuality and identity will reemerge. Auge's characterization of non-places almost too accurately describes the spatiality of dissociation. Auge argues that "a person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants" such that "he becomes no more than what he does or experiences" (Auge 103). Indeed, when one is dissociating, one's immediate experience becomes decontextualized from the network of social relations through which personal identity is established. Indeed, Auge insists that the non-space "does not contain any organic society" (Auge 112).

The space the subject currently occupies is thus emptied out of whatever meaning, whatever history, it may have previously held for that subject. Just as the subject is detached from the memories that were tied to that place, they are detached from the place itself.

There is a temporality associated with non-places as well, which Mark Fisher calls “non-time.” Fisher describes non-time as a “flattening sense of time” in which one “has lost the ability to grasp and articulate the present” (Fisher 14). Indeed, when one is dissociating, there is no sense of teleology, no sense that one’s present experiences, and present actions, are part of a broader narrative which comprises one’s life. Any overarching self-narrative that might lend meaning to these experiences feels artificial, impossible to invest in. In that moment, in that place, the dissociating subject merely exists, an existence without specificity or thickness, outside of both space and time. This is certainly the case for Hans, whose points of connectivity with the spaces, and the persons, that give his life meaning have been rendered fictional. It is also the case for the female speaker from whose point of view the majority of the stories in *Asylum Piece* are told. She lives her everyday life in a liminal spacetime that is defined only by the anticipation of her future internment in a mental asylum. Any teleology which might extend her life into the future is cut off by this inevitable event, while her relationships with the people around her become ephemeral and, to a certain extent, fraudulent, since none of these people have even the faintest understanding of what she is experiencing and what is happening in her life. The stories throughout *Asylum Piece*, then, whether they focus on the unnamed female speaker, or Hans, or any of the other asylum patients, narrativize derealization as an ongoing process that strips the individual of both their sense of place and their sense of time and, ultimately, their sense of self.

IV.

If *Asylum Piece* offers a coherent narrative representation of the embodied, enminded experience of dissociation and derealization by presenting the interiority of a dissociating subject, then *Ice* reproduces this experience of dissociation at the level of the narrative itself. *Asylum Piece* grants the dissociating

subject a definable subjectivity that gives her the agency to craft a narrative about her dissociative experiences by making her both the narrator and the subject of the events that unfold throughout the text. In contrast, *Ice* increases the level of subjective dissociation by decentering its own protagonist within its narrative. While *Asylum Piece* portrayed the viewpoint of a woman whose mental illness is persistently exacerbated by various untrustworthy, nefarious male actors, most of whom are representatives of the very mental health care system that is supposed to be helping her, *Ice* inverts this perspective, telling its story from the viewpoint of the male figure in this relationship as he pursues an unnamed woman, referred to only as “the girl.” Yet despite this inversion of perspective, the dynamics of the relationship between the two figures remain relatively the same, with the girl being the perpetual victim of the male figure’s relentless cruelty. As such, though the male narrator who pursues the girl appears to be the consciousness through which the reader is granted a window into the world of *Ice*, the novel almost begs to be read in such a way that he is not the protagonist, or even the subject, of the story he is telling. If one reads the novel as embodying the experience of dissociative consciousness, then the girl, whom the novel seems to relegate to the status of mere object of the male narrator’s predatory pursuit, could actually be understood as the true subject within the narrative of *Ice*. The dehumanizing, de-ontologizing way that the narrator views the girl might then be understood as the way that the girl, as a result of the constant dehumanizing trauma to which she has been subjected, perceives herself. It is also the way she thinks others perceive her.

Gülden Hatipoğlu has argued that the girl in *Ice* is “a dispossessed female whose story is rewritten and multiplied at will in the visions of the male protagonist/narrator” such that “she is deprived of a sense of a beginning as well as a sense of an ending in the masculine, violence-centered narrative” (Hatipoğlu 108). From this perspective, the girl exists in a permanently fragmented state; the events in her life have no contiguity with one another, nor are they associated with a clear narrative trajectory. They are singular, isolated events detached from the context of life and thus from the process of self-

formation. As a result of this fragmentation, her life becomes nothing more than the endless sequence of abuses and gruesome deaths she endures throughout the narrator's hallucinatory visions. She is allowed no self-narrative beyond this perpetual victimhood. Through the mechanism of fantasy, the narrator multiplies infinitely the violence that is inflicted upon the girl, while simultaneously removing from that violence any sense of a beginning or an ending, and hence depriving the girl of any hope for either a reprieve from that violence or an explanation that will allow her to make sense of it.

The agony of this condition cannot be overstated. Sometimes, when intense pain, be it emotional or physical, becomes profoundly acute, the only coping mechanism available to the one experiencing this pain is the thought that it will end, that a time will come when they no longer experience this pain. Often, this takes the form of suicidal ideation, which offers the prospect of relief in times when nothing else seems to do so. Yet *Ice* offers the girl so little control over her own body-mind that even that momentary escape is unavailable to her. The narrative modality of *Ice* provides no conception of a before or after to frame these painful experiences in finite terms, such that, as they occur, they become, within the context of the narrative, the totality of the girl's existence. For instance, early on in the novel, she is slain by marauders during the sacking of some nondescript city. The novel gives no name to this city and provides no hints as to *why* these marauders are attacking the city beyond the vague notion that city-sacking is simply an inevitable consequence of the apocalyptic ice age rapidly enveloping the entirety of the planet and decimating all human civilization. Instead, the novel provides only a visceral description of the girl's broken body, as the narrator finds her "lying face down on the stones" while "the bones of the forearm were broken, the sharp pointed ends of bone projected at the wrist through the torn tissue" (*Ice* 59). The narrator speculates that "she had been dragged by the hair" in such a way that "hands which had twisted it into a sort of rope had dulled its silvery brightness" (*Ice* 59). It is worth noting that her body parts are referred to as *the* forearm, *the* wrist, *the* hair etc., rather than *her* forearm, *her* wrist, *her* hair, such that her body is no longer attached to the identity of any specific person. It is just meat.

The idea of the body-as-meat is a very crucial aspect of the experience of dissociation- when one feels that the body they occupy is not really their body, that it is not *them*, but simply an empty vessel, then it truly does become nothing more than lifeless, purposeless meat. By representing the girl's body as meat, the novel reveals no aspect of the girl's existence not tied to her violent demise, such as why she was in the city in the first place or what she had been doing or thinking before she died, nor does it even acknowledge these as possible questions worth answering. Her life before she became a mutilated corpse is erased. Within the context of the narrative that *Ice* is communicating, through the lens of the narrator's warped psychic reality, she holds no ontological status beyond this mutilated corpse, a corpse which fails even to signify any lived human life that preceded its existence as a corpse, and which could thereby be mourned.

In fact, the girl's life is deprived of even the few scraps of narrativity it might gain via her identification as a mutilated corpse, as she is alive again on the very next page, hurtling toward her next brutal, violent death. Indeed, on the next page, she is dragged by some townsfolk to some sort of canyon, where they sacrifice her to a dragon that dwells within it. There is no indication anywhere else in the text that dragons exist, and even the narrator remarks upon the outlandishness of this notion, referring to it as "preposterous rigamarole" (*Ice* 60) and reflecting that he "had never before met anyone who owned a telephone and believed in dragons" (*Ice* 35). Because of this sentiment, this version of the girl's demise, which the text describes dismissively as "something white struggling frantically for an instant before the crunch of armor-plated jaws" (*Ice* 61), is relegated to the status of a childish fiction, an antiquated folk-tale, even though the narrator literally witnesses it happen. Indeed, he makes note of "her pitiful white face of a child-victim, terrified and betrayed," and reflects that "I could enclose the whole of her with my two hands, even the rib-cage containing her heart" (*Ice* 60). Just as in the previous death, her vulnerability, helplessness, and bodily fragility are emphasized above all else, while the narrative elements of her death, those elements that lend meaning to that death as the end of an actual

life lived by an actual person, such as how she came to be in this situation in the first place, are omitted. Her existence began and ended with this “crunch of armor-plated jaws.”

The juxtaposition of these two scenes, the girl’s brutal murder by marauders and her sacrifice to the dragon, without even an attempt to bestow upon this sequence of events any semblance of narrative logic, offers the girl no self-narrative within which she might hold any role other than the perpetual victim of an endless onslaught of meaningless violence. It is precisely this condition that makes it possible to describe the girl’s subjectivity, and the perspective underlying that subjectivity, as dissociative. The experience of dissociation deprives the person who is dissociating of a sense of attachment to their own experiences, and thus disconnects them from the sense of narrativity that accompanies such attachments. In such a situation, it can hardly be surprising that the girl would not recognize herself as the subject of her own life-story, that that subjectivity might then be displaced onto the man who, from her perspective, appears to be the agent of the violence that defines her lived existence. Within the narrative framework of *Ice*, the power to both narrativize and interpret the events in the girl’s life, to arrange them into a coherent story, is transferred to this narrator. As a result of this transference, the girl herself is reduced to a kind of abstraction, a repository into which the narrator projects his own fears and desires.

This constant bombardment of disconnected, narratively incompatible scenes portraying the violent maiming and/or murdering of the girl allows *Ice* to illustrate, in a visceral way, the violent nature of dissociation. The girl’s entire life has degenerated into pure experience, stripped of the context which lends meaning to that experience. And of course, these are not pleasant experiences full of moments of joy and contentment. Dissociation is a response to experiences which are so intolerable that the subject’s conscious mind cannot assimilate them, such that, for the psychic survival of that subject, they simply *must* not have happened. Instead, they must have happened to someone else, to what I described earlier, referencing a concept from Harry Stack Sullivan, as the not-me. Each of these

mutilated corpses of girls is, within the psychic reality that enframes the narrative of *Ice*, a different person, even if they all share a single body-mind. *Ice* thus represents the girl's dissociation as a violent ripping away of her identity and sense of self, one that results in the removal of her psyche from the domain of conscious experience, even when those experiences are happening to her own body. And, because of the almost ubiquitous presence of inconceivable violence in the girl's life, she is constantly dissociating. Her dissociation is so complete that her conscious self has effectively been erased from existence, leaving it up to the narrator to describe it, in a completely detached way that strips the humanity and, more importantly, the *feeling* from her life experiences and the events her body-mind endures.

The male figure's role as narrator, then, might be understood as a product of the girl's dissociation. Regarding the girl, the narrator confesses that "at times she hardly seemed real" (*Ice* 6). But the narrator feels almost unreal himself. To begin with, his characterization of reality as an "unknown quantity" calls into question the division between reality and unreality, or at least the possibility of discerning that division within the narrative of *Ice*. As I suggested before, there is an important distinction between what a person who is dissociating knows, factually, to be real and what that person experiences as real. The constant, abrupt changes in the narrator's understanding of and perspective on what is unfolding around him allow the narrative of the novel to inhabit this disjuncture and tell a story from within that disjuncture that communicates the subjective experiences of the dissociative subject who dwells within that disjuncture. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator suggests that his sense of unreality may be a side effect of the pills he has been taking to treat his chronic insomnia. In doing so, the novel offers at least a semblance of a plausible, concrete reason for the narrator's dissociative experiences. Yet this is never mentioned again. It is not pertinent to the narrator's experience. Even though dissociation is a concrete phenomenon grounded in one's lived existence, the dissociating person does not experience these facts as concrete. Instead, they experience everything: the world around them, even their own

self, as an abstraction. In the same way, *Ice* presents a series of events, such as the apocalyptic ice age unfolding in the background of the novel, that can be accepted as real, but that do not seem real when they are presented from the narrator's point of view. *Ice* thus embodies the psychic reality of a person who dwells in a state of permanent unreality, who is perpetually dissociating both from the material phenomena that comprise the world that surrounds them and from their own embodied experiences of those phenomena.

The concepts of non-place and non-time are again useful here, as *Ice* immerses the reader in this state of unreality by producing a profound sense of spatiotemporal dislocation akin to that which structures the asylum in *Asylum Piece* but much more totalizing, unfolding at a global scale. From the onset of his journey, the narrator's senses of time and space are severely compromised, and the landscape through which he passes on his way to reach the girl already exists in a permanent state of flux. He notes that he "had visited the girl and her husband before, and kept a vivid recollection of the peaceful, prosperous-looking countryside round their home," then promptly confesses that "this memory was rapidly fading, losing its reality, becoming increasingly unconvincing and indistinct" (*Ice* 4). There is a constant oscillation here between association and dissociation. Whatever association the narrator has with the girl is rooted in a shared past that may or may not be real, in a place that may or may not exist, and as such, the association between them is itself characterized by a destabilized sense of reality. Even the "idyllic countryside" through which he travels is bound up with his unstable memory of the girl and his interactions with her and her husband. As his memory of the girl fades, so too does the landscape associated with this memory, as he "passed no one on the road, never came to a village, saw no lights anywhere" such that "it was just as if the entire district had been laid to waste during my absence" (*Ice* 4). The physical world reshapes itself in accordance with the viewpoint character's loosening grip on his senses, his fading memory of this place paralleling its actual fading existence.

Yet the text does not offer any suggestions as to which phenomenon is causing the other. Indeed, the very notion of causality seems to have been thrown out entirely. There is a sense that the landscape and the viewpoint character's perception of it have a reciprocal influence upon one another, such that each one changes in accordance with changes in the other, but there is no sense of one change coming before or influencing the other. Everything disintegrates simultaneously. In that sense, it would not be entirely accurate to say that the girl's subjectivity is displaced onto the male narrator. The narrator is granted no more control over his own story than the girl is over hers. His story is just as fragmented, cut up by the schizoid narrative structure of the novel. Neither his thoughts nor his actions are internally consistent; his motivations and intentions regarding the girl, along with his overall attitude toward her, frequently change, often spontaneously and with no apparent provocation. Indeed, the narrator's experiences in the city-sacking and dragon-sacrifice scenes described above are as incomprehensible as the girl's. When he encounters the first version of the girl's corpse, his reaction indicates a sadistic bent to his pursuit of the girl: "I felt I had been defrauded; I alone should have done the breaking with tender love; I was the only person entitled to inflict wounds" (*Ice* 59). This passage would appear to support the idea that the narrator's sole desire is to possess the girl as an object, as his objection is not to the violence that is inflicted upon her, but to the fact that someone other than himself inflicted it. Yet, prior to this, he had been overcome with worry that something bad might happen to her. And on the very next page, when he overhears the townsfolk discussing their plans to sacrifice the girl to the dragon, he is appalled by their violence, reflecting that "these people were worse than savages," and tries desperately to save her: "I sprang forward, tried to reach her, to cut her bonds...I rushed after the group, shouting: "Murderers!"" (*Ice* 60). One second, he seems aroused by the thought of physically harming the girl, and the next second, he is horrified at the prospect that harm might come to her and morally outraged at those who would inflict that harm.

These abrupt personality shifts are a common occurrence throughout the novel. At no point, however, does the narrator, and by extension the text itself, recognize any incongruity between these obviously contradictory sentiments. He moves fluidly between three broad affective orientations: from an intense desire to protect this “glass girl” (*Ice* 6) from harm to a complete indifference to her suffering, to a burning desire to inflict that suffering himself. What is important is that this is not a linear progression, or degradation, but rather simply a palette of affective states amongst which the narrator continually cycles as if he were changing clothes. From the very beginning of the novel, he reflects that “I derived an indescribable pleasure from seeing her suffer...I disapproved of my own callousness, but there it was” (*Ice* 5). The flippant nature of phrase: “but there it was” with which he ends this horrifying admission is worth examining. While it is certainly possible for those who luxuriate in their cruelty toward others to disapprove, philosophically, of their own behavior, what is remarkable about the narrator is that there is no tension between his callousness and his disapproval of it. Indeed, the narrator reflects that “ironically, my aim then had been to shield her from the callousness of the world, which her timidity and fragility seemed to invite” (*Ice* 5-6). In other words, his driving motivation throughout the narrative is to protect the girl from that which he himself inflicts upon her. Yet this contradiction produces no internal conflict within the narrator. His use of the word “ironically” here demonstrates that he is aware of this contradiction, but the flippant tone he uses to describe this contradiction suggests that he is not particularly concerned about it. In that sense, what is perhaps most important to note about the narrator is his detachment from his own thoughts and experiences, and, moreover, from his own feelings regarding these experiences, almost as if they belonged to someone else. If the novel illustrates the girl’s dissociation by decentering her within the narrative itself, then it illustrates the narrator’s dissociation via the detached tone of the narration and the inconsistency in the narrator’s characterization.

In one illustrative character moment, the narrator reflects that “I had a vague feeling that something was wrong with me, although I could not decide what it was. For a moment this was disturbing; then I forgot it” (*Ice* 60). Here, the narrator’s own psychic disintegration is of only fleeting significance to him. The explanation I would offer for this profound sense of detachment is that the narrator is not the one telling the story. Rather, as I suggested earlier, the girl is the one actually telling the story, as it is her story, but because she is dissociated from her own sense of self, her dreams, concerns, attachments, etc., she is only able to view the events in her life from an outside perspective that objectifies and dehumanizes her. With that in mind, it makes perfect sense for her to adopt the perspective of the man whose relentless abuse triggers her dissociations. Because this man’s actions toward her are so inconsistent and contradictory, his personality, from her perspective, can only appear to be indeterminate and unstable, in constant flux. The wild inconsistency of his behavior toward her produces a kind of emotional whiplash that only compounds the dissolution of her own sense of reality.

Within the context of the narrative as communicated by the male narrator, this instability and indeterminacy stem, in large part, from his own persistent failure to recognize himself as a singular, individuated subject. This precipitates a state of ontological confusion in which he begins to have trouble differentiating himself from another key character in the novel: a man known only as “the Warden.” The Warden is an enigmatic but domineering male figure who recurs throughout the text as both the narrator’s doppelganger and his principal antagonist in his pursuit of the girl. His first meeting with the Warden prompts “a vision of an iron hand gripping a girl’s thin wrist, crushing the brittle prominent bones” (*Ice* 35). Once again, the girl’s bodily fragility and vulnerability to male violence are emphasized, and furthermore, these characteristics seem to be amplified in the presence of the Warden. Moreover, the Warden only emerges in conjunction with these instances of extreme vulnerability, as if he himself were merely a manifestation, or even a projection, of the girl’s (perceived) helplessness. This introduction to the Warden includes one of the few moments throughout the novel when the narrative

viewpoint becomes blurred, having presumably shifted to the girl herself, who observes of the Warden that “the hypnotic power of his eyes could destroy her will, already weakened by the mother who for years had persistently crushed it into submission,” rendering her “defenseless against his aggressive will, which was able to take complete possession of her” (*Ice* 37-38). This description seems to emerge from within the girl’s own interiority, yet immediately afterward, mid-paragraph, the narrative switches back to the first-person perspective of the male narrator, who reveals that: “I saw it happen” (*Ice* 38). The consciousnesses of the girl and the narrator seem to coalesce in this moment, in which they seem to recognize, simultaneously, the Warden’s singular power over both of them.

The Warden’s primary function in the text is thus to disrupt the relationship between the girl and the narrator. The narrator seeks to exert psychological and physical power over the girl, but the Warden already exerts that same power over the girl and, by virtue of this fact, comes to wield a certain power over the narrator as well, whose own subjectivity and agency thus far have been defined almost exclusively by his relationality with the girl. As a result, the imposing figure of this Warden threatens to eclipse entirely the narrator’s sense of self, which seems to evaporate in the Warden’s presence, forcibly absorbed into his commanding aura. To wit, the narrator confesses that “I continually found I was not myself, but him” to the point that “at one moment I actually seemed to be wearing his clothes (*Ice* 111). A psychic slippage occurs, as the boundaries of the narrator’s psyche become eroded to the point that his identity and sense of self are devoured by the Warden. During one key scene in which the Warden appears to have shot and killed the girl, the narrator professes to be “entangled in utmost confusion, not sure which of us was which,” imagining himself and the Warden as “like halves of one being, joined in mysterious symbiosis” (*Ice* 111). On the surface, the claim that they are “halves of one being” seems to suggest that the Warden is merely a separate personality dwelling within the body-mind of the narrator rather than an entirely different person. The narrator projects his repressed violent desires and power fantasies onto this other personality, which overtakes his consciousness in moments of profound trauma

and violence. This interpretation would fit neatly with clinical descriptions of dissociative identity disorder.

Yet such an interpretation only makes sense if one assumes the centrality of the narrator's subjectivity within the narrative. If, as I have suggested, one interprets the novel as embodying the girl's subjective experience of the world, then a triangular relationship emerges between the girl, the narrator, and the Warden. In one key scene in which the girl, the narrator, and the Warden are apparently in the same room together, the narrator reflects that "it was clear that he regarded her as his property," while "I considered that she belonged to me," such that "between the two of us she was reduced to nothing; her only function might have been to link us together" (*Ice* 85). This scene, in which the Warden exerts a powerful psychic influence on both the girl and the narrator, problematizes any attempt to understand the dynamic between the narrator and the girl in terms of a simple subject-object relation between perpetrator and victim. Though the Warden and the narrator may both perceive the girl as an object, either a canvas onto which to project their violent fantasies and/or white-knight delusions, or else as an object to possess as proof of their superiority over their rival, she is not, within the formation the narrator describes here, actually an object. Firstly, if the primary function of the Warden vis a vis the narrator is to bring to the surface his violent tendencies, and the function of the girl is to "link" the narrator and the Warden together, then the girl's vulnerability, her visible victimhood, actively produces the violent fantasies in which she is reduced to the status of pure victim. In a reciprocal maneuver, these same fantasies produce the violent spectacles of victimhood, real or imagined, in which her body is repeatedly destroyed. Just as the image of the dominant, physically imposing Warden exerts a kind of power over the narrator's psyche by stoking his aggressive tendencies, so too does the image of the frail, broken body of the girl elicit a psychic transformation within the narrator that is beyond his control, manifesting as an overpowering, but completely decontextualized, desire to simultaneously protect and brutalize her.

Furthermore, by suggesting that the girl is “reduced to nothing,” the narrator erases her concrete existence, placing her in a position beyond, or at least apart from, subjects and objects and the relations between them. Whereas an object is, from the perspective of the subject, reduced to the status of a thing, the girl is relegated to the status of a non-thing. Insofar as she maintains a conscious existence, that existence is separate from the body-mind of the girl-figure over which these two men are fighting. And for that consciousness, both the body it occupies and the men who fight over it occupy the same state of unreality. What R.D. Laing calls “the existential position of ontological insecurity” (Laing 109) provides a useful framework through which to understand the kind of derealization presented here, which causes the psyche to metabolize reality in such a way that reality presents itself as a direct threat to that psyche’s existence. Laing defines ontological insecurity in opposition to what he calls ontological security, a state which enables a person to “encounter all the hazards of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological, from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people’s reality and identity” (Laing 39). In other words, an ontologically secure person possesses not only a coherent sense of self, but also a confidence in the connection between their body and mind and in their body-mind’s grounding within the physical and social world. Such a person has little trouble differentiating between their own self-image and the perceptions of others, or at least what they believe to be the perceptions of others. This leads to both a stable sense of self and a stable sense of reality.

Ontological insecurity, therefore, describes a psychic state in which both self and reality, along with the relation between them, have become unstable. An individual in this position is “precariously differentiated from the rest of the world” in such a way that “his identity and autonomy are always in question” (Laing 42). Body, mind, and world exist in a state of irreconcilable conflict. In its most extreme form, this ontological insecurity leads to derealization, to a disconnection or detachment from physical reality, including one’s physical body, which can seem like a foreign vessel within which one’s consciousness is trapped. This disconnection can be so profound that one can no longer be sure of one’s

own existence. Laing suggests, as a result of this disconnect, the individual “rejects all that he is, as a mere mirror of an alien reality” to the point at which “this total rejection of his being makes 'him', his 'true' self, a mere vanishing point” (Laing 168). Here, the individual’s body-mind has itself become externalized and viewed as hostile, conspiring to eradicate their true self, which exists neither in their body nor in their mind, but in a kind of void, cut off from reality. That is to say, one’s own body-mind, along with the sensory experiences of that body-mind, become a personification of the not-me, of that which has become so traumatic that it must be cast away into a space completely dissociated from one’s own sense of self. In such a state, a person can no longer maintain confidence in their control of their body or their mind, can no longer be sure that they are the one calling the shots. Indeed, Laing suggests that, under such conditions, the components of everyday reality, including mind, body, and world, which the ontologically secure person takes for granted and which structure everyday life, “threaten him with non-being” (Laing 43). It is this ontological position, wherein everyday reality threatens one’s very existence with erasure, that I argue structures the forms of relationality between body, mind, and world in *Ice*.

This existential threat presents itself most overtly during those sections of the novel when the point-of-view shifts to that of the girl. If the Warden functions, for the narrator, as a personification of this existential threat of ontological erasure, then for the girl, this threat is personified in every aspect of the physical world she encounters. As in *Asylum Piece*, the nonhuman holds a great deal of influence over the subject’s experience of reality. Unlike in *Asylum Piece*, however, the nonhuman does not offer a refuge from the hostility of human society. Instead, the nonhuman world has begun to mirror the hostility of the human world. For the girl in *Ice*, humans, animals, and flora all display the same sort of sinister personhood, as if they were all agents of the near-infinite conglomeration of forces bent on her destruction. At one point, she is running through a dark forest, attempting to escape an unknown assailant. As she runs, the forest itself begins to grow less and less distinct from this assailant: “the

crowding trees unnerved her, transformed themselves into black walls, shutting her in" (*Ice* 54). From the girl's perspective, "the trees seemed to obstruct her with deliberate malice" such that "the forest had become the malign force that would destroy her" (*Ice* 54). Here, the psychic vulnerability which, in *Asylum Piece*, facilitated an empathic connection to the nonhuman, instead leaves her mind open only to further violence and trauma. That is to say, the girl's body-mind has been so constantly and intensely brutalized by traumatic violence that any sort of relationality not defined by such violence has become inconceivable. The narrator suggests that "systematic bullying when she was most vulnerable had distorted the structure of her personality, made a victim of her, to be destroyed, either by things or by human beings, people or fjords or forests; it made no difference, in any case she could not escape" (*Ice* 55). In every encounter, her traumatic memories of this "systematic bullying" come to the surface and transform her into the embodiment of the victimhood which defined her experience of these traumatic moments. She is reduced to nothing but this victim, and her relationality with all entities, which here include people, nonhuman lifeforms, and even landscapes, is defined exclusively in terms of that victimhood. Hence this forest, rather than a complex ecosystem comprised of a multitude of living beings and nonliving objects, instead presents itself as a singular, menacing animacy oriented exclusively toward destroying her.

Moreover, that animacy persistently refuses to distinguish itself from the human agents who seek to do her harm. In a parallel scene which occurs later in the text, also told from the girl's viewpoint, she is in a government building, a very different kind of space than the forest. Yet this government building is described in similar terms and seems to operate with the same sort of malicious intent. She finds herself in a room full of government officials, where "only her extreme slimness allowed her to slip the many tall silent figures, unnaturally silent, fantastically tall" which were "towering over her, surround her like dark trees" (*Ice* 113). She perceives these figures as "faceless black treeforms" which "pressed closer, extended arm branches, imprisoning her...filled trouser-legs, solid tree trunks, stood all around" (*Ice*

113). From the perspective of the girl, there appears to be no difference between the trees in the forest and the legs of these government officials because the form of her relation to them is the same. Both are physically imposing, both exude an implacable hostility, and both seek to imprison and eventually destroy her.

The animal studies scholar Matthew Calarco's concept of "indistinction" provides a useful framework for Kavan's representation of the role of the nonhuman in the constitution, or in this case de-constitution, of human subjectivity in *Ice*. Calarco has described the natural world as "a space in which supposedly insuperable distinctions between human beings and animals fall into a radical indistinction" (Calarco 54). For Calarco, this means that all living things are, at the physical level, reducible to mere flesh. In that capacity, there is a kind of contiguity between all organic matter. From the perspective of the girl in *Ice*, however, this contiguity does not extend to her. That is to say, all matter in the world is contiguous with one another, part of the living tissue of an animate and perpetually evolving world to which she herself does not belong. She exists separately from all of it. So, while the trees and the legs of the officials may occupy a space of radical indistinction, the girl herself remains distinct, but only in a strictly negative sense. Her detachment from the assemblage of physical phenomena that comprise the natural world reinforces her own sense of otherness, reminding her that she does not belong in that world, that the world rejects her. For her, the indistinction between these other elements stems from the fact that they are all equally hostile and foreign, part of the prison in which her consciousness has become trapped.

In a world in which human persons have been reduced to mere instruments of senseless violence, the personification of the nonhuman has the paradoxical effect of stripping nonhuman entities of those very qualities, such as compassion, empathy, and understanding, which many people recognize, perhaps incorrectly, as being uniquely human characteristics. Eduardo Kohn's "ecology of selves" which, in "The Birds," facilitated an empathic connection with the nonhuman that served a profoundly therapeutic

purpose, has now been replaced with a one-dimensional animacy that turns all figures, human and nonhuman, into soulless meat puppets acting under the direction of a kind of hive-mind driven exclusively by a mindless intent to destroy the girl. This type of dissociative position strongly resembles what Kohn has called “soul blindness,” which he describes as “an inability to be aware of and relate to other soul-possessing selves” (Kohn 117). Soul-blindness ultimately “results in a sort of monadic alienation as one is, as a consequence, avulsed from the relational ecology of selves that constitutes the cosmos” (Kohn 17). The affinity the viewpoint character in *Asylum Piece* felt with the birds and her dog was dependent upon the fact that her dissociation was incomplete- though she felt detached from her own body-mind, there were still phenomena within her body-mind-world that produced a *feeling* of attachment that grounded her, at least to an extent, within her physical reality. The birds, for instance, provided a kind of tether that made her feel as if she was connected to *something*, even if her own body-mind was not included in that something.

The girl in *Ice* has no solid ground whatsoever upon which to stand. Her dissociation is so totalizing, the trauma driving it so severe, that she has passed beyond the threshold beyond which the very concept of connection or attachment to anything is itself traumatizing. She is, as Kohn describes, “avulsed” from the “cosmos” itself. This is a metaphysical avulsion, whereby she is excluded from the natural order of the universe to which every entity, living or nonliving, belongs *except for her*. But while Kohn attributes “soul-blindness” to “the solipsistic enfolding of an increasingly private mind onto itself” which “results in something terrifying: the implosion of the self” (Kohn 61), the girl experiences this same implosion of the self by moving in the opposite direction: toward the complete erasure of her subjectivity, a relegation to a kind of void in which she has no subject-position whatsoever. Yet despite not being a part of the universe, she is still, in the context of her immediate experience, bound by its physical laws. Inasmuch as she feels separate from the world around her, she is nonetheless violently enveloped by that world on a constant basis. Because of this, the physical environments through which

she travels cannot simply blend into a background that she can ignore at will. Rather, they always have an intense presence that threatens to overwhelm her consciousness to the point of destroying it.

The notion of being detached from one's physical surroundings while simultaneously being precariously undifferentiated from them, or even violently absorbed into them, may seem paradoxical. However, this paradox is at the crux of the dissociative experience and its impact upon the body-mind-world of the dissociating subject. The feeling that one does not belong in this world, that one's presence in this world is simply *wrong* in a metaphysical sense that is impossible to convey in words, can only make one feel one's enmeshment in that world more acutely. The sky overhead becomes the ceiling of one's prison. The ice enveloping the world in *Ice* operates as an extended metaphor for this particular form of relationality between the dissociating subject and their physical reality. From the moment the ice first appears, it is described as a prison: "the world had become an arctic prison from which no escape was possible, all its creatures trapped as securely as were the trees, already lifeless inside their deadly resplendent armor" (*Ice* 21). It is worth noting that this "arctic prison" is described as entrapping all the world's creatures. Indeed, that is how other beings appear to the girl: trapped within the kind of one-dimensional existence I described above, in which they have no function or purpose beyond reproducing the traumatic violence that, from her perspective, structures the universe.

But above all, the ice is defined by its relationality to the girl, in language that emphasizes the claustrophobic, suffocating nature of that relationality:

"She was completely encircled by the tremendous ice walls, which were made fluid by explosions of tremendous light, so that they moved and changed with a continuous liquid motion, advancing in torrents of ice, avalanches as big as oceans, flooding everywhere over the doomed world. Wherever she looked, she saw the same fearful encirclement, soaring battlements of ice, an overhanging ring of frigid, fiery, colossal waves about to collapse upon her. Frozen by the deathly cold emanating from the ice, dazzled by the blaze of crystalline ice-light, she felt herself becoming part of the polar vision, her structure becoming one with the structure of ice and snow" (Kavan 21).

Not only is the ice described as a kind of living enclosure encroaching upon the girl with a violent and overpowering animacy, but it even begins merging with her at the level of her physical structure. This is a

very important detail, because it demonstrates one of the most significant and horrifying aspects of the experience of dissociation: just as the dissociating subject feels trapped in the physical world, they feel trapped in their physical body as well. Moreover, the physical world and the physical body are all part of the same prison: being trapped in the world means being trapped in one's body, and vice versa. By extension, escaping the world also means escaping one's body.

It perhaps goes without saying that one of the crucial limitations of clinical discourse is that those writing from a clinical, curative, or academic perspective, such as Harry Stack Sullivan and even R.D. Laing, do not themselves inhabit a psychic reality in which they are constantly dissociating. They cannot internally reproduce the feeling that they do not belong in their own body, in their own mind, or on the planet on which they are standing. The physical world is real to them, and no amount of mental conditioning can place them in the psychic position from which they truly perceive everything around them as not real. Because of this, they inevitably end up writing from the position of a person who takes for granted the notion that having a stable sense of self, feeling at one with one's body, mind, and world, is both an attainable and an ideal state of mind that a person can and should strive to achieve. This is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it can be immensely restorative and even empowering for people who are plagued by almost constant dissociation to maintain a dialogue with other people who, out of genuine care and compassion, want them to achieve this state of mind. But for many who experience profound dissociation, asking them to feel at one with their body-mind-world can be tantamount to asking them to feel at one with their prison cell. Try as they might, clinicians cannot truly insert themselves into a psychic position in which their innermost existential desire is not to achieve a stable sense of self, but simply to leave, to escape the prison of the physical body and the physical world. *Ice* demonstrates the capacity for literature to facilitate an immersion into this type of unstable, alienating body-mind-world in which every moment, every space, every object drips with the threat of imminent violence, and thus to reproduce the profound sense of unreality that structures the everyday experience

of dissociation. For those who are willing, for a short time, to step out of their own body-mind and into another that is far more disorienting, confusing, and panic-inducing, *Ice* offers the possibility for a genuine empathic connection that might open new, more direct avenues of communication through which they might come to understand experiences such as dissociation, depersonalization, and derealization, that are radically different from anything they have ever experienced.

Chapter Four: Making the Invisible Visible: *Mr. Robot* and the Embodiment of Social Anxiety

For this final chapter, I investigate a form of psychic distress that has quite deeply impacted my own life: social anxiety. While social anxiety disorder is absolutely a real disorder, one with which I have personally been diagnosed and which I feel quite acutely on a daily basis, I do not examine social anxiety through a clinical or diagnostic framework here. Instead, I consider social anxiety as a distressing situation in which one's relation to the social, to one's social world and to the other people in it, is persistently disrupted to the point of producing profound social isolation and atomization and even disrupting one's connection with one's own identity and sense of self. There are a few reasons why I have chosen to write my final chapter on this topic. To begin with, social anxiety has become increasingly ubiquitous in the past few decades, especially in the United States. The sheer number of people, especially among the younger generations, who lead lives almost completely severed from any form of sociality has the makings of a serious social crisis. Furthermore, it is a problem that is compounded by an economy within which access to jobs and resources is becoming more and more dependent upon social networking and performativity, such that the ability to be "socially successful" has become almost a prerequisite for survival in the current socioeconomic environment, especially in the United States. And yet, despite its severity and ubiquity, the public discourse on mental health has largely neglected to take it seriously, as a result of which it remains little understood by the general public.

Finally, social anxiety interweaves throughout all the other forms of psychic distress I have examined in this dissertation, perhaps even illustrating how those forms of psychic distress are themselves woven together. In the first chapter, I examined anhedonia, and indeed, social anxiety could be understood as a form of anhedonia. Those forms of sociality from which people often derive their happiness and fulfillment, such as relationships with friends and loved ones, become, for the socially

anxious person, a source of anxiety and stress instead. It is nearly impossible, without a great deal of money, to extricate oneself entirely from the social world. Because of this, and the innate human need for companionship and connection, simply living in this world requires a person with profound social anxiety to continuously, and without reprieve, immerse themselves in a psychosocial reality that causes them a level of psychic distress so overwhelming that they can neither think nor feel anything else. In the second chapter, I contemplated the propensity for depression to lead to self-hate and even a desire to destroy oneself, which often causes a person to lash out at those closest to them and sabotage those relationships. Certainly, that was the case for Horace Cross, the protagonist of *A Visitation of Spirits*, the novel I examined in that chapter. Furthermore, Horace's sense of separation from his social world was perhaps the biggest contributing factor to his depression and eventual suicide. In the third chapter, I investigated the experience of dissociation, and here the link to social anxiety is perhaps the most striking. On the one hand, the disconnection from reality and from one's own sense of self makes it difficult to ground oneself in one's immediate reality and be present enough to actually relate to other people, making social situations quite disorienting and often a source of extreme stress. On the other hand, the socially anxious person often loses access to the forms of recognition one receives from others which help scaffold their identity and their understanding of their place in the world, leading to a dangerous destabilization of both identity and sense of self.

Before moving forward with this chapter, I would like to make a brief statement about this chapter's orientation toward its audience. One of the most common criticisms made by neurodivergent people, which some have even suggested I should address in this dissertation, is that, while neurotypical people are often very vocal about the importance of understanding mental illness and empathizing with people whose minds work differently, they often find themselves repulsed by many of the specific behaviors and traits associated with various forms of mental illness. They may demonize people for never making eye contact, thinking that makes those people untrustworthy, or for not smiling or being

too standoffish, thinking those people are being hostile or bringing “negative energy” to their social spaces. They do not view this as being ableist or psycho-normative because they attribute those behaviors to that person’s individual character or personality, rather than considering that they may be, at least in part, symptoms of a mental illness. This lack of understanding may not be willful, as it can often be attributed to the invisibility of the internal struggles conducive to these behaviors and to the general lack of public knowledge about what mental illness is actually like. Such persons may know people with mild symptoms of depression and anxiety that have very little effect on the way they carry themselves in public but who are nonetheless very vocal about their diagnoses. Because such people are far more common than those with severe mental illness, those people are often most people’s baseline model for what mental illness looks like. The core objective of this chapter, vis a vis its audience, is to facilitate a greater understanding of the link between some of these behaviors and traits and the forms of intense psychic distress that drive them. To that end, my analysis in this chapter focuses heavily on breaking down the relationships between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with social anxiety and explaining them in rather lay terms.

I.

My core objective for this chapter is to explore the ways that storytelling can make the *experience* of social anxiety, along with the myriad psychosocial challenges which come along with it, more legible. I seek to accomplish this through an examination of the recent serialized television series *Mr. Robot*. *Mr. Robot* aired from 2015-2019 and was written and created by Sam Esmail, who has been vocal about his own experiences with social anxiety and has cited them as a key influence on his creative process as he was writing this series. *Mr. Robot* is a present-day science fiction thriller about a young, alienated computer whiz named Elliot Alderson (Rami Malek) diagnosed with severe social anxiety and major-depressive disorder, who is recruited into a small hacktivist group by a mysterious older man who calls himself “Mr. Robot” (Christian Slater). The group is planning a complex, historic hack which would

erase the financial records of E-Corp, the world's largest financial conglomerate which, in the world of the story, owns the majority of the world's debt. The objective of the hack is to free everyone from the debt slavery in which their lives have become mired on account of the system of ruthless finance capitalism that structures the economy of the (barely) fictionalized New York City in which the series takes place. At the end of the first season, they complete the hack, but this only creates further problems, as the loss of these financial records prevents people from being able to access their bank accounts or use their credit cards. This only ends up increasing E-Corp's stranglehold on everyone's lives by allowing them to capitalize on the economic crisis by creating a new "universal" cryptocurrency called "E-Coin" and rendering the global economy dependent upon it. Because people now only have access to the cash and physical assets they have on hand, the financial precarity of the middle and working classes is compounded by this situation, while the wealthy remain relatively unaffected. Because of this, Elliot and his sister, Darlene (Carly Chaikin) end up reversing the hack, undoing the so-called revolution they started.

The other element of the story that is vital to my analysis is the fact that the Mr. Robot character who recruits Elliot into the hacker group ends up being an alternate personality of Elliot's, as Elliot has dissociative identity disorder. The relationship between them is one of the core conflicts driving the plot of the series, while also being, in many ways, its emotional center. The series takes a rather nuanced approach to this situation, as the relationship between Elliot and Mr. Robot is quite ambivalent. Initially, they vie for control over Elliot's consciousness and Elliot tries to get rid of Mr. Robot, but eventually, they come to depend upon one another, work together toward larger goals and, ultimately, to love one another. Furthermore, it is eventually revealed that the Mr. Robot persona emerged, as is often the case with multiple personalities, in order to protect Elliot from traumas he could not handle. This is, of course, merely the tip of the iceberg regarding the plot of *Mr. Robot*, which becomes increasingly intricate and convoluted as the series progresses, with conspiracies layered on top of conspiracies. For the sake of

brevity, however, I will end my summary of the plot here and address some key events and storylines when they become relevant to my analysis of the series' representation of social anxiety. But I should emphasize that there are many important plot points, characters, and themes central to the narrative of this series that I will be unable to address or even reference in this chapter, as my analysis is more narrowly focused on the series' depiction of social anxiety. When I do address the political elements of the show, I do so strictly in the capacity of exploring their implications for the series' representation of social anxiety, rather than for the series' broader political message.

I must also acknowledge one inherent limitation to the ability of a television series with thriller elements to convey the experience of social anxiety accurately. Both the genre and, to an extent, the medium itself require the viewpoint character to be, quite frequently, at the center of events, events that tend to be intense, stressful, and often involve other people. Moreover, it requires the viewpoint character to be an active participant, often even a driving force, in these events, rather than a passive observer and listener. This requires the character to be out and about quite often, interacting with other people, rather than sequestered in their own private space away from other people. While it is certainly true that some people with severe social anxiety may live life in such a way, such people are certainly the exception. The experience of being completely socially isolated, which is the reality for many people with social anxiety, is not an experience that a series of this nature can represent. A series like *Mr. Robot*, therefore, cannot truly enmesh the viewer in the marginal social position in which many socially anxious people find themselves trapped. Despite these limitations, however, the series does an excellent job portraying both the psychological and interpersonal effects of social anxiety, and it is these portrayals on which I focus my analyses in this chapter.

The vast majority of critical commentary on *Mr. Robot* focuses on its political themes, which are quite complex and far more nuanced than the above plot description might imply. For instance, one article states that "Elliot's psychological illness, addiction, and isolation, then, all signify the violence

enacted by economic policies of austerity and the prioritization of shareholder value” (Vint and Alexander 179). It is certainly possible to watch *Mr. Robot* through a strictly political lens, and to interpret Elliot’s mental illness as a narrativization of the dehumanizing and atomizing forces of finance capitalism. Such critiques mirror Elliot’s own criticisms of the political economy and social structures of neoliberal society. I would argue, however, that such critiques also treat Elliot’s mental health conditions as what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have called a “narrative prosthesis,” whereby disability “serves as a metaphorical signifier of social and individual collapse” (Mitchell & Snyder 47). I am therefore skeptical of any interpretations of *Mr. Robot* that reduce Elliot’s social anxiety to the status of a mere metaphor for some “more significant” or “more universal” social problem, rather than acknowledging it as a lived experience that is worth understanding in its own right.

Without a doubt, *Mr. Robot* is a political show. It includes much in the way of explicit critique of the various social, cultural, and economic forces of neoliberalism, including austerity politics, deregulation of the financial sector, debt predation, corporate oligarchism, the surveillance state, the use of social media to instrumentalize and monetize human sociality, and the encouragement of rampant, unconstrained consumerism as a means of manipulating and pacifying the middle and working classes into consenting to socioeconomic conditions which are disadvantageous to them, thereby trapping them in a permanent state of economic precarity. And it is absolutely true that there is a direct link between these structural problems and Elliot’s mental illness. In large part because of his social and economic circumstances, he works a thoroughly alienating corporate IT job from which he derives absolutely no personal fulfillment, before coming home to a decrepit apartment in a rundown tenement building where he ends up getting embroiled, at gunpoint, in the affairs of a gang of murderous drug-dealers.

But *Mr. Robot* is not *only* a political show. It is also a thoroughly neurodivergent show. And as a neurodivergent person who has struggled with many of the mental illnesses depicted in this show, and who has watched and discussed this show at length with other neurodivergent persons, I can attest to

the fact that much of the emotional storytelling that unfolds throughout the series is operating at a wavelength that seems explicitly designed to speak directly to neurodivergent people and their experiences. Throughout this chapter, I hope to connect to and render visible the story that unfolds on that particular wavelength- to conduct, as it were, a neurodivergent analysis of *Mr. Robot*. My own analysis of *Mr. Robot* therefore focuses on the ways it employs body-mind-worldbuilding to represent social anxiety as an embodied, personalized and socialized experience, and my primary concern is the way that this experience impacts Elliot's life and frames his perception of himself and of the world around him.

I therefore do not believe that the series supports an interpretation of Elliot's social anxiety and depression as merely a consequence of political, social, and economic problems, nor do I think that discussion of Elliot's experience of mental illness should be subordinated to some ostensibly more important critique of larger systemic issues. Rather, those problems number among the many factors that influence his mental illness, along with more personal factors such as childhood traumas stemming from parental abuse, including physical and psychological abuse by his mother and as is revealed in the final season, sexual abuse by his father, who died of cancer when he was a child. In fact, a large part of Elliot's anger toward E-Corp stems from the fact that his father was an employee of E-Corp who died after contracting leukemia from a toxic chemical leak resulting from the corporation's negligence. Thus, his personal traumas and political grievances have a reciprocal effect upon one another and cannot be either neatly disentangled or placed in any sort of hierarchy of significance. Instead, they blossom alongside one another and ultimately coalesce into one colossal albatross that overwhelms his identity, disrupts his relationships with others, and ultimately engenders within him a paranoid orientation toward any and all elements of the social world.

Mr. Robot utilizes the audiovisual elements of the television medium to facilitate an immersion into Elliot's disorienting sensory experience of the world, while also granting the audience direct access

to Elliot's interiority by borrowing a narrative device found primarily in literary works: the internal monologue. The combination of the internal monologue with these audiovisual elements facilitates a kind of polyphony that allows the audience to view Elliot, and his body-mind-world, from two different perspectives: his own interiority and an external perspective that reflects the way he projects himself in social spaces. The Elliot that takes shape through the internal monologues is so drastically different from the Elliot who converses with other people and whom they therefore perceive as "Elliot" that it is difficult to reconcile these two Elliots as one and the same person. The incongruity between these two "versions" of Elliot offers a framework for narrativizing the massive rift that often emerges between a socially anxious person's interior and exterior selves. As I mentioned earlier, *Mr. Robot* takes this notion of "two Elliots" a step further by revealing, in the penultimate episode of the first season, that Christian Slater's "Mr. Robot" character, the primary person with whom Elliot had been interacting throughout the season, is in fact a separate persona dwelling within Elliot's mind who sometimes usurps his consciousness for extended periods of time, causing him to "lose time." Throughout this chapter, I examine all of these narrative devices and storytelling choices as ways of using body-mind-worldbuilding to narrativize social anxiety as a form of disconnection between the social world, which is held perpetually out of reach, permanently inaccessible to the socially anxious subject, and that subject's conscious sense of self, which, as a result of this disconnection, grows more and more faint, a fading echo that eventually threatens to disappear entirely.

II.

The pilot of *Mr. Robot* is titled "hellofriend.mov," and there are two elements of this title that both provide key insights into Elliot's orientation toward the social world and indicate to the audience how they ought to interpret the phenomena unfolding before them on-screen. The first thing to note is that the episode title is written as if it were a computer file, i.e. a .mov file. This is reflected in the later episode titles as well, which also end in file types such as: .mpeg, .wmv, .flv, .avi, etc. To a certain extent,

this is a gimmick, but it is also a crucial narrative device that focalizes the narratives of each episode within Elliot's perceptual frame. It does so by organizing the actions, relationships, and emotions portrayed on-screen in the same format in which Elliot himself internally organizes them: as data that can be hidden, protected, hacked, exploited, or otherwise manipulated at will. I should note that, despite how it may sound, this organization of reality as manipulatable data should not be understood as some type of sociopathy. On the contrary, Elliot is particularly sensitive to the feelings of others, largely because of how often he plays the role of quiet observer or listener in social situations. Instead, I interpret this as a coping mechanism. Like anyone else, Elliot organizes his perception of reality in a way that makes it more comprehensible, accessible, and manageable. The social world is overwhelming and stressful for him, so he translates the language of sociality, which intimidates him, into a language he intuitively understands, and which therefore lends him a greater sense of control over his body-mind-world. The social world becomes a kind of computer interface, and social risk is mitigated by reframing social interactions as a series of inputs and outputs. This same narrative device threads throughout his internal monologues, in which he frequently employs programming language to describe the behaviors and psychologies of other people, his relationships with these people, and the events in his life and his orientation toward those events. These are all psychological techniques for making the social world, and the people in it, seem less threatening. Almost all of Elliot's internal monologues that I analyze throughout this chapter employ this narrative device.

The other aspect of the pilot's title worth noting is the "hellofriend" part. The "friend" in question, it turns out, is the audience. The audience is the explicit addressee of Elliot's running internal monologue throughout the series. It is important to note that this narrative contrivance does not, as it might seem on the surface, serve a primarily metafictional purpose. Rather, it serves to illustrate just how insular, claustrophobic, and lonely Elliot's psychosocial world is. Because he cannot trust or communicate with other people, he invents an imaginary "friend" with whom he can share not only his

innermost thoughts, but even his most basic observations of the world around him, which he does not feel comfortable sharing with other people. The only social milieu within which he feels comfortable authentically expressing himself is the one enclosed within his own mind, invisible to other people. Thus, the Elliot the audience encounters, and through whose perspective the events of the series are filtered, is effectively invisible to the other characters in the series, who, of course, do not witness his internal struggles or the moments when he breaks down crying in the seclusion of his studio apartment. The audience is thus interpellated as Elliot's confidant and the sole witness to his internal struggles. Through this interpellation, the audience is offered both the power and the responsibility of giving these struggles, along with the conscious subject who endures them, the recognition they do not receive from any source within the diegesis of the series.

This lack of recognition stems, as I suggested earlier, from the massive rift between Elliot's interior self and his social self. This rift frames Elliot's encounters with the social world, the other people who inhabit that world, and even his own consciousness. In an early scene in the pilot, Elliot is speaking with his psychologist, Krista (Gloria Reuben), who asks him: "what are you thinking about?" (*Mr. Robot* 1.01 10:50). He pauses for a few seconds and then says "Nothing" (*Mr. Robot* 1.01 10:54). His response is delayed, as if his thinking were slowed down, a common symptom of depression. But the internal monologue shows that the gears in his head are in fact spinning quite rapidly. The scene demonstrates this audially, as the voiceover speaks very quickly, without even pausing between sentences. Inside his head, he states that: "Though she's a psychologist, she's really bad at reading people. But I'm good at reading people. My secret: I look for the worst in them" (*Mr. Robot* 1.01 11:14). His internal monologue proceeds to recount everything he knows about Krista's life story, which he has learned by hacking her, something he does to every person he encounters. Hacking is his way of knowing people, which makes sense given his method of organizing reality as computer data. Elliot comes to understand a person, their psyche, their life, by finding as much data as he can about that person and collating that data into a

totalizing figuration that makes sense of that data. The more data he collects about a person, largely through hacking, the more he feels like he knows and understands them.

It makes sense, then, that he cultivates knowledge of other people by looking for the worst in them. In theory, the data that is most tightly protected is the data that is most harmful to the image people are trying to create. By discovering the parts of others they are trying to keep hidden, he discovers their “true” selves. This view of the human psyche both feeds on and reinforces his social anxiety. On the one hand, like many persons with social anxiety, Elliot developed a profound mistrust of other people as an adaptation to years of mistreatment by others, including his own abusive parents, in order to protect himself from potential threats to his mental health and personal security. But on the other hand, this perspective on humanity is a kind of maladaptive ego-defense mechanism, a way of rationalizing his avoidance of people through misanthropy. It allows him to convince himself that his social isolation is a deliberate, rational choice he has made, rather than something brought about by involuntary psychic processes compounded by a social world that rejects and excludes him. Yet the show makes clear that this is a form of self-delusion, as a few minutes later in the episode, Elliot is huddled in the corner of his room, hugging his legs and crying, as the voiceover says: “I hate when I can’t hold in my loneliness. This crying has been happening too often, every other week now” (*Mr. Robot* 1.01 20:32). This scene illustrates the way that his social anxiety and his depression reinforce one another. The inability to outwardly express these painful feelings, combined with the lack of a social outlet through which others might acknowledge and validate those feelings, amplifies them to the point that his body can no longer contain them and thus forces him to unleash them, but only in an asocial context where he cannot do anything about them.

In the midst of this crying episode, Elliot’s internal monologue asks, with all sincerity: “What do normal people do when they get this sad? They reach out to friends and family, I think. That’s not an option for me. I do morphine” (*Mr. Robot* 1.01 20:34). The use of morphine as Elliot’s drug of choice is

worth noting, as it indicates an anhedonic orientation toward emotionality and sensation. Sensations and emotions can only ever be, from his perception, negative experiences. From this position, the most beneficial effect a drug can have would be to eliminate those experiences by numbing him, which is, of course, the primary objective of opiates like morphine. Like the anhedonic characters in Thomas Ligotti's stories, which I analyzed in Chapter 1, Elliot's most pressing goal is not to be "happy" but to be "less depressed" or "less anxious." The best he can hope for is to feel his painful emotions less acutely, rather than to replace them with pleasant ones.

Elliot's inability to express these feelings verbally increases exponentially the brutality of their effect on his interior life. Elliot feels the forms of social exclusion that marginalize him on his own body-mind, where they manifest in these episodes of uncontrollable crying, panic attacks, and his addiction to morphine. Elliot's social position, which he describes as "wanting normalcy but stuck on the outer fringes, not knowing how to participate" (*Mr. Robot* 1.03 23:10), produces, for him, a body-mind-world in which the rules governing the social world are so defamiliarizing, so impossible to follow, that they inflict psychic and even physical wounds upon his body-mind. With that in mind, these glimpses into Elliot's private, internal life enact a kind of body-mind-worldbuilding that allows him to function, in a way, as what Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer have called a "living criptistemology." The term "living criptistemology" is intentionally amorphous and multi-definitional, but the key point is that it "centers disabled experience and "knowledge-making" (Johnson and McRuer 121) through forms of representation in which "the conditions of one's life repeatedly form the basis for creative embodied interventions in ableist logics" (Johnson and Mcruer 116). That is to say, the mere presence of disabled body-minds within the physical and social environments that exacerbate the painful and/or disabling effects of those disabilities renders visible the ableist logics that undergird the construction, operation, and social use of those spaces. By staging such encounters between body-minds and environments as a

mode of creative expression, it is also possible to draw attention to, and even disrupt, the cultural and linguistic paradigms which produce the ableist logics that undergird such spaces.

When I suggest that *Mr. Robot* creates the space to enable Elliot Alderson to produce a living criptistemology about social anxiety, I mean that the show uses body-mind-worldbuilding to stage these types of encounters in ways that reveal the occluded cause-and-effect relationships between dominant forms of sociality and severe symptoms of social anxiety. For example, in his conversation with Krista, she asks him if he went to his childhood friend Angela Moss's (Portia Doubleday) birthday party. The visuals cut to a scene of Elliot standing outside of a bar, looking through the window to see Angela talking with a group of people. Elliot opens the door, peers inside, and then freezes. The audience can see Elliot straining himself, trying to muster up the courage to enter into this emotionally and psychologically daunting social situation for the sake of his friend. Ultimately, he turns around, pulls his hood up over his head, and quickly walks away, but only after making a clear effort to force himself to engage socially, to be there for his friend. However, no one in Elliot's life sees this effort, except the audience. The next day, Angela ends up getting angry with him, telling him: "you said you were going to try" (*Mr. Robot* 1.01 9:00). Indeed, from an outside perspective, it appears as though Elliot is putting little to no effort into their relationship, and I can attest to the fact that this is how many socially anxious persons are viewed by their peers. Just as in Elliot's case, however, that perception is very often false.

Multiple significant cause-and-effect relationships between different phenomena, which in many ways define the embodied experience of social anxiety but which are generally quite difficult for others to comprehend, are made visible by placing these two scenes in connection with one another, along with the scenes of Elliot crying in his room curled up in the fetal position and the scenes of him taking morphine. The televisual medium allows the audience to witness these invisible efforts, to see the strain through which socially anxious subjects put their body-minds in those moments when nobody is watching, when nobody possibly could be watching, as they happen in the flow of the real, everyday life

of a person who spends their everyday life isolating from others. Not only does the bar scene render visible Elliot's efforts, but, when placed side-by-side with the scene of Angela castigating him for not "trying," it also exposes the ableist logic behind normative social expectations, which place upon socially anxious persons the obligation to function in ways their body-minds cannot function in order to be included in society.

It is therefore not surprising that all of Elliot's painful feelings and experiences impress themselves onto his worldview in the form of misanthropy. The inaccessibility of the social world, its unwillingness to see him as he is and his reciprocal unwillingness to expose his true self to it, inevitably cause him to view it as an enemy, as the source of his anguish, and thus to lash out against it. In the previous scene in which he is speaking with his psychiatrist, she proceeds to tell him that they need to work on his anger issues, that "he's angry at everyone, angry at society..." (*Mr. Robot* 1.01 11:56). His internal monologue promptly interrupts her with a bitter interjection of: "fuck society" (*Mr. Robot* 1.01 11:59). "Fuck society" is the type of line that could, under many circumstances, come across as puerile and perhaps even disingenuous, trying too hard to be edgy. But there is nothing performative or self-congratulatory in the way that Elliot expresses this sentiment. The immediacy of this internal response gives the impression of an almost unconscious reflex rather than an intentional, prepared statement, and his tone of voice betrays genuine anger and hurt. As he utters the phrase "fuck society," his head whips to the side, as if Krista's question were a physical slap in the face. The hatred he feels toward society is his lived truth, a truth he has gleaned from his own life experiences, from his own observations of the social world, from being disappointed again and again by other people and, moreover, witnessing the people around him fall into the same patterns of disappointing behavior. In fact, just prior to the scene with his psychiatrist, there is a scene in which his friend Angela is speaking to her boyfriend, attempting

to convince him to keep trying to connect with Elliot despite Elliot's resistance to this connection¹¹, and the boyfriend responds by saying: "I can't have that kind of negativity in my life" (*Mr. Robot* 1.01 10:56). This comment is a perfect encapsulation of what I described in Chapter 2 as the "happiness imperative," whereby negative affect, or even simply an absence of outwardly positive affect, is codified as socially toxic and framed as a legitimate basis for social exclusion. Moreover, this moment illustrates how casually and flippantly the decisions to socially ostracize such people are often made. If nothing else, the prevalence of this kind of attitude within Elliot's social world lends quite a bit of legitimacy to his fear of rejection.

Elliot's negative feelings about society are explored in greater depth during the next part of his conversation with Krista, after she asks him: "What is it about society that disappoints you so much?" (*Mr. Robot* 1.01 12:16). There is a long pause, and then he goes on an extended tirade in which he begins to air many of his social grievances:

"Oh, I don't know. Is it that we collectively thought Steve Jobs was a great man, even when we knew he made billions off the backs of children? Or maybe it's that it feels like all our heroes are counterfeit. The world itself's just one big hoax. Spamming each other with our running commentary of bullshit masquerading as insight, our social media faking as intimacy. Or is it that we voted for this. Not with our rigged elections, but with our things, our property, our money. I'm not saying anything new- we all know why we do this, not because *Hunger Games* books makes us happy, but because we want to be sedated. Because it's painful not to pretend, because we're cowards" (*Mr. Robot* 1.01 12:26-13:17).

This monologue expresses Elliot's deeply held resentment of what he perceives to be the fraudulent nature of contemporary forms of sociality and self-expression. He acknowledges that he is "not saying anything new," but again, regardless of how original this critique may or may not be, it is his truth, which frames both his view and his experience of the social world.

¹¹ It is worth mentioning that Elliot's reticence to get to know the boyfriend is not merely caused by his social anxiety, but also stems, in large part, from the fact that he knows from hacking this boyfriend that he has been cheating on Angela, and thereby deems him a scumbag who is not worth getting to know and who will likely be out of the picture before too long.

The problem is that for someone living such an atomized existence, these legitimate critiques of contemporary American society only end up fueling his personal misanthropy and reinforcing his social isolation. To wit, though he appears to be articulating this lengthy social critique out loud to Krista, his monologue is interrupted by Krista's voice saying: "Elliot. You're not saying anything." She then asks him what's wrong and again, he answers: "Nothing" (*Mr. Robot* 1.01 13:20-13:26). Here, the televisual medium allows *Mr. Robot* to juxtapose Elliot's internal monologue, reflective of his genuine thoughts and feelings which inform his experience of the world, with the actual dialogue he exchanges with others in such a way that reveals the profound discrepancy between the thoughts in his head and the words he says out loud. His internal monologue succinctly explains the rationale behind this behavior: "that's the only way to protect myself. Never show them my source code. Close myself off. Create my cold, perfect maze where no one can ever find me" (*Mr. Robot* 1.03 15:50). This phrase "perfect maze" speaks to Elliot's view of the human psyche as a puzzle to be solved, such that the way to protect oneself is to create a maze so labyrinthian that no one can solve it. There are two intertwined, deep-seated anxieties driving this perspective: the fear that other people will use his vulnerabilities against him and the fear that, if people come to know his inner self, they will be repulsed by him, and then shun and reject him.

On the one hand, these fears are a consequence of low self-esteem, which is compounded by the lack of affirmation he receives from others on account of his social anxiety. But it also speaks to his general view that the core of the human psyche is shameful, that one will find nothing buried within it other than a nest of fears, anxieties, resentments, selfish desires, and horrible secrets. At one point, Elliot's boss, Gideon, advises him to "find someone you can be your honest self with," and Elliot's internal monologue responds by saying: "I remember when I was a kid, I got into web design by ripping off sites I liked. All you had to do

was view source on your browser and there it was, the code. You could copy-paste it, modify it a little, put your name on it, and like that, it was your site. View source. What if we had that for people? Would people really want to see?" (*Mr. Robot* 1.07 10:46). The camera then pans around the office, showing all of the office workers wearing signs around their necks displaying their innermost thoughts/secrets. The signs display statements such as: "I pretend to love my husband," "I am bulimic," "I hate my family," "I'm empty inside." Elliot's internal monologue then concludes: "Find someone to be your honest self with? Bullshit." And so, of course, despite internally rejecting Gideon's suggestion, what he actually says to Gideon is: "'Really good advice. Thanks'" (*Mr. Robot* 1.07 11:30). Elliot suspects that his actual thoughts on this matter will make Gideon uncomfortable and that he may even take them personally, so he tells Gideon what he knows Gideon wants to hear.

Many neurodivergent viewers will intuitively understand the logic behind Elliot's behavior here and immediately identify it by the term that neurodivergent people often use for that behavior: "masking." Masking involves projecting a visage of normality by suppressing one's neurodivergent traits and instead mirroring the behaviors, affects, and speech patterns of those around you, projecting whatever other people want or expect to see by reflecting whatever they themselves express. This is a very common strategy that neurodivergent persons use to navigate social spaces, such as classrooms and workplaces, within which communication and affect are expected to adhere to a strict set of rules which align with social norms. In order to assimilate into the forms of sociality that govern his workplace, and to avoid offending his boss, whom he genuinely likes as a person, Elliot represses all of those elements of his

personality, perspective, and affect that he thinks other people may find abnormal or discomfiting. For Elliot, masking is the only way to survive complex social scenarios.¹²

The problem for Elliot is that, largely on account of his social anxiety, he is not very good at masking. One of the most debilitating, and most invisible, aspects of social anxiety is the mental paralysis it induces when the socially anxious person is around other people. One's mind does not work as it normally does. The anxiety is so overpowering that one's cognitive machinery breaks down and cannot function properly, making it extremely difficult to formulate coherent thoughts. This turns even the most basic forms of communication, such as, for example, small talk, into an almost impossibly daunting task. One cannot assimilate oneself into the natural flow of a conversation, which often moves along at a fairly brisk pace. All of this is compounded by the fact that socially anxious people tend to have a fairly limited reservoir of social energy which, in social situations, depletes very quickly.

For Elliot, then, it is not feasible to constantly project a convincing visage of normality, so he opts for the only available alternative: to make himself as invisible as possible. Invisibility is, throughout the series, Elliot's primary social tactic. *Mr. Robot* represents this visually. Elliot's

¹² The concept of masking is, in some ways, related to Tobin Siebers' conceptualization of disability as a masquerade. Siebers contrasts the concept of the masquerade with the concept of passing, suggesting that "the masquerade represents an alternative method of managing social stigma through disguise, one relying not on the imitation of a dominant social role but on the assumption of an identity marked as stigmatized, marginal, or inferior" (Siebers 5). That is to say, rather than trying to pass as a nondisabled person, a disabled person deliberately performs their own disability in a specific way in order to express a specific idea about themselves and their disability to others, including disabled and nondisabled people. For instance, they may emphasize certain features of their disability that coincide with the expectations of nondisabled people in order to be recognized as disabled or they may express certain aspects of their disability as a form of solidarity with other disabled persons. The masquerade can also serve political aims, to articulate a claim for civil rights or to draw attention to the ways that social, cultural, economic, and political systems discriminate against disabled people and make their disabilities more painful or debilitating. Within the context of mental illness, the masquerade can be particularly useful in rendering visible mental and emotional disabilities that are normally invisible, such as social anxiety. Masking, while seemingly more similar to passing than to the masquerade, nonetheless can be considered a form of masquerade within the context of *Mr. Robot*, as the intense strain through which Elliot puts his body-mind in order to acclimate to behavioral and social norms, a struggle that is normally internal and invisible to others, becomes visible when portrayed on screen, thus drawing attention to the ways that those norms compound the damage that social anxiety already does to socially anxious persons.

body language around others is very closed off, head down, shoulders drawn in, hands jammed in his pockets, as if he is trying to take up as little space as possible. The defining feature of his outward presentation is the black hoodie that he is always wearing, with the hood pulled up over his head, hiding as much of his face as possible. The hoodie, combined with this body language, makes him seem aloof and unapproachable, and thus acts as a kind of shield against any attempts by other people to engage him in some sort of anxiety-inducing social confrontation. The black hoodie functions as a visual metaphor for the way that other people, especially those who are socially successful, often perceive socially anxious individuals: as having no color, no personality, no perspective. Yet Elliot's internal monologues show that he has quite a bit to say: about the state of the world around him, about human psychology and relationships, and about the people in his life and his own relationships with those people. The issue is that he never expresses any of this verbally in his dialogue with other characters. His mode of expression is quite laconic, as he uses the fewest, most inoffensive words possible in order to appease others and end social interactions as quickly as possible. And so, all other people see is the black hoodie. For them, he is nothing but this black hoodie.

This tactic of social invisibility is, I would argue, a kind of violence directed toward one's own self, an erasure of one's identity and one's social self, akin to what I described in my second chapter as "self-annihilation." In fact, Elliot himself uses the term "annihilation" early in the second season while reflecting upon human sociality during a conversation with his psychiatrist. This conversation about self-annihilation occurs in the second season, after Elliot has uncovered the true identity of Mr. Robot as an alternative personality dwelling within his own mind and is, in a sense, at war with himself, or with that part of himself, for control over his body-mind. He informs his psychiatrist of his plan to get rid of Mr. Robot permanently by playing a game of chess, winner takes all: whoever wins gets full control of the body-mind they share. The loser

will effectively have their consciousness erased by retreating, permanently, into the recesses of Elliot's psyche. His psychiatrist suggests to him that "you are agreeing to destroy a part of yourself, win or lose" because "for better or worse, he is a part of you that makes you you" (*Mr. Robot* 2.4 30:32). She then asserts that "annihilation is not the answer." I will address this larger conflict with *Mr. Robot* momentarily, but first, I want to address Elliot's internal monologue's response to his psychiatrist's insistence that annihilation is not the answer:

"Krista's wrong. Annihilation is always the answer. We destroy parts of ourselves every day. We Photoshop our warts away. We edit the parts we hate about ourselves, modify the parts we think people hate. We curate our identity, carve it, distill it. Krista's wrong. Annihilation is all we are" (*Mr. Robot* 2.4 30:53).

Elliot understands masking to be the very basis for human sociality, a notion that parallels his critique of social media and social performativity from the pilot. In this monologue, however, he describes masking as a violent process, of destroying parts of the self in order to carve out a personality that adheres to social norms and expectations. What differentiates socially anxious people, then, is not the fact that they mask their true selves, but the fact that they cannot maintain a persuasive enough mask to put up a socially acceptable façade continuously, and they end up being socially marginalized because of it. Whereas neurotypical, psychosocially normative individuals may destroy parts of themselves and replace them with a meticulously crafted mask, socially anxious people destroy parts of themselves but project nothing in their place, causing other people to fail to notice them.

Social invisibility is one of the defining experiences of social anxiety, and also one of the most damaging. In order to understand, in greater depth, the psychological impact of this invisibility, I would like to return to the concept of recognition, which I briefly mentioned earlier in the chapter. When I use the word "recognition" here, I mean, primarily, a phenomenological process akin to what Hegel describes as the "process of recognition," according to which "self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another" such

that “it exists only in being acknowledged” (Hegel 111). That is to say, one comes to understand oneself as a self-conscious being only when one’s self-consciousness is acknowledged by another being whom one also recognizes as being self-conscious. Hegel explains that this is a reciprocal process, which he calls “the double movement of the two self-consciousnesses,” whereby “each sees the other do the same as it does; each does itself what it demands of the other (Hegel 112). This notion of a “double movement,” which he also refers to as “the duplicating of self-consciousnesses” (Hegel 112), suggests that self-consciousness is an intersubjective phenomenon. One develops an awareness of oneself as a conscious, social subject only when one sees one’s own self-image reflected, or duplicated, in the gaze of another. The version of oneself that exists within one’s own body-mind-world as, in a sense, the subject of that body-mind-world, and the version of oneself that exists as a subject within the perceptual frame that structures another subject’s body-mind-world, unite into an individual, coherent subject.

Merleau-Ponty takes this concept a step further, arguing that “the other consciousness can be deduced only if the emotional expressions of others are compared and identified with mine, and precise correlations recognized between my physical behaviour and my ‘psychic events’” (Merleau-Ponty 410). It is not sufficient simply to perceive another person perceiving or recognizing oneself; one must also understand and identify with the mode of perception through which that recognition takes place. That is to say, each person must perceive themselves as they are perceived by the other person. This requires a mutual recognition and understanding of the affects, behaviors, and perspectives through which each subject expresses their personhood. This makes recognition difficult for people whose modes of perception, due to neurodivergence or any other reason, differ drastically from those of the people who share their social milieu and whose recognition they require in order to become a social subject within that milieu. Merleau-Ponty writes further that, through the act of recognition, “I enter into a pact with the other,

having resolved to live in an interworld in which I accord as much place to others as to myself” (Merleau-Ponty 415). One’s own sense of self must be mediated through the perception of another, i.e. through an intersubjective, social process that unfolds within the domain of a shared perception of reality.

This is a problem for Elliot, whose own self-consciousness is mediated first, through an interpellated audience that has no ability to express any sort of recognition of that consciousness within the diegesis of the series, i.e. within Elliot’s domain of perception, and second, through the figure of Mr. Robot, who is a fragment of his own consciousness expressing itself as an alternate personality. Because the connection between Elliot’s inner self and social self is ruptured, Elliot remains trapped within his own interiority, a fragmented consciousness fighting endlessly with itself. For example, early in the second season, Mr. Robot poses a rhetorical question to Elliot: “What do they see when they see you coming?” He then answers his own question: “Because I’m going to make you realize...that they see me” (*Mr. Robot* 2.02 32:33). In other words, the Elliot that other people see, whom they recognize as “Elliot Alderson,” is, from Elliot’s perspective, not himself, but rather an impostor wearing his face. Mr. Robot, due to his substantially higher level of confidence and self-assurance, is able to project a dynamic, coherent, and even dominant personality, one that completely eclipses the timid, reserved, socially invisible Elliot Alderson. As Elliot’s internal monologue puts it: “This is why I’m different. Sometimes my mask takes over” (*Mr. Robot* 2.02 32:40). In this moment, Elliot feels as though he has become a mere passenger in a body-mind over which he wields no control, trapped behind a false mask, his true self unseen, unrecognized by anyone, and all he can do is watch helplessly as the mask lives his life in his place. Under such conditions, it is not possible to achieve the kind of recognition from others necessary for subjectivation, and so one experiences complete social erasure and, by extension, loses one’s faith in one’s own sense of self.

While this may be an extreme example, this feeling of being trapped within a body-mind one does not control resonates quite a bit with intense experiences of social anxiety. In social situations, a person with high social anxiety loses control of their entire body: their face becomes flushed, their heart-rate elevates significantly, they begin sweating profusely, their chest tightens, their stomach begins doing flips, their entire body trembles. They may even feel light-headed, dizzy, or nauseous. Anxiety overwhelms all of the senses. The mental paralysis I spoke of earlier in this chapter prevents them from being able to think clearly, which prevents them from being able to express themselves verbally. They are no longer the operator of their own body; instead, their anxiety is running the show. This also means that they lose control over their affect, over their outward self-expression, as their body expresses their anxiety and discomfort, their weakness, very much against their will, and fails to express anything else.

After Mr. Robot says these words to Elliot, the tone of the music changes, the synths becoming louder, more aggressive, and agonizingly repetitive, producing a more oppressive, suffocating ambient effect that compounds the sense of claustrophobia created by the dark bedroom in which they are standing. Elliot turns around and walks a few steps away from Mr. Robot, and for a brief moment, only his back is visible. His shoulders then begin shaking, and it looks like he may be crying, but when he turns around, it becomes apparent that he is laughing hysterically. The camera centers Elliot within the frame as his laughing grows louder, then abruptly jump-cuts to a new frame in which Elliot, still laughing hysterically, appears to be standing in a different part of the room. It promptly jump-cuts again to a close-up of Elliot's face, still laughing, but with no sense of where in the room he might be located. The effect is disorienting, rendering in an audiovisual way Elliot's confused sense of space and time and making clear how unstable and radically uncertain his locus of subjectivity has become. This is all compounded by the fact that he frequently has blackouts where he loses significant amounts of

time, sometimes even days, during which Mr. Robot (or another persona, as it turns out there are others) presumably takes over his body and his life. There are large chunks of his life experience, even in the very recent past, for which he cannot account and of which he has no memory whatsoever. One moment he is sitting in his apartment, and the next moment he wakes up in a van two days later, discovering that the E-Corp hack has been initiated and the entire world has been completely transformed. Elliot has thus not only lost all sense of himself as a coherent, psychosocial subject, but he has lost his sense of relation to all other subjects and objects, and even his sense of relation to his own life, his own memories, and his own experiences. Everything is up in the air, nothing makes sense, and so the only possible reaction is a complete breakdown of any sense of order within his body-mind-world, a breakdown which manifests as senseless, uncontrollable laughter.

Under such conditions, it is no wonder that Elliot perceives himself as having very little agency in his own life. This is one of the defining experiences of not only social anxiety but many other forms of mental illness: a perceived lack of control over oneself and one's life, paired with a pressing need to attain that control by any means necessary. The word "control" recurs quite a few times during Elliot's internal monologues throughout the series and is in fact one of the key recurring themes of these monologues. It would not be a stretch to suggest that he is obsessed with control, or, more specifically, with the need to establish control over his mind and his life. Toward the end of the pilot, as Elliot is riding the subway home, he reflects on the day's events, including his first meeting with Mr. Robot, in the following way: "It's a delusion. Is this a delusion? Shit! I'm a schizo!" (*Mr. Robot* 1.01 40:27). This very brief reflection succinctly illustrates the complete lack of faith Elliot has in his own perception of reality. This is, in large part, a product of his social anxiety. Because he never shares his personal experiences, and his perception of those experiences, with others, he never receives any kind of external

confirmation or validation of what he perceives with his own senses. As a result, those senses become untrustworthy.

But this is actually a very common experience for people who deal with severe mood, anxiety, and/or psychotic disorders. The more one's perception of the world differs from that of the people around them, the less reliable one's own perceptions become, especially when one is already profoundly insecure and unsure of themselves. When one factors in the frequency of comorbidity between multiple different mental illnesses (one rarely has only one), it is no surprise that Elliot finds himself unable to conclusively or even persuasively convince himself that he is not schizophrenic and that the things he is experiencing are in fact real and not mere delusions. It is a terrifying experience, made even more terrifying by the fact that he must endure it alone on account of his social isolation. His own interiority, which one might assume to be a refuge from the chaotic and unpredictable social world, becomes itself a source of profound uncertainty.

Elliot's initial solution to this problem is to reject his own interiority, which he has come to view as a locus of chaos rather than a locus of control. At the very beginning of the second season, after he has learned Mr. Robot's true identity and Mr. Robot has initiated the E-Corp hack, Elliot has returned to live at his mother's house. His internal monologue explains that he has decided to live his life as a "perfectly constructed loop," which he describes as follows:

"Today started just like yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that, and every day for the last month, a loop, my perfectly constructed loop. At 8:00 A.M. my daily program begins by having breakfast with my friend, Leon. He just discovered "Seinfeld." And talks way too much about it. It's really fucking with him. But it's perfect for me. I don't have to say anything. I can just listen. At 10:00 A.M. I help out around the house. At 12:00 P.M. I have lunch with Leon. At 2:00 P.M. we'll check out a basketball game. Hot Carla, the local pyro, is usually there. She's become like my personal totem. I still don't understand why people like sports. They get so emotional over the weirdest things. But I do see the beauty in the rules, the invisible code of chaos hiding behind the menacing face of order. At 4:30 P.M. I clean up around the house again. At 6:00 P.M. I have dinner with Leon. As you can tell, we eat most meals together. Like I said, I never have to talk, and the repetition is good for me now. It keeps my regimen intact. Two days a week, I go to a

church group. I don't get the rules here either, but I need to keep socializing myself. It's good for me. Besides, these people seem normal. I've been keeping a journal. It's the only way to keep my programming running like it's supposed to. And then I go to bed. My mom has no computer or internet access to tempt me into the night. All that's left for me is just ordinary analog sleep, ending the day's loop" (*Mr. Robot* 2.01 7:11).

In short, Elliot's technique for reestablishing control over his life is to run his own life like a computer program, reducing his conscious existence to a mindless loop. He acknowledges that the purpose of the loop is to "keep my programming running like it's supposed to." He watches the basketball game every day precisely because he has no interest in it. Interest is a dangerous emotion for him at this moment, because it stimulates the mind in unexpected ways, adding new variables into the equation of his life that might jeopardize the safe, secure, reliably repetitive monotony of the simple, automated loop he has programmed into his psychic reality. Furthermore, by spending all three meals, every day, listening to his friend Leon talk about a sitcom from the 1990s, and not participating in the conversation in any way, he not only shuts off the part of his brain that actively engages with external phenomena, but also plunges his body-mind-world into a kind of temporal stasis where time can never move forward for him, and in fact even regresses to an earlier moment before any of his current, anxiety-inducing problems existed.

But interspersed throughout this lengthy internal monologue and the montage of Elliot's daily routine are shots of a tv screen in which Barack Obama is discussing the E-Corp hack, dubbed the "5/9 Hack," and discussing its implications for the global economy and for people's everyday lives. The television screen displays mass protests, rioting, and other such phenomena. The world is moving forward, dealing with the fallout of the events of the first season. The real world is encroaching upon the meticulously constructed fantasy Elliot has created to protect himself, but Elliot has opted out of life, opted out of the world. Because in that moment, for him, regaining control over his own psyche, his own perception of reality,

holds greater priority than any of the social and political concerns that were so important to him in the first season, greater priority than his relationships with others, greater priority even than asserting his own personal agency and individuality as an autonomous human subject. All that matters is preserving the loop, and this requires him to block out any and all threats that might potentially disrupt the integrity of that loop. Elliot asks the audience: “You may not think this is a way to live, but why not? Repeating the same tasks each day without having to think about them, isn’t that what everybody does?” (*Mr. Robot* 2.01 11:36). Indeed, this is Elliot’s understanding of normative social existence: bracketing one’s reality so that all unpredictable elements, such as, for instance, neurodivergent persons, social injustices, and negative events happening in the world, are excluded from one’s perceptual frame. This meticulously constructed ignorance is, from Elliot’s perspective, the secret technique that allows people to live putatively normal, happy lives in a world so horrifying that such a thing should not be possible.

Elliot’s obsession for control represents one of the key links between Elliot’s mental illness and his political/hacktivist goals. Near the end of the pilot, after quite a bit of waffling, he agrees to meet with Mr. Robot to hear about his plan to hack E-Corp. At this meeting, Mr. Robot tells Elliot: “You’re here because you sense something wrong with the world. Something you can’t explain. But you know it controls you and everyone you care about” (*Mr. Robot* 1.01 45:29). The forms of control to which Mr. Robot is referring here are primarily political, economic, and cultural. People’s everyday lives are governed by debt. Austerity policies severely limit, and often foreclose, the paths they can take to unburden themselves of that debt and reclaim control over their own lives. This leaves them stranded in degrading, dead-end jobs, with little to no social mobility, staring up at a glass ceiling. The panoptic effect of surveillance capitalism constrains what they feel comfortable saying and doing. The state’s disciplinary

apparatus primarily operates in the service of E-Corp's dystopian agenda. The list goes on and on. Elliot himself makes many of these criticisms in his own internal monologues. And all of these criticisms are certainly valid, and E-Corp is certainly, within the world of *Mr. Robot*, the embodiment and primary instigator of all of these structures of control.

But this is also a very personal matter for Elliot. E-Corp plays an important role as the villain of the metanarrative Elliot has developed to explain the lack of control he feels over his own life. In fact, his internal monologue reveals in the pilot that whenever he hears "E-Corp," his subconscious edits it so that he instead hears "Evil-Corp." This is replicated within the series at the aural level, as everyone else seems to be using the term Evil-Corp as well, including those who work for E-Corp or otherwise do not maintain the critical perspective toward corporate capitalism that Elliot does. For instance, when the series presents an E-Corp commercial, the people in the actual commercial are saying "Evil-Corp." The effect of this substitution is, first, to immerse the audience in Elliot's body-mind-world, to remind the audience that the reality presented on screen is a distortion produced by Elliot's subconscious. But this substitution also emphasizes just how prominent a role E-Corp has in Elliot's self-narrative and how entrenched it is within the very fabric of his psychic reality. E-Corp functions, to a large extent, as a reification of Elliot's own sense of being out of control over his own life, a repository for all of the social and emotional frustrations for which he has no other outlet.

Within this metanarrative, Elliot can regain control over his own life by disrupting the control of the entity which has played the largest role in depriving him, and everyone else, of that kind of control. Elliot's whole hacktivist approach to fighting corporate power, i.e. by hacking a specific corporation, is itself a product of this need for control. John Lynch has suggested that Elliot harbors "a notion of authority as that which is sustained by the possession of a key that can unlock and, by extension, also lock the sanctified data" (Lynch 17). As I

explained earlier, Elliot assimilates reality as data and understands his interactions with it within the same framework through which he understands his interactions with computer data. Hacking gives him the sense of control he feels to be lacking in every other aspect of his life, which is also why he hacks all of the people in his life. Discussing his first time initiating a successful hack, when he hacked his local public library as a child, he describes the feeling in the following way: "I felt so powerful. 11 years old and in complete control of the Washington Township Public Library" (*Mr. Robot* 2.5 2:55). In a sense, then, hacking E-Corp is a bid for control over his life when it feels like everything is spinning out of control.

All of this speaks to the fact that, for Elliot, his political anger and anti-establishment worldview are wrapped up with his social anxiety, his personal traumas, and his feelings of not being in control. It is no coincidence that the name of his hacker group is "fsociety," short for, of course, "fuck society." In fact, it is revealed during a flashback that he initially comes up with the idea for the E-Corp hack while sitting in his apartment with his sister Darlene, watching their favorite childhood movie, a slasher flick called "Careful Massacre of the Bourgeoisie." The plot, themes, and political thrust of this film should be clear from its title. In this flashback, the two of them bond over this film and, at the same time, over a discussion of their shared childhood traumas. The mask that the characters in the film wear, similar to a Guy Fawkes mask, ends up becoming the face of the "revolution" they begin with their hack on E-Corp, as they end up using that mask to disguise their identities in the video statements which they put out to explain their motives, challenge E-Corp, and rile up revolutionary fervor amongst the public. The flashback scene culminates with Elliot putting on this mask and, in effect, transforming into Mr. Robot: the music becomes eerie, his tone of voice becomes somber, and he outlines, in detail, his plan to take down E-Corp.

During this same flashback scene, Elliot opens to up to Darlene about how he was just fired from his corporate IT job:

“Wasn’t my fault they sucked, but it was my job to keep hacking till it was hacker-proof. I think it was the night of Memorial Day Weekend. Everybody wanted to go home to their parties, their clubs, their vacations. But they couldn’t. Because of me. So when they couldn’t lock down the servers they decided to lock down my ass instead, in the server room. After a few hours, I fell asleep. Woke up. All the servers in the room were destroyed. I didn’t remember doing it. Judge made me go to therapy for anger management. Guess it’s official. I’m crazy” (*Mr. Robot* 2.04 5:30).

The situation Elliot describes here is one in which the degraded, alienating nature of work under conditions of neoliberalism, the perverse hierarchy of priorities embedded in corporate culture, and the forms of social exclusion integral to normative forms of sociality all work together to produce an ableist social environment so intolerable that it literally causes Elliot to black out and have a psychotic break. Elliot is penalized, forced to do extra work, by his bosses for being too good at the job they hired him to do. He is socially punished by his coworkers because of his anti-social nature, as they create a narrative whereby his perceived lack of understanding of their normative social needs (or rather desires) is prompting him to act in a way that jeopardizes their ability to fulfill those desires. Their failure of empathy causes them to perceive him as failing to empathize with them.

Of course, the bullying to which Elliot is subjected is a systemic, and institutionally encouraged, feature of the corporate workplace, where the monotonous and unfulfilling nature of work leads to a steady build-up of resentment which, eventually, must find an outlet somewhere. Elliot’s outsider status makes him the ideal target for that resentment, as well as an easy scapegoat for the inevitable blowback, as management can simply fire him as a way of relieving the workplace tension that they themselves caused. The fact that he is sentenced to “anger management therapy” merely demonstrates the extent to which the language of psychiatry can be used as a tool to sanctify and preserve this toxic system of workplace relations

and the fantasy system that scaffolds them. The court sentencing him to anger management therapy both legally and scientifically codifies the narrative that the only flaw in the system is Elliot's social deviance, and that that flaw is corrected by purging him from the system.

For the purposes of my analysis, the extent to which this assessment of the situation is accurate is of lesser importance than the fact that it showcases the intertwining of Elliot's social anxiety and his hatred of corporate culture. This is a perspective that he and Darlene share. What is most powerful about this scene, therefore, is not its narrativization of the origin story of society and Mr. Robot, but rather the way that it showcases a kind of space where alternative, perhaps even neurodivergent, forms of sociality may emerge. This is, to an extent, true of the hacker space Elliot and his group use, an abandoned video arcade, but it is especially true within his relationship with Darlene. Within the polyphony of the narrative, Darlene represents a very important counterpoint both to the social conformism that structures the psychosocial world around Elliot and to Elliot's own myopic perception of that world and his place in it, a perception which, as I have shown, is filtered through his social anxiety. When Elliot says the words "I'm crazy," Darlene rejects and reverses that assessment, saying: "You want to know who's crazy? Those Wall Street psychos" (*Mr. Robot* 2.04 6:52). It is a fairly innocuous and almost meaningless statement that most anyone would agree with, but the sentiment itself is significantly less important than the context in which it is expressed. At that particular moment, when Elliot's nihilism and misanthropy threaten to consume him entirely, when he feels completely alone with no one to trust, this innocuous comment serves as a counterpoint to his own paranoid worldview in which everyone is against him, even his own body, which is acting with a will of its own. Darlene's comment reassures him that, no, he's not crazy, and he's not alone, either in his view of the world or in his actual life.

This is one of the moments in the series where the storytelling seems to move exactly along that neurodivergent wavelength I spoke of earlier. As they are watching the film, Elliot asks Darlene if she is still having panic attacks, and she scoffs and responds: “Why is that always your go to? Trust me, in this day and age, it’s sicker not having panic attacks. Since when did pretending everything’s ok suddenly become the almighty norm?” (*Mr. Robot* 2.04 3:54). These lines demonstrate quite a few elements of Darlene’s worldview that position her in opposition both to the stigmatizing social norms which frustrate Elliot and to Elliot’s own anxiety-driven orientation toward sociality. By rejecting Elliot’s question as not even worth asking, she both refuses to allow her experience of life to be defined by the symptoms of her mental illness and, at the same time, suggests that those experiences ought to be taken for granted as integral, perhaps even necessary, aspects of the flow of everyday life. She also casually reverses the neurotypical logic through which behavioral norms are determined and delineated, normalizing panic attacks and pathologizing any state of mind in which high levels of anxiety are not a common, everyday experience.

The open, casual manner in which they discuss some of the very serious symptoms of their mental illness, symptoms they would be judged and stigmatized for speaking openly about in psycho-normative social spaces, is reflective of the way neurodivergent people talk to one another. As such, the scene stages a very different kind of social space that will feel familiar to many neurodivergent people, a space that produces a sociality that might itself be characterized as neurodivergent. Furthermore, this discussion of mental illness weaves its way in and out of the flow of a conversation that encompasses many other topics others might consider to be unrelated. The televisual medium also does a lot of work here, as both Elliot and Darlene frequently pause for extended periods of time before responding to one another, and even their own responses are broken up by extended periods of silence, often mid-sentence. Yet neither

Elliot nor Darlene exhibit any signs of impatience with the other, no matter how long they take to respond. I myself have had many conversations with other neurodivergent persons that echoed this rhythm. This rhythm is notable precisely because of the absence of the pressure and tension which socially anxious persons often feel to be thickly present in normative social situations, wherein everyone is expected to follow certain social cues and keep up with the rhythm of a conversation unfolding at a pace far too rapid for them to feel comfortable participating or even to think of the best way to express themselves.

All of this creates the space for Elliot to open up about his own mental illness, for the first time in the series, to someone other than his imaginary audience friend. It also opens the door for *Mr. Robot* to offer a view of human sociality that is more nuanced than the bleak view that Elliot expresses in his internal monologues. For many people who suffer from mental illness, one of the biggest struggles is finding a reason not to opt out of society, or even to opt out of life. The last few episodes of *Mr. Robot* are, to a large extent, concerned with this struggle, and suggest that this struggle is, in fact, the greatest thematic concern of this show. The more politically-oriented story threads have largely been resolved, and so these last few episodes focus entirely on Elliot and his mental illness. These final episodes attempt to imagine some new way of reconciling Elliot's profound and unshakeable aversion to normative forms of human sociality with his need to live in society. In one key scene, Elliot is having a conversation with the series' central antagonist, Whiterose (BD Wong), trying to convince her not to activate a machine that would, presumably, result in a massive number of human casualties. The specifics of the conflict are not important to my analysis here; what matters is that this conversation is unfolding between two broken people who were rejected by the social world, and by humanity writ large, because of their neurodivergence, and whose lives were destroyed because of this.

In the conversation, Whiterose is trying to convince Elliot that her machine will save the world, but Elliot rejects this notion, saying: “You don’t want to help the world. You want to destroy it. You want to destroy it because you hate people for what they’ve done to you, and you can’t look past that to actually see the good in it” (*Mr. Robot* 4.11 18:50). Whiterose calls him out for his apparent hypocrisy, accusing him of wearing his own hate “like a badge of honor” (*Mr. Robot* 4.11 21:14), asking him, rhetorically: “shall I remind you of your group’s name?” She then tells him that “hatred has been your anthem” (*Mr. Robot* 4.11 21:30). All of this is true. In fact, this hatred of humanity has, to this point, been the underlying truth driving Elliot’s view of the world and of human sociality. But *Mr. Robot* does not provide the expected resolution to this internal conflict by having Elliot renounce his hatred. Instead, Elliot doubles down on his hatred of humanity, but approaches it from a more nuanced perspective, telling Whiterose:

“You’re right. I hate people. I’m scared of them. I’ve been scared of them practically my whole life. People I loved—people I trusted—have done their absolute worst to me. And for a long time, that’s all I ever knew. So yeah, I called my group “fsociety,” because you know what? Fuck society. Society deserves to be hated for everything you said they did and more. Fuck every last one of them for what we’ve all been through...But then, there are some people out there...And it doesn’t happen a lot. It’s rare. But they refuse to let you hate them. In fact, they care about you in spite of it. And the really special ones, they’re relentless at it. Doesn’t matter what you do to them. They take it and care about you anyway. They don’t abandon you, no matter how many reasons you give them. No matter how much you’re practically begging them to leave. And you wanna know why? Because they feel something for me that I can’t. They love me. And for all the pain I’ve been through, that heals me. Maybe not instantly. Maybe not even for a long time, but it heals. And yeah, there are setbacks. We do fucked up things to each other. And we hurt each other, and it gets messy, but that’s just us, in any world you’re in” (*Mr. Robot* 4.11 21:44).

With Elliot’s response to Whiterose’s accusation, the show manages to present, as the culmination of Elliot’s character growth throughout the series, an orientation toward the world in which the hatred of humanity that so often builds up within socially anxious people can coexist with a genuine love for humanity and can, in fact, even fuel one’s love for humanity. Here, Elliot presents an orientation toward humanity that centralizes pain and psychic distress,

that allows for shared pain and shared experiences of psychic distress to become the basis for a kind of intersubjectivity that allows neurodivergent people to carve out livable spaces in a social world that, frankly, is not designed to accommodate them. This is not trauma-bonding, however. It is recognizing the limitations of normative forms of sociality, recognizing the pain they cause, recognizing the near impossibility of navigating such social spaces as a neurodivergent person, and then being reminded that you're not navigating them alone, even when it feels like you are.

One of Elliot's final internal monologues states the following:

"This whole time, I thought changing the world was something you did, an act you performed, something you fought for. I don't know if that's true anymore. What if changing the world was just about being here, by showing up no matter how many times we get told we don't belong, by staying true even when we're shamed into being false, by believing in ourselves even when we're told we're too different? And if we held onto that, if we refused to budge and fall in line, if we stood our ground for long enough, just maybe...the world can't help but change around us" (*Mr. Robot* 4.13 45:11).

This is, perhaps, naïve, wishful thinking- that the social world will somehow stretch itself to accommodate neurodivergence just because of the visible presence of neurodivergence. Many neurodivergent people, myself included, would very much like to refuse to mask, to refuse to be pressured into suppressing their divergent forms of self-expression for the sake of not making neurotypical people uncomfortable, to instead force neurotypical people to sit with the discomfort they feel when faced with people who think and feel in radically different ways than they do. But the fact remains that social survival, for neurodivergent people, often depends on masking, and the potential negative consequences to one's mental health and livelihood are often too great to risk openly displaying their neurodivergence. But this is, perhaps, what art and storytelling can do for us: create a space for neurodivergent people to unmask themselves without exposing themselves to the possibility of social expulsion and the crushing loneliness which follows it.

After his conversation with Whiterose, she commits suicide, and Elliot is presented with the possibility of shutting down her machine by playing a computer game. It is a simple adventure game where he is given a situation and then prompted to type his response to the situation, what he will do in that situation. The first prompt says: "You're trapped in a dungeon with your friend." After a series of prompts, he is given the ability to escape the dungeon, and the prompt reads: "You start to escape but your friend is too weak to go with you. They hand you a note. What do you do?" (*Mr. Robot* 4.11 30:34). He cannot read the note because it is too dark. Seemingly having no other choice, he opts to leave the dungeon and escape on a boat, and the game says: "Congratulations, you're heading to a new world! Do you want to play again?" (*Mr. Robot* 4.11 31:13). But despite having won the game, the machine does not stop. The building he is in is still shaking; an explosion is imminent. The moral seems to be this: the point of the game was never to win, just as the point of life is not to win, i.e. to achieve success or happiness or whatever else. Elliot opts to replay the game, and this time, the camera zooms in on the words "your friend." Elliot types in "sit down next to my friend" (*Mr. Robot* 4.11 31:58). In short, he opts to "lose" the game in order to stay in the dungeon with his friend. Perhaps this is what literary and other artistic engagements with mental illness invite and request audiences to do, whether they are neurodivergent or not: to enter the dark psychic spaces, the twisted and terrifying psychic realities, in which mentally ill persons are forced to live their everyday lives, and to stay there for an extended period of time, allow themselves to feel uncomfortable and even alien there, and immerse themselves in the neurodivergent experience of reality. Perhaps this could be a powerful form of recognition, and perhaps it is exactly the form of recognition Elliot Alderson is asking for, on behalf of all persons who struggle with profound social anxiety, when he says "Hello, friend."

Conclusion

By way of a conclusion to this dissertation, I would like to return to the question of audience, because if the interpretive process I have called body-mind-worldbuilding is to operate as a vehicle for expressing intense experiences of mental illness, then it is quite necessary to consider to whom these experiences ought to be expressed and for what purpose. At the outset of this dissertation, I spoke of my desire to speak to multiple audiences simultaneously, including my fellow mad, neurodivergent, and mentally ill subjects *and* those, such as mental health care professionals, who seek to work with us in a clinical context. I must emphasize the word “simultaneously” here. Throughout this dissertation, it was never my intention to separate these audiences by speaking at multiple levels, by addressing the mad community at one level and clinicians at an entirely different level. Approaching this subject matter in that way would merely reproduce the divisions between these two groups that precipitate the forms of miscommunication and misunderstanding I have endeavored throughout this dissertation to address.

One of the key impetuses for this project was that the vast majority of individuals with whom I’ve spoken who struggle with intense forms of mental illness, and I’ve spoken to many such individuals, harbor a deep mistrust toward psychiatrists and psychotherapists. People have spoken to me about psychotherapists who have blamed them for the abuse they have received from others. They have spoken to me of psychiatrists who sit silently, expressionless, taking notes as they speak, interrupting periodically to ask questions which are either inappropriate or which indicate that the psychiatrists had not been listening to them but instead merely trying to figure out how to box them into a definitive diagnosis. I have personally witnessed friends be involuntarily committed to residential psychiatric facilities on fabricated charges by clinical social workers whose priority is not the patient’s wellbeing but the protection of their own license. On the other side of the spectrum, I hear about psychologists who take a passive approach to psychotherapy characterized

by a kind of mirroring, whereby the clinician merely reflects what the patient tells them without really understanding it, deflecting the burden of responsibility for both describing and recovering from a mental illness onto the patient and offering little to nothing in the way of support. I do not raise these issues for the purpose of pointing fingers or assigning blame, but rather to draw attention to a reality that must be acknowledged if we are to foster mutual understanding and trust between these groups. Many people who suffer from intense mental illness emphatically do not perceive either the mental health care system or the people who work within it to be on their side, and they view the sort of emotional vulnerability necessary for effective psychotherapy as an untenable risk.

I do not say any of this with an accusatory tone, because I think a lot of these problems can be attributed, at least to a certain extent, to the extreme difficulty in communicating neurodivergent experiences in concrete terms that are discernible to those who have never experienced them. And I fully acknowledge that there are many frustrations on the clinicians' side as well: patients noncompliant with treatment regimens, patients missing appointments, patients abruptly ending treatment without explanation, patients relapsing into old habits and behaviors after having worked so hard to overcome them, etc. And I know that clinicians also harbor their own frustrations with the health care system, often on behalf of patients whose wellbeing truly concerns them. My goal here is not to assign blame. Instead, my goal has always been to develop a common language, a more expansive mode of expression through which mentally ill persons and clinicians can communicate fruitfully about experiences of psychic distress and approach such communication from a position of mutual understanding and respect. This requires, above all else, an acknowledgement of the boundaries of one's own perception of reality, and a willingness to allow other modes of perception to encroach upon one's psychic reality, to expand that psychic reality in unexpected ways. Such an expansion may provide an opportunity to gesture toward a shared

perception of reality, toward the possibility of imagining a body-mind-world that both parties can cohabit in order to comprehend, at the level of concrete experience, what is happening in the mind, in the body, and in the life of the person with mental illness. It was, and is, my belief that art creates the possibility for exactly this kind of cohabitation, and that possibility is what I have endeavored to explore throughout this dissertation. I cannot stress this last point enough, particularly as I address clinicians and other allies who are not neurodivergent themselves: if you want to understand, concretely, the distressing experiences of neurodivergent people or those who suffer from intense mental illness, it is imperative to consider these other, less direct, perhaps more metaphorical, modes of expression and communication. In doing so, it may also become easier to comprehend the ways that neurodivergent people express themselves in other contexts as well.

I must emphasize that it is not merely for the sake of fostering communication between mentally ill persons and clinicians that I have sought to uncover this possibility within art. One of the most vexing aspects of mental illness, at least for me, is not that other people do not understand it, but that they have no frame of reference for understanding it. This is a vexation I have heard echoed by many of my peers in the neurodivergent community. But what has always made this communication barrier feel truly bleak to me is that it is not merely neurotypical people who lack this frame of reference, but also other neurodivergent persons who lack a frame of reference for understanding the suffocatingly singular experiences of each individual's mentally ill life.

My intention for this dissertation, therefore, was not simply to discover ways to make other people understand experiences of mental illness in an explanatory sense, but to try to show how art can create this frame of reference through which it might become possible to begin sharing some of the most distressing experiences associated with mental illness, to discover a wavelength along which such sharing may take place. It can be difficult to detect such wavelengths within the rhythm of everyday life, when our walls are up, our ego is active and present, and all phenomena we

encounter are ultimately registered within the framework of our own self-narrative. Such conditions impose very real limitations upon our ability to acknowledge another person's embodied experience of reality, and as such, present an inherent aporia to the type of empathy my dissertation proposes. Engaging with a work of fiction, however, in any medium, presents an opportunity for us to set aside that self-narrative and allow our ego to recede into the background, to step outside of our own reality and step into the reality of another. In fact, people often approach fictional works with the intention of doing exactly that.

The best way to develop the concept of body-mind-worldbuilding further, and the first step forward for me should I develop this dissertation into a book project, would be to engage more broadly with audiovisual media, specifically film and television. Those media do, generally speaking, reach a wider audience than literary fiction, and, as I began exploring in my fourth chapter, employ a very different kind of body-mind-worldbuilding, one which directly engages the senses of vision and hearing and thus, for most audiences, can produce greater sensory immersion in the body-mind-worlds of neurodivergent subjects. In doing so, they create an opportunity for audiences to encounter sensory phenomena the way the neurodivergent body-minds encounter them. They can reproduce, using audiovisual techniques, the effects those phenomena have on the body-minds of these subjects. Film and television studies scholarship, especially that which examines film and television through a disability studies or mad studies lens, will be helpful here.

Secondly, if I turn this dissertation into a larger book project, I will want to apply the interpretive process that I have called "body-mind-worldbuilding" to two other intense forms of psychic distress which I did not explicitly address in this dissertation: psychosis and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Psychosis and OCD are simultaneously some of the least understood and most debilitating forms of psychic distress. With respect to psychosis, not only does psychosis emerge within many disparate forms of mental illness, including depression, schizophrenia, post-

traumatic stress disorder, addiction, and many others, but it produces a kind of radical indeterminacy regarding the concept of reality and its differentiation from delusion and fantasy. In creating such an indeterminacy, psychosis throws body, mind, and world, along with the subject's orientation toward these components of reality and the relations between them, into a state of uncertainty, generating a profoundly disorienting experience that I believe can be expressed artistically in ways that it cannot be expressed in direct, expository terms. I would also include a chapter on obsessive-compulsive disorder, not merely because of my own personal relation to it, but because OCD is both physically and mentally disorienting in ways that are distinct from the other forms of psychic distress I have investigated in this dissertation. The intrusive thoughts with which one is bombarded seem to emanate from some outside entity, depriving the obsessive-compulsive of what for most people is the last, most reliable refuge to which they have access: their mind. Perhaps even more disturbingly, one is often forced against one's will to engage repeatedly, or constantly in cases such as mine, in exhausting ritualistic behaviors which monopolize one's time, energy, and thoughts.

Lastly, and this returns us once again to the question of audience, it could be very fruitful to think about how the body-mind-worldbuilding that unfolds in fictional storytelling might interact with the work being done in clinical settings. To begin with, it can be useful to think of the talk-therapy portion of psychotherapy as an exercise in storytelling. However, rather than filtering that storytelling exclusively through the narrative modes provided by clinical psychology and the DSM-V, it could be very generative to think about how those modes can supplement, rather than replace, the less direct, more metaphorical forms of expression often employed by neurodivergent people, whether through creative work or within the cadence and rhythm of their verbal explanations of their experiences. And in turn, these other forms of expression may provide new avenues of inquiry through which clinical psychology might expand or enhance the narrative modes it utilizes to

describe, explicate, and concretize clinical concepts and diagnoses. For my part, I would like to explore, as I think about developing this dissertation into a book project, the collaborative work that is already done in furtherance of this goal within the field of the medical humanities, and to consider the ways my concept of body-mind-worldbuilding might contribute to that work. Ideally, a core aspect of that contribution would be to engage other mad, neurodivergent, and mentally ill subjects in this interpretive work, to hear about their different responses to artistic and/or metaphorical expressions of neurodivergent body-mind-worlds. This would be a crucial aspect of this research because, despite the immense support that can be found within mad communities, mental illness is always an individualized experience, and the worst moments are those which unfold within the solitude of the neurodivergent subject's own interiority. Every neurodivergent person, every mad subject, every person with mental illness will have a unique, personalized response to any encounter with another neurodivergent body-mind-world or the creative expression thereof, and much can be learned by sharing, and reflecting upon, all of these different responses.

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