

DISORDER

GIVING FORM TO FEELING IN THE LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY

UNITED STATES

By

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I suspect there are few women who can claim both the kind of deep allegiance to hospitality that charges them to mop an already clean floor upon hearing of even the most casual company coming and boast a mean chachacha even as they advance in age, but my mother is such a woman: equal parts respectability and joy. I am thankful to her for teaching me both.

My father worked his whole life well and proudly but in ways unequal to his talents. His true career was as my father, as a father to my sister, as a grandfather. Few men, fewer still of his generation, rise and fall with the well-being of their families like my dad. I hope he finds his rightful share in our happiness as well as our accomplishments.

Having a teenaged sister in your house when you're a kid is like living with a celebrity. This is particularly true when your sister is Laura Hardy, née Roberts. My sister, now an award-winning educator, has been celebrated at everything she has tried, in every place she has lived. My suspicion is that her successes are driven by genuine desire to be of service to or to produce something spectacular for the community to which she belongs, even when that community is just us Roberts girls.

I have two favorite sounds: my son's voice and the predictable clang Don Brown's u-lock makes against the handlebars of his bike as he ascends our driveway. He is home.

This work is dedicated to my best friend and our beautiful son, Elliot.

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INTRODUCTION

THE EMOTIONAL SELF

I have always been struck, in America, by an emotional poverty so bottomless, and a terror of human life, of human touch, so deep that virtually no American appears able to achieve any viable, organic connection between his public stance and his private life.

— James Baldwin¹

There is something the matter with the way we feel. I do not mean that we are angry but ought to be happy, distressed when we ought to be glad. I mean to suggest, rather, that the means by which we experience and express emotion to ourselves and others is often taken for granted when it desperately needs to be closely interrogated. The primary claim of the dissertation to follow is that our definition of emotional wellbeing and capacity to achieve it are a matter of story. There are so many ways to talk about emotions, but *only* so many ways. Expression and understanding yield to the limited vocabularies we have for conveying our inner emotional lives. The second claim is that we fear our own private, personal catastrophes with such crippling force that we miss and miss again the call to re-examine the means by which we understand and treat emotional distress.

¹ James Baldwin, *Remember This House* (1979) Quoted in *I Am Not Your Negro* (Velvet Films and Amazon Studios, 2017).

I privilege the term “emotion” throughout this dissertation. I am working from the understanding that an emotion is something mediated, something with a name and historical context that the person experiencing it engages with in the act of becoming consciously aware of its presence. I am operating, therefore, more or less within the commonplace understanding of “emotion” as we use the term in the everyday. Even so, there are shades of valence.

Some working definitions of emotion are reductive, such as Paul Ekman’s anthropological mission to confirm Darwin’s theories on the cross-cultural continuity of emotional expression and understanding. Theories of emotion predicated on universality often reduce emotional experience to a most basic part, in this case, facial expressions.² It is with a similar limitation in mind that I largely avoid the word affect.³ I draw my distinction between emotion and affect from Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth’s description of “encounters with forces and passages of intensity that bear out, while occasionally leaving bare, the singularly and intimately interpersonal—even sub-personal and pre-personal—folds of belonging (or non-belonging) to a world.” (3) In privileging “emotion” I am not ceding the world of the body; I am, however, insisting on the life of feeling extended beyond the private and visceral—the “subpersonal.” The emotions of this work are verbalized and named; they might be construed as consisting of but not limited to affects.

² Daniel Gross discusses reasons why emotion research has been limited in the past. One is that throughout much of the twentieth century the “ambiguities of studying emotion rendered it a difficult and even suspect science” (36). A more contemporary hesitation could be located in Gross’s examination of popular theories (such as those proposed by Ekman) which circumvent such ambiguities by postulating seductively reductive models, such as “when emotion is reduced to a basic unit such as the face” (47). Daniel M. Gross, “Defending the Humanities with Charles Darwin’s the Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals (1872),” *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 1 (2010).

³ In chapter three, as I move briefly into Octavia Butler’s representation of unconscious desires and haptic, non-(pre)-verbal communication, I make a calculated move into a discourse of affect that I believe more readily describes those instances. There, The term “‘feeling” is at times employed in this text as it is in common parlance, as a synonym for emotion.

In theorizing a definition of emotion as of the body and of the world, I am indebted to work such as Teresa Brennan's *Transmission of Affect* and Jenefer Robinson's *Deeper Than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art*. In Brennan's work, emotion exists less within a person or toward an object as between people and objects. It could in fact be said to have no true identity as emotion except in the act of exchange:

It is all very well to think that ideas or thoughts a given subject has are socially constructed, depended on times, cultures, and social groups within them. Indeed, after Karl Marx, Karl Mannheim, Michel Foucault, and any social thinker worthy of the epithet "social," it is difficult to think anything else. But if we accept with comparatively ready acquiescence that our thoughts are not entirely independent, we are nonetheless peculiarly resistant to the idea that emotions are not altogether our own.⁴

I wish to flag this interpretation as a commitment I share so that, in the pages to follow, if it seems that an emotion slips out from the consciousness of a single character and into the more amorphous realm of the tone or mood of a literary work, this slippage is deliberate and encouraged.

Brennan's approach as a socially-minded affect theorist is quite distinct from philosopher Jenefer Robinson's turn toward "recent work in experimental psychology, neuroscience, and other empirical disciplines."⁵ This breadth of research styles recommends the compatible theory of emotion they draw forward. Robinson's reading of empirical emotion studies brings her to a place of understanding emotion as "essentially a process."⁶ Robinson's theory of emotion as a

⁴ T. Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Cornell University Press, 2004), 2. Brennan's observations about how we came to the paradox of believing simultaneously that our existence is socially dependent and shaped but our emotions are private and sourced from within, are relevant to later claims of this introduction in which I attend to the notion of the scientific self: "As the notion of the individual gained in strength, it was assumed more and more that emotions and energies are naturally contained, going no farther than the skin. But while it is recognized freely that individualism is a historical and cultural project, the idea that affective self-containment is also a production is resisted." (2)

⁵ Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper Than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

⁶ A special kind of automatic affective appraisal induces characteristic physiological and behavioural changes and is succeeded by what I call 'cognitive monitoring' of the situation"

bodily cognitive process does not extend much beyond the individual experiencing the feeling; yet, understood less as an object and more as a happening, this theory of emotion permits us to extend the experience outward—to incorporate the world beyond—in new ways.⁷ Drawing from these two thinkers, I approach emotion from a place of inclusion and addition. Emotion is cognitive *and* bodily *and* social, *and* transferable—a thing and, most especially, an event. With this baseline understanding of emotion, I move forward to consider the lives emotions live within the narrative constraints of a particular time and place.

Disorder: Giving Form to Feeling in the Late Twentieth Century United States is a work of close formal literary analysis situated in a cultural history of emotion. In this work I argue that there is a period of roughly thirty years in the late twentieth century United States in which there existed a greater multiplicity and diversity of definitions of emotion and prescriptions for managing emotional lives. My research asks how emotional life was defined and emotional engagements were formally afforded in discreet fictional genres and in dialogue with other, sometimes contending and sometimes complementary, narratives of emotion from politics, popular culture, and most consistently, the behavioral sciences between 1968 and 1995.

In selecting the title “Disorder” to describe this work, I am making use of a few different connotations of the term. “Disorder” refers to the preferred term for mental or emotional states existing outside of established norms (“Disorders”) within the American Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. I engage critically with psychology and psychiatry in their clinical, experimental, and popular forms. But I do not ultimately find fault with the

⁷ Brennan and Robinson are compatible with and indebted to the work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio who wrote about emotion as a loop between body, mind, and world, in *Descartes Error* (1994) and *A Feeling for What Happens* (1999).

practices of therapy or psychopharmacology so much as the cultural milieu that granted them disproportionate authority.

The title “Disorder” is also intended as an assertion about the period the dissertation covers (1968-1995). After World War Two there was a boom in the Psy Sciences in the United States in the wake of catastrophic events and fueled by lingering concerns about the mental fitness of American soldiers (both before and after service), new orientations toward Freudianism, and the expansion of the psy fields as professional tracks. As a broad and often federally-funded project, the increased commitment to mental health was never free of political aims or biases. With grand objectives as a motivating force, it is perhaps unsurprising that as the sixties near a close, when Americans can agree on little, a nationalist move to be mentally and emotionally well faltered under the strain of its own universalizing tendencies. In the late sixties, more alternative modes of exploring the mind, like LSD, and group and new-age therapies, go more mainstream. The period was marked by a continued interest in the minds and feelings of Americans in a broad cultural way, but also a diminished faith in the established channels for managing that project. This break is my beginning. I will discuss the precursors to my period in some depth in this introduction.

While I give less time to the state of emotional narratives that follow my period (because a comprehension of the period-to-come is less vital to understanding the literary movements herein), I am nevertheless motivated to define my period of interest by the way in which I see it coming to a close. My period ends in 1995 as the change that truly began roughly a decade prior can no longer be denied as the dominant mode of assessing emotional wellbeing. By the mid-1990s, the new paradigm is one in which emotional life was described primarily through a lens of pathology, not merely as a reaction to various interpersonal dynamics throughout a life, but as

best interpreted and treated through a system of disease categories, many with consumer solutions. Many things build toward this, including but not limited to: growth of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual over its several iterations; shifts in professional objectives within the Psy sciences; FDA approval of Prozac (1987); relaxation of FDA restrictions on direct to consumer advertising for pharmaceutical companies over the course of the 1980s and 1990s; and the social appetite for books such as the best-seller *Emotional Intelligence* (1995). Literature of the 1970s and 1980s spoke to these rising changes, but from a position outside, or truly before, their prevailing influence upon narratives of emotional experience. My project is predicated on the notion that in periods of relative disorder—the time between more established, dominant trends in mental health narratives and practices—there was a unique space for imaginative interpretations of emotion.

Lastly, “Disorder” is a term with strong ties to my own neo-formalist, new historicist commitments as a literary scholar. Fiction’s formal strategies can meaningfully comment upon tendencies in the mind sciences that exist beyond traditional literary scope, even or especially as those fictions mean to disrupt or disarrange. My approach is strongly influenced by Caroline Levine’s 2015 work of criticism *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* in which she argues for approaching formal conventions by way of affordances—which is to say that a form, be it artistic or social, can be deeply influential but never wholly encompassing.⁸ I am similarly indebted to Terence Cave’s *Thinking with Literature* (2016), which reminds us that affordances act as much to extend narrative possibilities as to constrain them.⁹ To ‘afford’ is thus not to necessitate, but to make possible. I look for the possible in films, novels, popular magazines,

⁸ C. Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁹ T. Cave, *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

philosophy, poetry, government studies, clinical guidebooks, self-help, and daytime talk television. I approach each as a narrative construction with the potential to theorize about what emotion is and how it can or should be expressed and exchanged.

Levine provides a succinct summary of what the process of working through affordance entails: “Rather than asking what artists intend or even what forms do, we can ask instead what potentialities lie latent—though not always obvious—in aesthetic and social arrangements.”¹⁰ But what does it mean to find affordances in an object (literary or otherwise) and what do we hope to achieve by doing so? Cave grants us the metaphor of the tree:

If one says that a tree offers affordances for nesting, feeding, perching, climbing, shade, and so on, the tree remains an indifferent entity in the material world, with affordances added on as it were, whereas if we think of the tree as an open-ended affordance (affordances are by definition open-ended, since someone or something may always come up with a new use for the most unlikely object), we regard it as already part of the ecology in which individual things collectively form a complex network of reciprocal relations.¹¹

The problem with traditional formalism, or indeed many strands of neoformalism, is not the limitations it places on interpretation of a work in the world but what little agency the work of a novel or film has in that world beyond serving, at best, as a static critique of a particular social scene. In the work to follow I suggest that literature is ecological in the sense that Cave describes it here: equally contributive and fully able to interact with the affordances of other forms that bind and expand our emotional lives.

For example, in my first chapter on Cynical Humor, I argue that abrupt changes in scene and subject amounted to a kind of formal constriction—a means by which sentimental or even empathetic connections between the text and its reader were forestalled. In my second chapter, I

¹⁰ Caroline Levine and Project Muse., *Forms Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press., 2015), <http://muse.jhu.edu/books/9781400852604/>. 6.

¹¹ Cave, *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism*, 48.

argue that Biomythography afforded the perspective of the second-generation daughter as analyst, not simply by being written or narrated by women fitting that description, but by drawing the reader through the discontinuities of their internal lives. To give a full account of one's past is to be represented; to bend that account through a fractured subjectivity is to conspicuously assume authority over that story's interpretation. Finally, I suggest in Chapter three that mainstream science fiction contended with the growing threat of an over-celebrated rationalism in the development of artificial intelligence by championing emotion as a *Deus ex Machina*. Feminist science fiction, on the other hand, let emotion mean so many wider wilder things—dangerous things—and so complicated a narrative of cognitive supremacy with a set of affordances far more powerful than a platitudinous return to love.

On their surface, these fictions thus served as critiques of particular movements in psychology or popular culture. It is, Levine admits, “a commonplace practice in literary studies to read literary forms in relation to social structures.”¹² Yet, I argue that fiction which reconstrues the boundaries previously set around what emotion is, how it operates, and who gets to say, does not simply provide yet another definition of feeling but affords a range of potential emotional selves that remain in conversation with other forms and their affordances, from before their construction and after, as the meanings of each expand and contract over time. I do not believe that therapy culture or psychopharmacology, or any of the other techniques for describing and prescribing emotional experience, were quite so prescriptive as they are commonly cast. These fictions and the trends in emotional understanding to which they speak afforded a great deal (like the tree they could be nested in, climbed, harvested for lumber). But

¹² Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, 3.

they also set and reset limits for the emotional connections between a work of fiction and its audience.

As Jenefer Robinson argues, it is possible to think “of form not so much as an object of our aesthetic admiration in its own right, but as a means of guiding and managing our emotional experience of a work of literature.”¹³ While Robinson is most invested in the discussion of form as a coping mechanism, she contends that “formal devices guide our emotional responses to literary works, focusing attention and influencing both our initial affective appraisals and subsequent cognitive evaluations of content.”¹⁴ A formal affordance refers thereby to the emotional pull of a work—the thing that grabs us—but also the framework that constrains a readers emotional responses and, in so doing, sets forth a de facto definition of how emotion does or ought to circulate.

Genre provides the means by which such emotional structuring takes place. Cave writes that “to regard genre as an affordance invites one to consider it within the perspective of cultural evolution.”¹⁵ I strive to maintain this potential. A reader may notice in the chapters to come that I attempt to strike a balance between acknowledging what is new and unique about a subgenre and maintaining a work's capacity to, in essence, extend the affordances of the category to which it self-purportedly or by consensus belongs. Cynical humor is distinct from dark humor, but I hope not so much so that it is simply a bush rather than a reimagining of what a tree might do. I likewise resist the temptation to put feminist science fiction in newly conceived genres (i.e. “visionary fiction”) that lose the word “science” altogether. Biomythography is the most distinctive genre at work in this dissertation. I hope that in chapter two I successfully make the case for the necessity of the subgenre Lorde delineates, while also touching on the

¹³ Robinson, *Deeper Than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art*, 196.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹⁵ Cave, *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism*, 57.

subject of memoir enough to adequately suggest that the recategorization has an impact on the genre from which it stepped away as well.

As much as I rely on the affordance approach to literary study, both Cave and Levine describe commitments I do not share. Levine is invested in seeking social forms within literature rather than in conversation with it. Indeed, her book begins with the arrangement of the classroom in *Jane Eyre*. Cave brings the concept of affordance to bear on a theory of cognitive literary historicism which is committed to reconciling human biological evolution with cultural (the imperative to tell stories, if you will, with the practice of storytelling). In the latter case, my lens is simply not that long. As for the former, I do attend to social structures within the works I examine, but I employ the word 'form' most often in its more traditional sense—as the particular manner in which a literary or filmic work is constructed. It is my contention that neither deviation precludes me from making use of the term affordance and all that it, well, affords. I do so most clearly by thinking through how the broader affordances of emotional life in a discrete period of time are met by genre.¹⁶

These chapters engage with distinct literary genres in conversation with unique fields within the framing of emotion between 1968 and 1995. What they have in common, beyond the broad categorization of being about feeling, is that each case presents a window into competing

¹⁶ Cave further explains the tradition of defining 'genre' as synonymous with 'convention' in ways that severely limit the term's potential: "The word [convention] arrives with it a powerfully conservative connotation, and also a negative one: that which is convention is unoriginal, boring, or even sinister [...] If you redescribe convention as 'affordance' the picture is immediately transformed" (56). For genre expanding works such as those I examine here, the threat of being deemed conventional is less. From another perspective these works might be described in heroic terms as 'breaking with convention.' By opting for the language of affordance, I rob them of some of that valor, but I believe I gain a level ground in which 'conventions' like the congregation of checklists that is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual or social science framework of The Moynihan Report or the pre-existing 'conventions' of memoir, science fiction, or humor are not cast as the monolith with which these fictive works must contend, but all language on the subject of the emotional self is seen to afford a set of interpretations and preclude others. I say this, not to occlude power dynamics, but to get quickly to the work of taking seriously the affordances of emotional selfhood these literary works forward.

means of selfhood formation. I find that all of the stories contained herein—not merely the fictive—but stories from Sigmund Freud, Oprah Winfrey, Warren McCulloch, Hortense Spillers, Eva Moskowitz, James Cameron and so on, put forth a set of affordances for emotional selfhood (be they in the form of a patient, character, reader or audience member, or in the implicit boundaries erected around one who studies human emotion). While the self may seem no smaller a concern than emotion writ large, I am keen to keep these ideas close, to insist that the means we have to story our emotions are indivisible from the question of selfhood.

Period is a great deal of my argument. I demonstrate that the period between 1968 and 1995 was uniquely open to narrative affordances of emotion in the United States. As such, this introduction will delve most deeply into establishing the dates that bind this work. In my excavation of feeling prior to 1968 I hope to show not just a boom and its recession, but the close ties the quest for a science of emotion bore to the project of selfhood formation. From there, I move to argue that the mid-1990s marked the definitive arrival of a new paradigm. Characterizing the period that lies between them is the work of this dissertation in full. I will attend to it here only as it draws my chapters together. A point I wish to emphasize regarding the periodization of this work is that I view the time between 1968 and 1995 as no less active a time in discourses of the emotions. Rather, it is a period, I argue, in which there was less consensus around what a narrative of feeling could draw from and therefore a relaxation in the orthodoxies around understanding and managing emotional life. This period, in short, afforded more.

In this introduction, I hope to provide a sense of context by reviewing the history of the study of emotions in the United States in the mid-twentieth century through the question of selfhood. I am to some extent taking the pulse of an area of study just before the primary sources of interest to the dissertation come fully to life. As such, I wish to forestall the critique of

zeitgeist writing by establishing my methods within a framework similar to that proposed by one of the more prolific scholars in the world of science and literature and a critic deeply engaged in the history of the self: N. Katherine Hayles. Hayles' interdisciplinary research frequently zooms out—close enough to draw on what is particular, but wide enough to distinguish heretofore unforeseen parallels in distinct areas of inquiry: farther than a traceable interaction, nearer than a zeitgeist. While this method is common to much of her writing, it is perhaps most explicitly laid out in her early work, *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century*.

Here Hayles prefaces her study of specific literary works in the context of scientific field models with a commitment to represent that literature is not “‘caused’ by scientific field models. Rather, literature is an imaginative response to complexities and ambiguities that are implicit in the models but that are often not explicitly recognized.”¹⁷ It is especially important to this method of comparison that the subtle inner workings or implications of the scientific models be cast as implied or even, at times, unconscious. From this perspective, literary works are not following the dictates of a new scientifically rendered and consciously promulgated organizational theory; they are making manifest a theme cradled in the underbelly of these practices, regardless of whether or not it has yet found expression in the scientific literature.¹⁸

¹⁷ N.K. Hayles, *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century* (Cornell University Press, 2018), 10.

¹⁸ It is worth noting the synergy between Hayles approach to science and literature and Cave's theory of affordances. Hayles' field model approach broke with a tradition that reinforced the primacy of scientific knowledge by casting literature as merely representative or reactionary to scientific change. For Hayles, a deeper philosophical shift makes certain affordances which can result in similar movements across fields with little deliberate cross-pollination.

This kind of intersectional inquiry requires often a common point of dissent. Hayles locates many. At its very base, however, “modern literature and modern science” must contend with influential moments in the philosophical history of the thinking self:

The modern novel emerged from exploring the Cartesian dichotomy in literary terms; or to put the proposition in its more usual form, from exploring the relation between the teller and the tale. Modern physics developed from exploring the Cartesian dichotomy in scientific terms; or to state it in its accustomed form, by exploring the relation between the observer and the observed system.¹⁹

Both fields are thus always obliged to develop with the question of the self at their center. Hayles depicts the ways in which language returns ever to the problem of “self-referentiality.” As Gödel revealed, even in the seemingly pure and self-evident realm of mathematics, the theory of the language (of, in this case, number theory) can only be depicted within the language it seeks to describe.²⁰ The “inability to stand outside the problem” is thus a constant across fields; yet, for Hayles, the inherent ambiguities of fiction lend them special credence to address it.²¹ The question of self as author, reader, scientist is one we will return to as this work advances. Crucial at this stage, however, is the means by which Hayles has demarcated what is common to seemingly distinct enterprises. It does well to illustrate the necessity of a foregrounded concern to which the literary and the science of the mind both speak.

I give more words over to the internal lives of behavioral scientists here in the introduction than in the work that follows. This foregrounding carries through, however, by establishing an even ground between psy scientists and literary writers and film directors. I see the relationship between them not as an artistic cultural response to an authoritative discipline,

¹⁹ Hayles, *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century*, 41.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

²¹ *ibid.*, 37.

but as conversation back and forth in which both parties were influential and in which narratives of emotion were coproduced. The self, implied by what emerges as a scientifically suitable approach to mind, and the self, suggested by an attention or inattention to the relationship between reader and text in a literary work, converged on the question of emotion. Arriving at this point of insight, however, necessitates a short step back, establishing first the conditions into which a late-twentieth century emotional self is born, listening for the beat just before the post-war psychoanalytic boom comes to crescendo.

Before

Hayles' Cartesian dilemma proves to be a subject still too large for our purposes. If a project such as this—rooted in the modern, dwelling in the recent—wishes to avoid, as perhaps it should, going all the way back to Descartes, it needs to seek out a more immediate point of origin. I pursue that through the two most prominent approaches to the psy sciences in the mid-century United States and the relationship each struck with notions of emotion and selfhood.

In tracing the lineage of two types of behavioral scientists, this section looks to the relation between teller and tale, observer and observation. The manifestations of self-definition we find amongst these populations do not, however, map neatly onto a broad and all-encompassing shift in self-understanding. They are better understood in the context of not simply the self, but the scientific self, a persona central to Lorraine Daston's and Peter Galison's *Objectivity*. In setting out to reconstitute the origins of their single word title, these authors came to "[understand] the history of scientific objectivity as part and parcel of the history of the

scientific self."²² Objectivity has, they argue, an etymology and a backstory not merely wound up, but in fact co-constituted, with the developing notion of a scientific self.

While the periods and subjects of science this section looks to differ from those of interest to Daston and Galison (who focus on objectivity in atlas production), the mutually reinforcing, circular means by which self and practice came to be defined remain relevant to our story. Just as "scientific practices that [blur] into techniques of the self" resulted predictably in a "moralized epistemology," so too the works of behaviorists, cognitive scientists, novelists and literary critics did not and could stop at the descriptive.²³ To imagine a reader, an experimenter, a text, a diagnosis, a theory of the mind was to afford certain practices and feelings one ought to have, not inevitably, but in practice. It is no wonder transitions between schools of thought seemed so contentious and personal. It is well enough to say that one is dedicated to one's work and therefore takes slight when it passes from interest. It is another to suggest that one's manner of work is wrong, less in the sense of being incorrect than morally abhorrent.

Daston's and Galison's history of objectivity through the lens of atlas production thus provides an image of the scientist deeply weighted by fears over the virtue of not just the encyclopedic knowledge they present, but their legacy as presenters. In proclamations of self-assured objectivity we can hear the distinct tremor of one who doth protest too much. At every stage of recalculating the scientist's relation to the objective, emotion was a concern of at least negative interest. In one pursuit of objectivity which Daston and Galison frame as "mechanical objectivity," emotion was brought to bear on its own denial by scientists who sought to purge their emotions outside of the lab. In another phase, the possessor of "trained judgment" was

²² Lorraine and Gailson Daston, Peter, *Objectivity* (New York. Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books; Distributed by the MIT Press, 2007), 39.

²³ Ibid.

permitted to wear emotion on his sleeve. The well-trained scientist was, in this case, granted the special right to delve into the unconscious and use personal feeling as an accompaniment to scientific endeavor, as even his feelings were believed to be of superior stock. This, in the making of an atlas. What then, might the call for and primacy of objective science have meant to one whose very object was subjectivity itself.

The Behaviorist

Succinctly, “Psychology as the behaviorist views it is a purely objective experimental branch of natural science. Its theoretical goal is the prediction and control of behavior.”²⁴ Watson’s summary established the characteristic attention to supposedly objective study with which behaviorism has since become synonymous.

The mid to late century transition within the behavioral sciences has been much discussed, often in a celebratory manner: the hegemony of behaviorism finally lost its grip in mid-century, thus opening up a whole world of possibilities. As Howard Gardner writes, “in retrospect, the price paid by strict adherence to behaviorism was far too dear. So long as behaviorism held sway—that is, during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s—questions about the nature of human language, planning, problem-solving, imagination, and the like could only be approached stealthily and with difficulty, if they were tolerated at all.”²⁵ The gains Gardner attributes to a move away from behaviorism demonstrate the rigidity with which behaviorism has become associated.

²⁴ J. B. Watson, "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It," 20 (1913).

²⁵ Howard Gardner, *The Mind's New Science : A History of the Cognitive Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 12.

Behaviorism was itself a rejection of prevailing scientific methods. Giving the method its due, Gardner writes, "Behaviorism spoke to many needs in the scientific community, including some that were quite legitimate: discomfort with the acceptance of introspective evidence on face value, without any means of scientific control or any possibility of refutation; dissatisfaction with vague and global concepts like will or purpose and the desire to explain human behavior using the same constructs that were applied (with apparently great success) to animal behavior."²⁶ John B. Watson in the essay widely considered to be the opening bell of behaviorism, "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It" (1913) used the introspection requisite to any consideration of consciousness as the pivot point in psychological practice. His was a scientist in struggle: "Not being willing to throw off the yoke of consciousness he feels impelled to make a place in the scheme of behavior where the rise of consciousness can be determined."²⁷ Armed with perfectly good data, in other words, the psychologist was forced into a place of compromised scientific validity by way of a field-wide obsession with reducibility to consciousness. In this climate, if it could not speak to the nature of consciousness, it was hardly worth noting.

Watson and his successors wanted to give up the ghost. It was an approach founded in the belief that much good evidence was going to waste in service of an unachievable goal and based on a perception of the human psyche as infinitely malleable (because if one could be conditioned to nearly any state, there was little space to argue for essence). But the establishment of a method in such direct conflict with introspectionism also spoke volumes about what a psychologist ought to be. And what he ought to be was considerably less central: "Psychology, as it is generally

²⁶ *ibid.*, 11.

²⁷ Watson, "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It."

thought of, has something esoteric in its methods," Watson writes. "If you fail to reproduce my findings, it is not due to some fault in your apparatus or in the control of your stimulus, but it is due to the fact that your introspection is untrained. The attack is made upon the observer and not upon the experimental setting. In physics and in chemistry the attack is made upon the experimental conditions."²⁸ By eschewing high moral weight granted introspectionism and freeing themselves from the albatross of consciousness, behaviorists set themselves to, in their mind, the more properly scientific enterprise of data collection via experimentation.

The precarity of behavioral science as a science and the instability of study of the mind, both internally and institutionally, imbued the field with an urgent will to objectivity. Though at times imageless, and often unavoidably reliant on interpretation, the behaviorists thus set themselves on a course running in many ways parallel to the aims of what Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison describe as the mechanical objectivist. The highest aspiration for a mechanical objectivist was to achieve "blind sight." "In this context," Daston and Galison write, "the machine stood for authenticity: it was at once observer and artist, free from the inner temptation to theorize, anthropomorphize, beautify, or interpret nature."²⁹

We can hear in the descriptions of straightforward, seminal behaviorist works, such as B.F. Skinner's "'Superstition' in the Pigeon" the value placed on deduction born of hours of

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Daston, *Objectivity*, 139. Daston and Galison trace the emergence of mechanical objectivity in the 19th century as a departure from the practice of Truth-to-Nature. Where the latter sought perfection, compiling beautiful scientific atlases with birds, flora, fauna that typified and, quite deliberately, exceeded the symmetry and artistic precision of any living, breathing, growing creature, mechanical objectivity stems from stories largely characterized by shame of realization of how far Truth diverged from reality. Daston and Galison open with and return to the tale of Arthur Worthington, once author of perfectly formed drops of mercury, from release to splash, who is struck, dismayed, and eventually remade by the photographic evidence of drops in chaos, mercury seen to be splashing with no regard for the elegant geometric patterns he had sworn to have witnessed. For Worthington and many others, mechanical objectivity would become the only acceptable way to greet the world.

reproduction. It is a classic work of conditioned response: very hungry pigeons took to “superstitious” behaviors when these actions were followed by the introduction of food. These observations were granted further legitimacy by the instruments used to capture them: “When the stepping response became strong, it was possible to obtain a mechanical record by putting the bird on a large tambour directly connected with a small tambour which made a delicate electric contact each time stepping took place. By watching the bird and listening to the sound of the recorder it was possible to confirm the fact that a fairly authentic record was being made.”³⁰ The faith in experimental conditions and authority of the laboratory instrument extended even into the hypothetical: “A hundred photographs, each taken two sec. after withdrawal of the hopper, would show fairly uniform behavior. The bird would be in the same part of the cage, near the hopper, and probably oriented toward the wall where the hopper has disappeared or turning to one side or the other. A hundred photographs taken after 10 sec., on the other hand, would find the bird in various parts of the cage responding to many different aspects of the environment.”³¹ The “would” of this illustration means of course that no such photographs were taken, at least not in this volume. The camera was nonetheless a flattering comparison; so unblinking was the behaviorist that he was as a recording device. For some, however, the alert automaticity the behaviorist brought to observing the outside action left little room for curiosity about what precisely took place inside the mind of a pigeon (or bowler, or card player, Skinner’s human counterparts to meaningless superstitious acts) when they acted as they did.

As Daston and Galison frequently note, from our contemporary vantage point, the concepts of the “scientific” and the “objective” seem synonymous. Yet each descriptor has a

³⁰ B. F. Skinner, “Superstition in the Pigeon,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 38 (1947): 170.

³¹ Ibid.

history. It is relatively recently that we mean what we mean by objective (and important to note that we do not always mean quite the same thing) and just as new that we should assume that to engage science is to enter into a contract with objectivity itself.³² One constant of the much lauded "objective," however, is its relation to the variably regarded "subjective." As not simply antonyms, but terms each impossible to define without the other, "convex and concave," the "photographic negative" of one another, subjectivity is bound to suffer when its "obverse" rises to the level of moral obligation.³³

In the era of behaviorism, objectivity reigned at subjectivity's expense—this in the study of human psychology. And so a vision of the scientist as self came to color notions of self far from the laboratory. Emotion was to be repressed and when that wasn't possible, the mechanical could come to be our better, precisely because it lacked feeling and perspective. Behaviorism afforded any emotion imaginable but relatively narrowly bound the means by which that emotion

³² It is perhaps surprising then to find the root of modern objectivity, not in the laboratory, but in philosophy, originating from sources that would become more seminal to literary criticism than the establishment of the sciences. Samuel Taylor Coleridge is perhaps the most identifiable pivot in objectivity's epistemology. Renegotiating or, less generously, misinterpreting Kant, for whom "the line between the objective and the subjective generally runs between universal and particular, not between world and mind," (Daston and Galison, 30), Coleridge explains in his *Foundations of Philosophical Natural Science* (1806):

“Now the sum of all that is merely OBJECTIVE, we will henceforth call NATURE, confining the term to its passive and material sense, as comprising all the phaenomena by which its existence is made known to us. On the other hand, the sum of all that is SUBJECTIVE, we may comprehend in the name of the SELF or INTELLIGENCE.”

There are a few matters of note in this brief passage. First is Coleridge's capitalization, more pragmatic than emphatic I suspect. He means to lay out a common vocabulary; he doesn't want you to miss it. This suggests, accurately enough, the very novelty of his proposed terminology. We can locate a second subtle insight in his use of the word "merely" where a modern audience might not expect it. For Coleridge, the objective is not the Truth inasmuch as it is raw material, just stuff for the self and mind to, much more impressively, interpret. Lastly, we witness here something familiar if not altogether identical to our working definitions of objective and subjective. Put simply: the objective is out there; the subjective is in here.

³³ Daston, *Objectivity*.

might have been understood (through mechanical objectivity or human acting as a mechanical analog) or how the emotion might come to matter (only as expressed as an observable behavior). The limits around content and method made affordances of their own—suggesting a self as subject and self as scientist for whom emotion was neither a primary nor secondary concern.

The Cognitivist

Of course the tenets of behaviorism were not abrogated overnight nor entirely. The lingering reach of behaviorist approaches into the present day and the first steps of cognitive science as early as the 1940s made for a considerable period of concurrent if incompatible streams of thought rather than replacement. Norbert Weiner and John Von Neumann were convening proto-cognitivist discussions as early as 1944 and Warren McCulloch formalized these in the Macy's conferences beginning in 1946.³⁴ The fifties saw a spread in published work with cognitivist underpinnings in linguistics, neuropsychology, and other fields.

Interestingly, Gardner places humanist education among the root causes of the turn toward cognitive science, congratulating presenters at the Hixon Symposia on their “familiarity with the kinds of epistemological issue that had first exercised the Greeks and had then formed a major part of learned conversation during the Enlightenment.”³⁵ That is to say, cognitivists were, according to Gardner, motivated precisely by the deep, philosophical questions behaviorists had eschewed. As the demarcations surrounding issues of method play so central a role in the

³⁴ Gardner, *The Mind's New Science : A History of the Cognitive Revolution*, 24.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 14. “The Enlightenment” as romanticized historical ideal, and the relevance such nostalgia holds for the fate of emotion, is a point I return to in the conclusion of the dissertation.

definition of both behaviorism and cognitive science, the trend toward interdisciplinarity shed light on the ways in which the latter sought to distinguish itself institutionally.

In his examinations of how cognitivism fit in with the cause célèbre of creativity at the height of the cold war, Jamie Cohen-Cole recounts the very enthusiastic if only mildly successful attempts to build interdepartmental centers focused on the study of mind by the first generation of cognitivist professors in the Ivy league.³⁶ Thus for Gardner and Cohen-Cole, the post-war period fostered a brand of American cognitivism that touted “open-mindedness” and a commitment to resolving existential questions regarding our very nature, in ways that behaviorism simply could not.

It would ask the big questions, but also, just as critically, it would ask them in the right way. For Cohen-Cole cognitive science could be enlisted in the case for Western, allied superiority, because “better knowledge of how higher thought processes work would protect democracy” in that such study was believed to grant insight to how one makes the kinds of complex decisions that shaped world events.³⁷ Cognitive psychology also represented to some the kind of practice—and therefore, the kind of person—democratic states needed. Scientists could not only describe, but model, the open mind. At the extreme, certain scientific approaches were granted a one to one relationship with modes of political thought: as Else Frenkel-Brunswik writes in *The Authoritarian Personality*, “a good way to distinguish a fascist from a democratic scientist would be to see if they lauded simple empiricism (these were the fascists) or if they believed that science involved an active mind and a tolerance of ambiguity (these were the

³⁶ J. Cohen-Cole, *The Open Mind: Cold War Politics and the Sciences of Human Nature* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), 165-89.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

believers in democracy and the true scientists).”³⁸ Cohen-Cole argues that in the early years of the cold war many behavioral and social scientists as well as historians of science rose to prominence with, or in part because of, their “anti-positivist vision.”³⁹ From Oppenheimer to Kuhn, he cites numerous thinkers who “argued that science was a process that involved creativity, insight, ideas, and invention as much as the collection of data.” That these characteristics came to stand in for democracy (and their antithesis, it is implied, for communism) was neither inevitable nor self-evident. They were foregrounded in principles of personal responsibility and self-management that preceded their political usage. As the emphasis on interdisciplinarity and scientific ideals reveal, both cognitive psychology and its predecessor took the shape they did in close conversation with developing notions of who a behavioral scientist was.

Thus, the image of a scientific self that predominated the field of cognitive science emerged, in part, in contrast to that of the behaviorist: he was interdisciplinary, open-minded, and optimistic about the potential to discern logical patterns or laws across minds, organic and inorganic. In many ways, he was like the persona of trained judgment Daston and Galison describe, trusting in his own assumptions and expertise. In the twentieth century, the practice of trained judgment, “taught and practiced as a skill rather an act of will” gained esteem.⁴⁰

³⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 147.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 150.

⁴⁰ The notion of judgment as a skill rather than will, is a direct critique of some of the most essential tenets of mechanical objectivity, which through an elaborate project of self-denial, ironically made the self a central concern. Assuring the sanctity of the observed required great feats of “self-abnegation.” Proponents would have to set themselves on the course of what Schopenhauer dubbed the “will to willessness.” This was not simply an attitude, but a means of conducting oneself. Daston and Galison take the Foucauldian line, that techniques and technicians produce one another; “scientific practices of objectivity were not, therefore, merely illustrations but embodiments of a metaphysical idea of self.” As part of their practice, scientists let the self out in journals, in compartmentalized

Furthermore, the cognitive scientist was one who reversed the flow of information as it was understood in the era of behaviorism. Where the behaviorist viewed what is meaningful about the mind as the response to environmental factors, the cognitive scientist placed his emphasis on that which is within. The mind managed external stimuli in either case, but for the cognitive scientist, the most interesting aspects of mind preceded any interaction with the outside world. At first blush, Cognitive Science would seem to have afforded much more for emotion than its predecessor, Behaviorism, and, indeed, there was greater space for hunches and feelings, albeit only from the carefully trained. Cognitive Science may have allowed for emotion; it wasn't, however, especially interested in it.

The trend is observable even in the early days and at the outer edges of the cognitive science umbrella. Herbert Simon, a political scientist, worked not in cognitive psychology (though he certainly made much use of it), but was thoroughly entrenched in the burgeoning art of cognitive scientific approaches to problem solving. The first of many editions of his *Administrative Behavior* was published in 1947. It did as it promised: outlined the workings of behavior in administrative roles, as they purportedly were and ought to be. It gave, in fact, great credence to environmental factors. Yet the mind that responds is eternally reducible, even when Simon pushes to complicate. Just as the logic of administrative thought and action began to seem impossibly neat, Simon afforded us this admission:

Objective rationality [. . .] would imply that the behaving subject molds all his behavior into an integrated pattern by (a) viewing the behavior alternatives prior to decision in panoramic fashion, (b) considering the whole complex of consequences that would follow on each choice, and (c) with the system of values as criterion singling out one from the whole set of alternatives. [sic]

artistic practice. In other instances, they attempted to, in a sense, out run him, paying for a clear head through the determination of hours spent and discipline directed.

Real behavior, even that which is ordinarily thought of as ‘rational’ possesses many elements of disconnectedness not present in this idealized picture.⁴¹

A modern audience might expect to here learn of the myriad ways administrators were a mess of conflicting desires and motivations, much as anyone else. Not so. The limits to rationality were equally systematic. The administrator did not always act in the interest of “objective rationality” because he could not judge between all possible consequences, not having access to them, because values were “imperfectly anticipated” as assessing consequences is a practice of “imagination,” and lastly because he didn’t always choose between every possible action as “only a very few of all these possible alternatives ever come to mind.”⁴² The psychology of the administrator thus remained predictable enough, his only potential downfall having to do with an insufficiency of information.

Even where emotion entered in, it was as a step in a logical sequence of decision-making events, not as a force unto itself:

An administrator may feel considerable doubt that a particular activity should be undertaken; but once the responsibility has been assumed, it may be advantageous to continue rather than lose the time and effort that have already been expended. Another way of stating this is to say that activities are usually continued at least until a point of “consummation” has been reached—a point where the values produced by sunk costs have been harvested.⁴³

We might credibly argue that “consummation” is itself little more than a feeling of satisfaction. It was nevertheless presented as the resolution of an equation in which productivity could be perceived as equal to or greater than doubt or lost time and effort. Simon went onto to describe “persistence” in an activity as having to do with directed attention: “It may be seen that a large

⁴¹ H.A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior*, 4th Edition (Free Press, 2013), 80.

⁴² *ibid.*, 81.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 95.

part of this stimulation is ‘internal’ and proceeds along the associational paths that have been built up in the mind. If the pattern of associations is rich, the mind acts as a sort of closed circuit” which may “actually decrease the individual’s sensitivity to external stimuli.”⁴⁴ It was the administrator, or more broadly, the human mind which acted upon external information. This “closed circuit” was forever in response to new data—that which has triggered it into focus in the first place—but its operations were notwithstanding. The environment may be ignored or incorporated. It did not shape but was shaped by the mind.

In starker terms, yet another Hixon speaker, Karl Lashley, whom Gardner describes as reveling in the complexity so anathema to traditional behaviorists, delved into the question of how speech acts (to put it simply) occur with so little lag time by supposing that, “rather than behavior being consequent upon environmental promptings, central brain processes actually precede and dictate the ways in which an organism carries out complex behavior.”⁴⁵ Such drive to designate the means by which complex internal processes might foreground experience served as a base level explanation of the sometimes subtle shift in the object of study moving from behaviorism to cognitivism: from the act to the act’s heretofore unobservable inception and instrumentation. We no longer cared so much about behavior; we had moved on to the mind.

Yet, as I will discuss extensively in Chapter three, the open-minded cognitivists were thoroughly invested in the mind as a separate concern from the field of emotion. There was greater space for creativity and interdisciplinarity, but the cognitive sciences were, at their core, systematic in ways that unpredictable emotions could only serve to complicate. The machines they took as metaphor for the mind (computers), furthermore, simply lacked the capacity.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁵ Gardner, *The Mind's New Science : A History of the Cognitive Revolution*, 13.

Cognitive Science was, no less than behaviorism, a quest for knowledge at a moment in which knowledge was still heralded as discreet from feeling.

With objectivity as the goal, notions of emotional selfhood were channeled by and through a vision of the psy scientists' own set of beliefs surrounding the relationship between rigor and feeling. With the two most prominent early to mid-century fields established (one the dominant experimental practice of behaviorism, the other the rising emphasis on cognitive science), we are moved to consider the broader cultural life of the psy scientist self and how their take on emotion as a subject of study and problem to be solved within the one studying impacted the period known commonly as the post-war psychoanalytic boom.

Histories of the psy sciences in the United States after WWII did not observe the same temporal logic I have employed in this work. "Before" refers most commonly to the period before the war, and "after" to that war's conclusion. Individual authors of course trace trends which bleed through that over-simplified boundary line, but they seldom cut at 1968 as I have elected to do here. One thing post-war psy science had in common with the preoccupations of behaviorist and early cognitive scientist was the watchword "objectivity." It is the momentary disillusion with the project of objectivity that permits me to carve a unique space between 1968 and 1995.

In an oft-cited history of the sway of psychoanalysis after World War II, *The Romance of American Psychology*, Ellen Herman looks to psychology after WWII as not only colored by the mix of fear and triumph that characterizes the postwar period, but as deeply implicated in the development of these trends. She is concerned with therapeutic practice as well as the combined efforts of scholars in the human sciences—most notably psychology, cultural anthropology and sociology—who were employed in large scale social engineering enterprises ranging from in

many ways well-intended pathologization of black families (important to the claims of chapter two of this volume) to projects like Camelot that sought to predict the psychological and cultural norms of whole nations for direct use by the military.⁴⁶ As such, Herman's critique has less to do with the ways psychology has altered our visions of ourselves and more to do with the ways in which the jurisdiction of what problems can be solved through psychoanalytic involvement grew out of proportion, crossing an ethical and practical line into policy making of various sorts.

Already the disconnect between the insular concerns of the individual behaviorist or psychologist and this emphasis on national projects becomes clear. In this work I attempt to stand mid-way between such methods of critique, neither wound up in the minutiae of individual lives nor zoomed out to cross quite so many disciplines and concerns. Scope notwithstanding, Herman's work is important to this dissertation because, like other works such as those of Nathan Hale, Frank Furedi, and Eva Moskowitz, Herman is interested in the costs of an increasingly pervasive role for the psy sciences in everyday life.

In *Therapy Culture*, Furedi argues that while promoting itself as a means toward "self-fulfillment," the "therapeutic imperative does in fact "[promote] self-limitation."⁴⁷ At its best, *Therapy Culture* presents a very feasible argument that the ubiquity of diagnosis and the sense that certain events were, for example, inherently traumatic (as in the connection between PTSD and war) led people to view themselves as ever vulnerable and therefore in effect were less able to rely on their own natural coping strategies.

⁴⁶ Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology : Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

⁴⁷ F. Furedi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (Taylor & Francis, 2013), 21.

In *In Therapy We Trust*, Eva Moskowitz offers the important critique that “our emphasis on the individual psyche has blinded us to underlying social realities,” citing instances in which counseling was seen as an appropriate (and costly) response to the 1992 L.A. riots and issues of overcrowding in New York, which had clear material and political problems at their centers.⁴⁸ In addition to opposing the very act of therapy in response to problems which she finds to be outside the purview of psychology, she offers a critique of the ways in which therapy in practice mis-located the source of individual problems, tracing shell shock for example back to parental relationships rather than as a natural response to violence.

There are many more critiques to be heard: from Freud’s disillusionment with the medicalization of psychoanalysis in the States (Hale), to the faulty processes of designating our most common diagnosis (Hirshbein), to the commodification of feeling by way of teletherapy (Illouz) or the costly exchange of the fifty minute therapy session (Dartington).⁴⁹ I am indebted to each of these works. They will all resurface in the dissertation to follow in ways critical to understanding the literary contributions of the seventies and eighties in the framing of emotion. I also depart from them in one overarching and important way.

For most critics of American psy sciences in the latter half of the twentieth century there exists one historical arc charting from 1945 to the present day (or at least to the date of publication). In its best formations, this narrative is complicated by distinct actors, retreats to the

⁴⁸ E.S. Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust: America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

⁴⁹ N.G. Hale, *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States: Freud and the Americans, 1917-1985* (Replica Books, 2000); Laura D. Hirshbein, *American Melancholy : Constructions of Depression in the Twentieth Century*, 1st Paperback ed., Critical Issues in Health and Medicine (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2014); E. Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Wiley, 2013); Tim Dartington, "The Therapeutic Fantasy " in *Politics and the Emotions: The Affective Turn in Contemporary Political Studies*, ed. P. and Thompson Hoggett, S. (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).

past, and disagreements between camps. But it is not much interrupted. The postwar psychoanalytic boom and the present reign of psychopharmacology are depicted as opposite ends of a single story. From the pared down perspective of linear time some loose causality surely cannot be contested. It is my hope, however, that the unique contribution of this dissertation will be the claim that by 1968 the American public had lost its faith in the psychoanalytic project in its myriad manifestations and that a true successor in the vein of a dominant narrative of emotional life was not established until the mid-1990s. The entirety of this dissertation takes place in the gap.

I have a similar sense of the events that take us from the War to the end of the century, but a distinct take on what constitutes continuity and what counts as a break that differs from that of the aforementioned authors. By 1968 we witness the close of what was only ever a tenuous faith in the post-war psy sciences, and the growing trend toward a variety of new experimental methods Americans are willing to take on to locate a vision of the emotional self that affords them greater solace and understanding. Several factors contributed to the change.

For starters, there was the issue of general medical mistrust. The Thalidomide disaster was only fully brought to light in the late fifties/early sixties. The effects of the birth defects would, of course, bear out for a generation.⁵⁰ Martin Freeman performed his final lobotomy in 1967. Freeman's reluctance to accept the critique that lobotomies were unscientific or inhumane put on quite the demonstration of medical hubris on the subject of human behavior (and feeling). The horror was made worse by Freeman's showman style in the heyday of the lobotomy,

⁵⁰ Thalidomide causes major birth deformities when taken by a pregnant woman in the early stages of gestation. The majority of cases took place in Europe as Thalidomide was not approved for use in the US by the FDA. Nevertheless, some American children were harmed through US drug trials and the fear that images of children with unusable or missing limbs conjured had an impact on medical trust nevertheless.

performing them for crowds, moving to the icepick-through-the-eye-socket technique largely as a means to demonstrate just how simple it was to sever cortical neural pathways.⁵¹ The lobotomy had little to do with therapeutic practices on the whole. Thalidomide poisoning had even less. Yet, I argue, developments such as these contributed to a growing sense of distrust in experts looking to fix us.

The struggle, unique to the United States, to insist that the psy sciences belonged to the camp of hard science and/or medical expertise meant that they forever came up short. Behaviorism hoped observable behavior could supplant the unwieldy worlds of emotion, personal history, and consciousness. Cognitive Science returned to consciousness but held tight to notions of information systems and the metaphor of the burgeoning computer as their ticket to the serious and concrete world of cognition as systematic and objective science.

In the years after the war, psychologists wanted to hear from people, but they also wanted to record them and view them through one-way mirrors. Emotion may have been back, but authority remained where it had ever been—outside the self. Beleaguered by the last bastions of social movement, robbed of so many leaders bound up with spirituality and hope by way of the many assassinations of the 1960s, mistrustful of medicine and institutions more broadly, by 1968 many Americans wanted their emotions back. The work of demonstrating that the years between 1968 and 1995 did indeed afford something unique to questions of the emotional self is the project of this dissertation in full. The preceding pages established the limited affordances early psy sciences in the US held for conceiving of an emotional self. A period of greater emotional

⁵¹ H. Dully and C. Fleming, *My Lobotomy: A Memoir* (Crown Publishers, 2008).

affordances was born somewhat accidentally of lost faith in the late sixties. By the mid-nineties, the possibilities for conceiving of the emotional self had narrowed once more.

After

I have marked the close of this period as 1995, but the change takes place over something more like a decade. By 1995 I believe the changes that had been underway since the mid-eighties inarguably constituted the new norm in the conception of emotional life. I shorthand this new direction as a medicalized approach to feeling. Several concrete moments mark its coming.

Most directly, the increasingly medicalized approach to emotion was owed to the invention, availability, and marketing of particular medicines. Psychiatric medication, particularly in the form of sedatives or tranquilizers were in use for many years prior to 1995. The use and effectiveness of leading psychiatric drugs like tricyclic antidepressants first prescribed in the mid nineteen-fifties was countermanded by their sometimes severe side effects. Between the mid-eighties and mid-nineties, however, drugs became both safer (still exhibiting a host of side effects but shy of mania and toxicity linked to their predecessors) and more effective at treating emotional disorders like depression or bipolar disorder.

While some historians view the development of better treatments as a pure gain—a means to treat a host of problems that would exist regardless of the messaging or development of its remedies, still others have looked to the ways new developments in treatment altered the culture around emotional expectations. David Herzberg’s cultural history of *Happy Pills* argues, for instance, that while “advertisers and other message-carriers of the consumer culture had sanctified happiness as a central goal of human striving before, of course [...], as tranquilizers

and eventually antidepressants came to be standard appurtenances of middle-class life, happiness itself came to be part of a new psychological standard of living—a disciplinary marker of status that one was obligated to achieve in a variety of ways.”⁵² By such an account, the narrative boundaries for selfhood formation shifted in accordance to the new standards of what could be medically achieved.

Even writers who offer general support for the development of psychopharmacology noted porous relationships between the work of medication and definitions of self. In his incredibly influential 1993 book, *Listening to Prozac*, Peter Kramer makes the case that the budding SSRI was distinct in its relation to self from the drugs that had preceded it: “Unlike amphetamine, Prozac is not a case of down or up but of same or other. Prozac has the power to transform the whole person [. . .] When you take it, you risk widespread change.”⁵³ Kramer expresses concerns that personality altering drugs would always be founded in cultural norms and that perhaps the creation of “hyperthymic” people generally, but women especially, inured to their problems was too much power to grant psychiatry. Beyond the pill itself, Kramer acknowledges a moving needle on methods. “The success of medication” he writes, “is changing both the mind-centered and biological psychiatry and moving them closer to each other.”⁵⁴ As the new century approached, it became increasingly clear that one could not simply opt for a traditional drug-free approach on the slow road of psychotherapy as if one’s ability to evaluate progress could be taken as separate from cultural change; the landscape of emotional wellbeing had been forever altered.

⁵² D. Herzberg, *Happy Pills in America: From Miltown to Prozac* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 198.

⁵³ P.D. Kramer, *Listening to Prozac* (Penguin Books, 1994), 267.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 289.

This increased faith in psychopharmacology was not simply a natural response to genuinely better drugs—it was a culture shift actively pursued and managed by members of the psychiatric community and pharmaceutical and insurance industries. Perhaps one of the most dramatic shifts that brought the lexicon of a medicalized emotional life into the homes of Americans was the increased practice of and lowered regulations for Direct to Consumer Advertising. Jurisdiction over pharmaceutical marketing fell to the Food and Drug Administration. Following legislation put in place in 1962, the rules governing pharmaceutical advertising were intended, however, to set a standard around what information was required in industry outreach to members of the medical community. The notion of selling straight to a would-be patient was, at the time, unheard of. When a few pharmaceutical concerns began to test the new waters in the early 1980s, the FDA was at a bit of a loss regarding the ethics of these practices. Direct to Consumer Advertising of Pharmaceuticals was deemed impermissible between 1983 and 1985.⁵⁵ For what amounts to a moment the FDA paused to consider. From 1985 on, the restrictions were lifted and ever expanded—meaning both that the bar for what a company must be able to prove in order to advertise directly had gotten lower over time and that the media in which advertising was permitted were expanded from a beginning in print to its current incessance on TV.

In ways that may now seem ironic, the shift toward Direct to Consumer Advertising rode in on the back of consumer advocacy movements of the 1970s. The call to empower consumers with information and choice provided all the right language for the goodwill pharmaceutical

⁵⁵ C. Lee Ventola, "Direct-to-Consumer Pharmaceutical Advertising: Therapeutic or Toxic?," *P & T : a peer-reviewed journal for formulary management* 36, no. 10 (2011).

concerns promised if allowed in magazines and on the air.⁵⁶ While arguments led by decidedly interested parties continue on the subject of cost benefit analysis of DTCA, Julie Donohue summarizes the terms of debate in the U.S. in the twenty-first century: “Direct-to-consumer advertising (DTCA) of prescription drugs in the United States is controversial. Underlying the debate are disagreements over the role of consumers in medical decision making, the appropriateness of consumers engaging in self-diagnosis, and the ethics of an industry promoting potentially dangerous drugs.”⁵⁷ DTCA covers much more than emotional disorders, but it would be difficult to deny—from the present moment in which advertisements for MAOIs and SSRIs preponderate—that the capacity for pharmaceutical interests to tell a story about emotional distress as a medical problem has impacted the broader narrative of emotional wellbeing for the American public and aided in the construction of a narrative of emotional selfhood that could be summarized as “potentially sick.”

In the final twenty years of the twentieth-century, Americans were increasingly met with the notion that their feelings required almost constant watch. They needed to be actively managed and improved upon for any of the desirable components of life to be realized—relationships, happiness, success. In ways that I explore in Chapter One, this emphasis on emotional management paired well with the easy provision of consumer solutions. An industry grew up around the striving to be one’s best emotional self, evidenced by a wide range of self-help books and television programs, but perhaps best summarized by the idea behind Daniel Goleman’s 1995 best seller, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. I have

⁵⁶ Julie Donohue, "A History of Drug Advertising: The Evolving Roles of Consumers and Consumer Protection," *The Milbank quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2006).

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 659.

chosen 1995 as the year the new era of emotion has firmly arrived not because of the contents of Goleman's book per se but because, in 1995, Goleman brings into popular discourse the phrase that typified the period to follow. *Emotional Intelligence* sought to help you identify and manage your feeling states in ways that promised to better your life and career.⁵⁸ There was nothing particularly shocking or deplorable about the project itself, but the phrase went a long way toward epitomizing an era of never-ending self-surveillance and self-improvement.

The public selling of drugs and self-help have a fairly straightforward relationship to the period I am marking as one of increased medicalization of emotion. Perhaps more controversially, I wish to suggest that other medical concerns of the period played an indirect role in reframing feeling. The HIV and AIDS epidemic got so thoroughly out of hand in no small part because, even once its status as a virus was well known, it was cast as lifestyle dependent. The social and cultural life of the disease was given far too much credence, to the detriment of medical investigation, and most particularly by those whose hostility to the gay community was an open secret. There is some movement toward destigmatization by the mid-90s. Randy Shilts' 1987 critique of the Reagan administration's lack of response to the AIDS crisis, *And the Band Played On* became a popular motion picture in 1993, increased material investment such as the 55% increase in AIDS program funding in the first four years of the Clinton administration, and growing awareness that HIV could be contracted through heterosexual intercourse fueled by Magic Johnson's 1991 diagnosis all played a role in moving away from a message of abstinence

⁵⁸ D. Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than I.Q.* (Random House Publishing Group, 2012).

and heteronormativity that had previously crowded out the search for a cure or more effective treatments.⁵⁹

Peter Conrad argues, however, that AIDS didn't move from the social to the medical so much as it "remedicalized" the social practice of homosexuality. "Because of the perceived connection with homosexuality" Conrad writes, "the medical response to AIDS has been twofold: it includes both medical neglect and medical surveillance of gay men's behavior."⁶⁰ Medical surveillance played a role in the medicalization of emotion because it marked one's romantic encounters as potentially pathological. The other response of well-documented medical neglect similarly made a case for increased medicalization, in this case, in the form of lessons learned. I don't wish to suggest that Americans confused Depression or Anxiety for AIDS but that it is in part because of particularly heinous historical negligence like the U.S. inattention to AIDS as disease that erring on the side of medicalization had the power it did from the 1990s onward.

In categorizing the late-century as a period of generally increased emotional medicalization, I draw from the history of medicalization more broadly. Conrad's *The Medicalization of Society* marks a new era in a long history of medicalizing human experience: "We have long turned normal life events into medical events. From conception to childbirth to menopause to aging. We are now turning breast-size, shortness, and male baldness into problems

⁵⁹ R. Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the Aids Epidemic* (St. Martin's Press, 1987). Julie Rovner, "President Clinton Wages Public War against Aids," *The Lancet* 349, no. 9044 (1997). In this article, Rovner also addresses many of the shortcomings of Clinton's plan to address the AIDS crisis, most notably the absence of advocated preventative measures like needle-sharing. She notes also, however, that Clinton's 1997 document is "the first national AIDS strategy to carry the imprimatur of the US head of state." It is worth noting also, the impact of Magic Johnson's public announcement that he was HIV positive in November of 1991 had on the persistent narrative of the "gay plague."

⁶⁰ P. Conrad, *The Medicalization of Society: On the Transformation of Human Conditions into Treatable Disorders* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 106.

subject to medical enhancement. [. . .] Virtually any human difference is susceptible to being considered a form of pathology, a diagnosable disorder, and subject to medical intervention.”⁶¹

Conrad’s concerns include mental and emotional life, particularly in the case of the burst in diagnoses of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. His rather staid critique revolves around one overarching observation and the questions it brings forth:

Clearly, the number of life problems that are defined as medical has increased enormously. Does this mean that there is a new epidemic of medical problems or that medicine is better able to identify and treat already existing problems? Or does it mean that a whole range of life’s problems have now received medical diagnoses and are subject to medical treatment despite dubious evidence of their medical nature?⁶²

Like Conrad, I am less interested in deciding “whether any particular problem is *really* a medical problem.”⁶³ Where Conrad looks to social consequences, I am mostly viewing the late-century burst in medicalization as the closing down of alternative frameworks for emotional distress. The period of disorder became more orderly in the midst of a cultural turn that looked to any human problem as a potential medical problem.

Finally, I note the close of the period this dissertation covers by the changing representation of members of the psy science community within American popular culture. In the wildly popular show *Cheers* (1983-1993), psychiatrist Doctor Frasier Crane was pompous, ridiculous, and played for laughs. In 1993 the most successful spinoff series of all time saw *Frasier* as a sympathetic romantic lead. Oprah, as examined in the first chapter of this dissertation, was herself one of the pioneering teletherapists, and yet it doesn’t surprise me to

⁶¹ Ibid., 148.

⁶² Ibid., 3. See also , Clarke, A., Mamo, L., Fosket, J., Fishman, J., and Shim, J. (2010). *Biomedicalization: Technoscience, Health, and Illness in the US*. Durham: Duke University Press.

⁶³ Ibid.

find that by the late 1990s she would recognize the power of medicalization in granting her entrees into the souls of Americans added gravitas by casting Dr. Phil as a series regular. His actual claim to medical expertise has been many times brought into question, but these misgivings did as little to curb his popularity at the time as claims against America's present prominent snake-oil-salesman, Dr. Oz. The celebrity doctor was long-revered. The celebrity psychologist or psychiatrist marked the end of an age of cultural ridicule.

I have no intention of pulling apart cause and effect in the establishment of these histories. My sense is that it doesn't work that way. Prescription drugs newly took on household fame, American talk TV went from hearing you to curing you. The figure of the psychiatrist was once a point of cultural derision; by the close of the nineties the most critically acclaimed show on television featured a gangster and his psychiatrist. I believe that elements of culture that we might deem high or low or professional and public co-inform beyond any attempt to neatly separate them out. For the purposes of this dissertation, these changes serve to mark an era as distinct from the one that precedes it.

Beginning in the late sixties and lasting through to the late eighties or early nineties, America's relationship to emotion was characterized by lost faith in the project of psychoanalysis, general mistrust of authority—including medical authority—and newfound concerns regarding the right to feel and believe beyond normative conventions. These feelings were far more disperse than the united projects of post-war analysis or the more recent rise of medicalized emotion. The in-between was not chaotic, however. It was crowded. In the chapters to come I demonstrate the ways in which literary and filmic works of the seventies and eighties afforded distinctive and expansive visions of the emotional self. I will argue also that they pull forth from the affordances that preceded them and contend with the forces of medicalization and

consumer solutions to emotional problems still in their nascent state. I have chosen this period to work in because these cultural artefacts were produced in a time when the overarching narratives of emotion surely persisted in some ways and changed in others, but did not quite so tightly grip our imaginations as the prevailing narratives before and since.

The relationship between emotional storymaking and claims to selfhood matters to everyone, but to some more particularly so. As Kramer notes, there is a particular void between inner life and social expectation that marked women as more vulnerable to the pull of “cosmetic psychopharmacology.” The pressure for emotional conformity was certainly not equitably experienced. Yet, I have chosen James Baldwin’s words to open this dissertation because of the extraordinary way in which he binds the fates of all Americans together. His conception of emotional starvation as national crisis did not denote an elision of difference but an acknowledgment that it is in our private emotional failure that we made a public enemy of difference and transmogrified our unresolved emotional selves into beings capable of hatred, fear, and discrimination:

I have always been struck, in America, by an emotional poverty so bottomless, and a terror of human life, of human touch, so deep that virtually no American appears able to achieve any viable, organic connection between his public stance and his private life. This failure of the private life has always had the most devastating effect on American public conduct, and on black-white relations. If Americans were not so terrified of their private selves, they would never have become so dependent on what they call the “Negro problem.” This problem, which they invented in order to safeguard their purity, has made of them criminals and monsters, and it is destroying them.⁶⁴

I am not invested here in reclaiming the souls of white Americans; nor is the work to follow explicitly about race relations. This section of Baldwin’s notes on emotional bankruptcy reveals,

⁶⁴ Baldwin, *Remember This House* (1979) Quoted in *I Am Not Your Negro*.

however, something I found to be true in my own research. In excavating narratives of emotional life in the United States, it very quickly became clear that the standards by which wellness was measured and the mechanisms in place to attain that all-consuming goal of “happiness” were both utterly context bound and entirely interdependent. The peculiar intersection of the social movements of the 1970s, met then by a recoiling into conservatism in the 1980s and transposed over the wane and wax of faith in the medical enterprise and its institutions marked a space in which those who were so poorly represented by mid-century ideals of happiness in the first place found themselves more free to imagine an emotional self who was otherwise. This is to say: The period between 1968 and 1995 was uniquely Disordered. As such, the voices that would afford emotional selfhood to women and minorities could be heard, absent the din of a consensus never meant to include them.

CHAPTER ONE
THIS IS NOT AN EXIT
CYNICAL HUMOR SPEAKS TO THE “ME GENERATION”

Self-actualization was everywhere in the 1980s. Me, me, me emblazoned politics, culture, and society. The process of achieving one’s true and best self had its roots in 1960s works by Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, but the 1980s promised the consumer means to make that higher meaning happen—in the office, at school, at home, on TV. This chapter proposes that cynical humor—an especially bodily and amoral subgenre of dark humor—contests the 1980s imperative to self-actualize. In their employment of such humor, Clarence Major’s *My Amputations* (1986) Michael Lehmann’s and Daniel Waters’ *Heathers* (1989), and Brett Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* (1991) mock their characters’ attempts to seek out their best emotional selves, ridiculing common therapeutic practices, the rise of teletherapy, and the move to profit from public expressions of private feeling. If therapeutic discourse invites us to objectify our emotions—separating them from self and context to more clearly observe them—the cynical humorist imagines the dark and terrible hilarity that ensues when feelings are externalized to an extreme, becoming mere commodities in a cynical marketplace of feeling.

On some level, this chapter investigates the beginning of the end for the period of relative multiplicity and self-definition in the culture of emotions that this dissertation covers. By narrowing my focus to a particular sub-genre in the second half of my period of interest, I take the temperature of the therapeutic boom at its apogee. But I also aim to consider the cross-affordances of distinct and simultaneous cultural trends. The dominant conception of a well self in this period fused Humanist psychology's call to self-actualization with a Reaganite vision of personal responsibility and success. These works of fiction are emboldened by the relatively free inward turn of 1970s, but follow that impulse as it becomes entangled with the urge to commodify so prevalent in the 1980s and into the 1990s. Eva Illouz has argued, for instance, that emotions in the late twentieth century were readily commodified and brought to the marketplace through various entertainment strategies.¹ There is, therefore, an intersection of affordances—economic, political, therapeutic, and in the literary conventions of postmodernism—where cynical humor sits. *My Amputations*, *Heathers*, and *American Psycho* comment upon a dominant therapeutic discourse and the various forces that corrupted and altered it by making a mockery of the public utterance, disassembling the embodied self, and manufacturing characters for which everything, including empathy, is an external commodity, employed as needed, but also readily set aside.

¹ While this chapter will consider televised therapy as a continuous if escalated component of the trend toward self-betterment as performance, Mimi White has discussed the same aspects of these practices as a more fundamental shift into new territory: "The positions of confessor and interlocutor undergo substantial revision as they proliferate and create multiple possibilities for engaging viewers. This also involves heightened mobility, transience, and relativity of authority. Through these reconstructions, television offers new formations of individual and social subjectivity, displacing the modernist therapeutic project, recasting conventions of social decorum and transforming conventional distinctions between private and public spheres." Mimi White, "Television, Therapy, and the Social Subject, or the Tv Therapy Machine," in *Reality Squared: Televisual Discourse on the Real*, ed. J. Friedman (Rutgers University Press, 2002), 314.

Take for example the character of Pauline Fleming (played by Penelope Milford). This overwrought and oblivious teacher in the eighties teen cult classic *Heathers*, typifies this comedic slide from private feeling to public performance. The back story: a school has learned that two star football players are the latest victims of a believed rash of teen suicides that are in fact a thinly disguised series of murders. Enter Pauline, bounding into the cafeteria, megaphone in hand: “Attention!” she shouts, “May I have your attention, please? This school has been torn apart by tragedy! I’m here today to fuse it back together again! Through togetherness! I want everyone to clasp hands. We need to connect this cafeteria into one mighty circuit!”² This supposedly impromptu rally could be said to be a bit naïve but little worse, were it not for the fact that Pauline barely takes a breath between her call to collectivity and the exaltation, “Look! Here come the T.V. crews! Lock your paws!” As she makes her way around the room, yanking students from their seats and cajoling them with statements like “We’ll be on T.V. Show them how you feel!” Shannen Doherty’s Heather Duke heads for the camera and Martha Dunstock (perhaps the film’s only truly sympathetic character) retreats beneath her lunch table. Teen heartthrob serial killer J.D. (Christian Slater) sneaks up behind our bewildered protagonist Veronica (Wynona Rider) to ask, “Is this as good for you as it is for me?” Everyone save Martha and Veronica is high on the sudden realization of the extraordinary exchange value their emotions take on in moments of extreme tragedy. There is a buzz in the room. Suddenly everyone has suffered or caused suffering. Suddenly everyone has a story.

This is but one means by which *Heathers* insists that the profit motive increasingly drives emotions in the 1980s. As sociologist Eva Illouz explains, “The therapeutic biography is almost an ideal commodity: it demands no or little economic investment—it demands only that the

² Daniel Waters et al., *Heathers* (Burbank, Calif.: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2008).

person allows us to peek into the dark corners of their psyche and that they will be willing to tell a story.”³ Illouz’s work, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, points to the intersections of capitalist economic systems and “‘emotional ontology,’ or the idea that emotions can be detached from the subject for control and clarification.”⁴ *Heathers* darkly humorous brand of cynicism similarly critiques two pervasive trends of the mid-eighties: One, a therapeutic ethos of self-oriented public recognition and betterment; Two, a morally tinged entitlement to private gain.

Public Feeling / Private Gain

The entitlement to private gain so characteristic of the 1980s is especially well represented by President Reagan’s championing of the individual. Hugh Heclo and Sean Wilentz are among the presidential historians who have characterized Reagan’s power and his failures as stemming from a single, seldom wavering, if unsophisticated, dedication to national mythology. As early as 1959, Reagan was already casting U.S. history in a way that would guide his presidency. “‘Ours was the only revolution,’” he asserted, “‘that recognized man had the dignity and sacred right to determine his own destiny as an individual.’”⁵ This vision of a sacred right to an individualistic destiny makes the moral case for the divestment in public works and exaltation of private enterprise. Placed together with the simultaneous trend in psychology and pop

³ Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies : The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007).

⁴ *ibid.*, 36. This conversation will rely on and make reference to competing definitions of emotion set forth in the introduction. I would like to leave it as is for now and flag it for a footnote recap at a later stage of editing.

⁵ Hugh Heclo, "Ronald Reagan and the American Public Philosophy," in *The Reagan Presidency : Pragmatic Conservatism and Its Legacies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 22.

psychology to make public our most intimate emotional lives, these movements seem at first paradoxical. As Illouz sees it, however:

modern identity itself has become increasingly publicly performed [. . .] through a narrative which combines the aspiration of self-realization with the claim to emotional suffering. The prevalence and persistence of this narrative, which we may call as shorthand a narrative of recognition, is related to the material and ideal interests of a variety of social groups operating within the market, in civil society, and within the institutional boundaries of state.⁶

Understood as such, this “narrative of recognition” can be claimed not simply by deliberate or devout followers of Reagan’s brand of idealism, but by anyone exposed to this slow and powerful Bordieuan tonal change in which the individual, whatever his or her aims, would triumph.⁷ Marketing private feeling in the public sphere had its roots in early twentieth century advertising⁸ as well as corporations making use of psychoanalysis to increase productivity by finding ways to manage employee emotions by, for instance, making employees *feel* heard (whether they were or not).⁹ The eighties may simply be remembered as the time in which such capitalization finally found its way into the oval office as well as the everyday.

⁶ Illouz, *Cold Intimacies : The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, 4.

⁷ In treating the benefit of self-analysis and self-help as self-evidently and morally valuable, these narratives of emotional management popular in the eighties and beyond do more than simply suggest a mode of being. As Bourdieu writes, “it is [...] not sufficient to say that the rule determines practice when there is more to be gained by obeying it than by disobeying it. The rule’s last trick is to cause it to be forgotten that agents have an interest in obeying the rule, or more precisely, in being in a regular situation” (22). As Bourdieu describes the habitus, it defines the structure of production, not that which is produced, and it is slow to grow. It is begotten from gesture, habit, movement; it is practice worn into a groove. The metaphor of movement is useful as, though certainly more direct criticisms of late-capitalist aligned configurations of self-help exist and abound, it is not counter-movements per se that this chapter seeks to address.

⁸ TJ Jackson Lears, “From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930,” *Advertising & Society Review* 1, no. 1 (2000).

⁹ Dana L. Cloud, *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics : Rhetoric of Therapy*, Rhetoric and Society (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1998), 11; Illouz, *Cold Intimacies : The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, 8-15.

It is no secret that Reagan brought an especially emotional tenor to his public addresses.¹⁰ Critics and devout followers alike arrive at strikingly similar characterizations of this emotive power: “Reagan used emotion intentionally” James Rosebush writes, “He did not let emotion use him.”¹¹ It’s a curious thing to say. Rosebush appears to mean to cast Reagan’s more feminine-associated qualities in a masculine light. It is important that Reagan’s tears and his reputation as big-hearted never be spoken of as sentimental. Emotions are tools, sincere, but wielded more than felt.

Perhaps such separation can account for some of the disjuncture of Reagan’s time in office. Wilentz describes the second term of the Reagan presidency as the time in which the idealistic and ultimately unsustainable economic policies pursued in both terms begin to unravel, culminating most publicly in the market crash in the fall of ‘87. Even for historians like Wilentz, who labels the policies of the Reagan administration as demonstrations of “neglect, in venality, and arrant lawlessness,” the emotional tenor of the period is regarded as one of “moral rearmament and patriotic pride.”¹² The feel of the eighties was at peculiar odds with its material realities.

¹⁰ In his political history of the period from 1976 to 2008, *The Age of Reagan*, Sean Wilentz titles the chapter covering much of Ronald Reagan’s second term, “Call It Mysticism If You Will.” This title comes from the opening clause of Reagan’s speech on the occasion of the centennial of the Statue of Liberty in 1986. The speech is an expression of Reagan’s faith in the divine providence of the United States. It is replete with the vocabulary common to most modern presidents on such light and joyous occasions: “love of freedom”, “special courage”, “hope.” It is but one example of the emotionally weighted speeches Reagan is known for. It also marks a high point of his career; his public approval rating at the time was around 68%. Wilentz characterizes the tone of this moment as a “patriotic affirmation” marking “the nation’s triumph over the malaise and defensiveness of the Carter years. America was back, and the American dreamer, Ronald Reagan, had brought it back.”

¹¹ James S. Rosebush, *True Reagan : What Made Ronald Reagan Great and Why It Matters*, First edition. ed. (New York ; Boston: Center Street, 2016), 141.

¹² Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan : A History, 1974-2008* (New York [etc.]: Harper perennial, 2009), 177.

If the age of Reagan was defined in part by a coaxing of the public to not only defend policy decisions, but to mobilize devotion for the emotionally manufactured morality underlying such policies, it was well met with a shift in the management of emotions in private life. Therapy culture did not obey partisan boundaries. A turn inward as practice was both broad enough to encompass various political leanings and personal enough to seem more intimate than Politics could account for. Thus, even as elements on the right rejected the feel-good-nature of a therapized left, ever-expanding therapeutic cultures opened up new opportunities to believe in the inherent moral good of a limited government if it could be cast as in service to the individual.¹³

The other half of this intersection involves a marked increase in the practice of self actualization or self improvement, and more particularly the trend toward the public airing of feeling to those ends. This aspect of American history falls under the broad umbrella of “therapy culture.” That phrase generally refers to either the ways therapeutic practices have affected a common culture through the adoption of the language and logic of psychoanalytic, psychiatric or psychopharmalogical thinking outside the realm of formal treatment or the uses of therapeutic practice themselves beyond the scope for which one considers them an appropriate intervention.¹⁴ In the first case, we might find something like the “New Work Habits” pamphlet

¹³ It is worth noting that Reagan’s “individual” referred to the general notion of a person asserting distinction from the state and not the equally plausible definition of individual as one with a particular identity, separate from and in need of institutional recognition and assistance. The famously ignored AIDS crisis serves as an example of the distinction between the ideal of individuality and the practice of acknowledging difference within the US population.

¹⁴ In the early days of contemporary critique, Philip Rieff famously characterized modern therapy as a system of faith in contradistinction to the analytic tradition which Freud founded. Rieff proposed that “Doctrinaire therapeutics” like those put forth by Jung, Reich, and Lawrence were of their essence moralizing forces, arguing that they sought out cure over treatment where “cure is a religious category.” Historicizing the development mind-science fields is a common component of many therapy culture critiques. Medicalization, ambiguous disciplinary boundaries, or as we see in Rieff, following the curve toward increasingly prescriptive work, are each seen as potential divergences or missteps in the path to modern therapeutic practice.

Dana Cloud analyzes as a piece of worker “consolation and control,” which draws from the belief that it is the mind of the worker and not the circumstances of the workplace which are most affordably and effectively altered.¹⁵ In the latter case, examples of supposed over-stepping abound, as for example in Charles Sykes’ outrage over the Met’s hiring of a team psychiatrist.¹⁶ It isn’t necessarily that psychiatry couldn’t make a Met a better man, but Sykes is quite certain it won’t make a Met better at baseball.¹⁷ Critiques such as this argue less that psychiatry or psychology are ineffective as that they are not effective solutions to problems perceived as outside the scope of emotional management.

Few if any scholars employ the term “therapy culture” lovingly. It is a label for something that has gone too far, grown too pervasive, left its lane. Beyond any one opinion of what should or should not fall under the purview of the mind-sciences, there is evidence for such ubiquity. The popularity of therapeutic ideas is demonstrated by the best-selling status of titles like 1969’s *I’m OK—You’re OK*, 1976’s *Your Erroneous Zone*, or 1995’s *Emotional Intelligence*, among others.¹⁸ As therapeutic practices seeped out into ever larger popular followings, the field of potentially treatable subjects in formal settings has also steadily increased

¹⁵ Cloud, *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics : Rhetoric of Therapy*, xi.

¹⁶ This also serves as an example of the masculinist resistance to therapeutic treatment. The psychotherapeutic fields are particularly unwelcome in arenas dominated by a culture of masculine repression. This doesn’t mean that Sykes or others are wrong in identifying a disconnect between psychiatry and batting averages; rather, it demonstrates that the call to exclude therapy or psychiatry from untraditional realms is every bit as complexly motivated as the decision to include them.

¹⁷ Charles J. Sykes and St. Martin’s Press/Tor Archive (Brown University), *A Nation of Victims : The Decay of the American Character*, 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 33.

¹⁸ Thomas A. Harris, *I’m Ok, You’re Ok; a Practical Guide to Transactional Analysis* (New York,: Harper & Row, 1969); Wayne W. Dyer, *Your Erroneous Zones* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1976); Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995).

over time.¹⁹ Taken together, such evidence suggests the therapeutic has had an enormous influence on American life after WWII and most especially in the final thirty years of the twentieth century.²⁰

Some historians, cultural critics, and practitioners have come to view the therapeutic shift as a serious flaw of American culture. Frank Ferudi offers a rather conservative explanation for the rise in the popularity of therapy—the decline in tradition, religion and politics—but is more concerned with the ways in which therapy confines conceptions of self than in a back and forth constitution of therapeutic discourses by way of cultural exchange.²¹ As presented in my introduction, Ferudi believes that therapy is dulling our inherent coping strategies²² At its best, Ferudi's *Therapy Culture* cogently argues that the therapeutic impulse and industry overstepped their boundaries—from pathology into everyday life. At worst, the overall effect of Ferudi's

¹⁹ The DSM I (1952) had 128 Diagnostic categories, DSM II (1968) had 193, DSM III (1980) had 228, DSM IIIR (1987) had 253, DSM IV (1994) had 383 as did DSM IVR (2000), DSM V (2013) has 541. Roger K Blashfield et al., "The Cycle of Classification: Dsm-I through Dsm-5," *Annual review of clinical psychology* 10 (2014): 32.

²⁰ As Sommers and Satel summarize, "Therapism valorizes openness, emotional self-absorption and the sharing of feelings. It encompasses several additional assumptions: that vulnerability, rather than strength, characterizes the American psyche; and that a diffident, anguished, and emotionally apprehensive public requires a vast array of therapists, self esteem educators, grief counselors, workshopppers, healers, and traumatologists to lead it through the trials of everyday life." Christina Hoff Sommers and Sally L. Satel, *One Nation under Therapy : How the Helping Culture Is Eroding Self-Reliance*, 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 5.

²¹ Some historians who have contributed to this critique have concerned themselves primarily with broad disciplinary change. Ellen Herman's *Romance of American Psychology*, for example, looks to psychology after WWII as not only colored by the mix of fear and triumph that characterizes the postwar period, but as deeply implicated in the development of these trends. She is less concerned with therapeutic practice than with the combined efforts of scholars in the human sciences—most notably psychology, cultural anthropology and sociology—who were employed in large scale social engineering enterprises ranging from in many ways well intended pathologization of black families to projects like Camelot that sought to predict the psychological and cultural norms of whole nations for direct use by the military. As such, Herman's critique has less to do with the ways psychology has altered our visions of ourselves—whether vulnerable or entitled—and more to do with the ways in which the jurisdiction of what problems can be solved through psychoanalytic involvement grew out of proportion, crossing an ethical and practical line into policy making of various sorts.

²² Frank Fèuredi, *Therapy Culture : Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004), 21. It is worth noting that Fèuredi is British and commenting primarily on British culture for which there is extensive but far from total overlap.

arguments tends toward a prescription for thicker skin that would seem to dismiss or diminish the problems many people face.

In her history of therapeutic trends, *In Therapy We Trust*, Eva Moskowitz offers the more compassionate critique that “our emphasis on the individual psyche has blinded us to underlying social realities.” Like Ferudi, Moskowitz questions the appropriateness of therapy as a response to all problems that may be deeply felt but which have material injustices at their core. Where Ferudi wonders if the individual is made less able, Moskowitz suggests that therapy individualizes broader societal problems. There is nevertheless a great deal of elision that takes place in the broad category of therapy culture as “cult” that Moskowitz draws. For instance, as she looks to the ways in which the giving and receiving of talk therapy moves away from professionalization, she moves quickly from institutions like Narcotics Anonymous to Nail Biter’s anonymous, implying they serve equally valid concerns in equally justified ways.²³ While her observations are well evidenced in most places, her derision veers toward the monolithic and so bears the potential to throw the proverbial baby of useful practices and legitimate need out with the bath water of a hypersaturated or hypersensitive generation of therapy-seekers.

I do not find conflict between the claims authors like Moskowitz and Ferudi make about the ubiquity of therapy culture in precisely the period this dissertation covers and my own argument that this is a period of relative disagreement (and so, freedom) in the management of emotional life. Therapy culture is a moving target and an overwhelming presence due precisely to its lack of specificity. My argument about the years just after the war and the years beginning on or around 1995 is that they are overly homogenizing. Therapy culture is a broad affordance

²³ Eva S. Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust : America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment* (Baltimore :: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 251-56.

with a great many applications and uses. I argue the tent is bigger, not that everything in it was for the best.

Still, a tendency to over-generalize is surely a risk one takes any time a major movement or an entire generation is summarized. One could say the same of the famous *New York Magazine* essay, “The Me-Decade and the Third Great Awakening” which in 1976 coined the phrase “Me Decade” and gave rise to the notion of an entire “Me Generation.” Here Tom Wolfe seeks to identify the root causes of the supposed self-indulgence of young adults in the 1970s (also known as baby boomers). He creatively wanders from a screaming session “releasing the repress button” at the Admiral Hotel and back through thirty years of history, pointing to the relative economic wealth Americans enjoyed after WWII as the first necessary condition for self-obsession. Young people, he contends, left home, tried drugs, moved to suburbia, and, in short, had the liberty to live in ways they could only newly afford. “The old alchemical dream” Wolfe writes, “was changing base metals into gold. The new alchemical dream is: changing one’s personality—remaking, remodeling, elevating, and polishing one’s very *self* . . . and observing, studying, and doting on it. (Me!) This had always been an aristocratic luxury, confined throughout most of history to the life of the courts, since only the very wealthiest classes had the free time and the surplus income to dwell upon this sweetest and vainest of pastimes.”²⁴ But now that it was available to everyone, it was everywhere getting out of hand. Wolfe’s young Encounterers are not to him the beleaguered activists others have hypothesized as the chief therapy-seekers, but more simply too many baby boomers with too little to attend to and altogether too much time on their hands. Even the therapeutic evangelist Abraham Maslow

²⁴ Tom Wolfe, “The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” *New York Magazine* 23 (1976).

conceded that there were few neuroses to be had amongst the truly destitute.²⁵ Illness itself seemed a byproduct of boredom and leisure.

The therapeutic gospel is thereby imagined to be the inevitable service industry for a generation of mostly young adults, whether they sought it out because they were spoiled, desperate, or politically manipulated to distraction. Where they aren't explicitly offered, prescriptions for change are implicit in the theories behind the driving force of all this inwardly focused attention: sacrifice more, suck it up, revitalize materialist social movements.²⁶ Cynical humor, I hope to demonstrate, is uniquely able to critique the pervasive therapeutic ethos and the role of emotional performance as complicit in a process of objectifying and commodifying experience. It is not, however, bound to consider remedies in traditional terms.

Each of the primary sources of this chapter—the experimental prose novella of writer and visual artist Clarence Major, *My Amputations* (1986);²⁷ the mean-girl teen masterpiece *Heathers* (1989), written by Daniel Waters and directed by Michael Lehman;²⁸ and Bret Easton Ellis's²⁹ brutal and controversial novel *American Psycho* (1991)—was produced in the last years of

²⁵ A.H. Maslow et al., *The Journals of Abraham Maslow* (Lewis Pub. Co., 1982).

²⁶ Even as some critiques of the rise of “Me” insist on a turn away from individuality, what they in fact prescribe are “me’s” of another cloth. David Brooks’ 1987 article, “Good Vibrations” follows “mystical” and unorthodox groups with the mission of world peace through the cessation of the nuclear arms race. He critiques the very me-focused approach to social problems highlighted in this chapter. Brooks’ mocking of the tears and new-age tactics of post sixties peace groups does, however, in fact very little to get past a “me” generation mentality. What Brooks suggests isn’t less “me,” but a different more composed and conservative me. It is still, however, very much about personality. If he truly wanted to eschew the politics of personal feeling, he would have to let go his off-hand disdain of their performances of mourning and deep empathic connection and talk seriously about their mission. “Psychopeace activists” may well have been silly and a bit too sensitive to be effective political forces. That doesn’t mean they were wrong about unilateral nuclear non-proliferation. David Brooks, “Good Vibrations,” in *The Eighties : A Reader*, ed. Gilbert T. Sewall (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1997).

²⁷ Clarence Major, *My Amputations : A Novel*, 1st ed. (New York: Fiction Collective, 1986).

²⁸ Waters et al., *Heathers*.

²⁹ Hereafter, the author of *American Psycho* will be referred to as Easton Ellis, to avoid any confusion with “Ellis” the character from *My Amputations*.

Reagan's presidency.³⁰ The language of affordance is useful here as well. I believe the dark humor employed in these works—while surely to be credited to the individuals that composed them—is nevertheless highly symptomatic of the five-year period in which that were published. The style and dialogue of these works keep with an eighties aesthetic and they are anti-conservative in ways that would seem to respond to not simply Reagan's presidency, but his popularity. While these works react to the eighties, they reflect on the seventies in way that places them firmly in the period of critical distance to one era and in the thick of another.

The American Left of the 1970s retreated to the self as the locus of change. This period marked a definition of therapy broadened to include unorthodox bodily practices even as the act of self-betterment became suitable as first a shared practice and then a source of entertainment and intrigue for an ever-expanding audience. The desperate measures of characters like *Heathers*' Pauline Fleming and *My Amputations*' Mason Ellis mock these shifts in therapeutic culture. *Heathers* further demonstrates the potential downside of emotions divorced of context and freely circulating as the value added to the therapeutic biography. In *American Psycho*, any distinction between genuine empathy and shallow performances of emotional exchange is unobservable and irrelevant. Thus, these three fictional texts make humorous allusions to very real developments in the increasingly public, amateurized, and at their worst opportunistic, therapeutic practices.

Moreover, I mean to suggest that the changing conception of self as one who simultaneously and paradoxically is preoccupied by interior life and has exteriorized their emotions as a means to manage them is a narrative too close to the political casting of social ills

³⁰ Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho : A Novel*, 1st ed., Vintage Contemporaries (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

as personal defects for the two to be pulled apart. Fictional texts have an important role to play in the growing canon of therapeutic rebuttal. Texts such as these lean less on an account of the past and more on the possible futures of current ills. As such, they are also free to achieve a level of ambiguity that historical and sociological works seldom aspire to. They are free to catastrophize and to criticize ambiguously. If nonfiction accounts of therapeutic history can sometimes seem insensitive to suffering, an insistence on decisive causes—elements neither expected nor especially welcome in fiction—is often to blame.

What is of interest to this consideration of dark fiction is what the form can uniquely afford. Darkly humorous fictional texts of the long eighties were engaged, in their own unique ways, in the same kind of critique of the “me generation” that we find elsewhere—in historical recollections like Ferudi, Herman, Moskowitz, Cloud and even in contemporaneous critiques like those laid out by Brooks and Wolfe.³¹ The real advantage to singling them out amongst those disabused or even just cynically amused by a period in which therapeutic rhetoric reached its zenith in both ubiquity and fervor is to find what is particular about humor. Why should a blackout dark brand of humor find its place in this moment and what does humor offer to counter the narratives it so unlovingly mocks that other manifestations of critique cannot?

Perhaps more telling than each work’s direct engagement with therapy culture, however, is its refusal to engage. Through careful formal strategies each of these works of art, in their own distinct ways, undermine the connection between reader and text, making perhaps their boldest claim against the rush to be recognized, acknowledged, and treated by disconnecting their own empathetic pathways toward greater understanding. Both through their formal and deliberate disconnections and critique offered at the level of plot and direct attention to particular trends,

these fictional works provide us with a counternarrative for how emotions are made and managed at the height of Reagan-era America.

The work to follow is thereby primarily engaged in establishing the interaction between specific artistic works and all that is “therapeutic” about the events they describe or the means by which they relate to their audiences. This evidence builds, however, to the question of how these efforts differ from other critiques of therapy culture happening during or since the time of their publication or release and what dark humor, in particular, has to say about therapy culture that non-fiction or even other forms of fiction cannot. To this I suggest, in the final section of this chapter, a consideration of the category of cynical humor as a postmodernist technique, distinct from humor that is merely dark, both in the depths of its misanthropy and in its approach to political change.

Feeling in Fiction

Before we arrive at the consideration of genre or even attend to the subtle formal strategies, we should first account for the ways in which each of these texts offers a rather overt critique of self-actualization in the form of their central characters—Patrick Bateman (*American Psycho*), Veronica, Pauline, and the many Heathers (*Heathers*), and Mason Ellis a.k.a. Claude McKay (*My Amputations*). There is hardly a stranger mix of fictional personas, and yet, all are deeply, uniquely saturated by the quality of self-obsession. Let me begin with *My Amputations*’ Mason Ellis, a man who has many moments of metaphorically bursting into the cafeteria of emotional expectation. He may not crave television crews as our high school teacher so desperately does, but his attempts to self-actualize fall well within the realm of the absurd. Looking closely at specific moments in Ellis’ self-quest we can find not only a healthy

skepticism in Major's writing for the promise of self-building, but condemnation for the practices particular to the period of the novel's construction.³²

Encountering Mason Ellis

My Amputations has no chapter breaks and no fidelity to the words of its protagonist. As I will demonstrate, doubt is a constant presence and a meaningful one. We are meant to doubt the very project of an account of Mason Ellis's life. At its core, the work is a picaresque.³³ Mason, a black, American ex-con who has run out on numerous women and children, becomes obsessed with the life of a living author and so, upon his release from prison, conspires with a sordid lot to kidnap the author (Claude McKay), ship him off, and then assume his identity and go on his book tour, where the impostor reads his own material and lives off the largess of the Magnan Rockford Foundation, a sort of faceless corporate entity from which he runs and hides as well as receives regular pay. The journey takes him to various colleges in the U.S., then on to Europe moving slowly South toward the older and more cryptic signifiers of ancient cultures, and then finally to Africa.³⁴ Though undoubtedly trapped by many a material concern, Mason imagines his crisis as existential.

³² According to Keith Byerman's history, *My Amputations* was inspired by the actual event of a recently released convict attempting to claim authorship of Major's *The New Black Poetry* and demanding royalties in 1971. Major started work in the novel in 1982 and published it in 1986. It contains, as I will claim of all the works featured in this chapter, aspects of critique particular to the mid-eighties and yet, perhaps as result of its relatively long period of germination, carries a good deal of the 1970s with it as well. In fact, looking to the state of therapy culture in the 1970s, the treatments Ellis seeks out in the novel seem far less fantastic than they might to a modern audience. Keith Eldon Byerman, *The Art and Life of Clarence Major* (Athens ; London: The University of Georgia Press, 2012).

³³ While it may otherwise defy categorization, *My Amputations* fits squarely into the picaresque category in that it focuses entirely on one individual of questionable character. Byerman cites this "underlying structure" as "quest-picaresque." Ibid.

³⁴ Mason somewhat ambiguously believes that origins may center him as a person. Greece ought to be preferable to France, so far as a journey inward is concerned, for its claim to be at the core of Western history: "In Greece Mason could go searching darkly and secretly for . . . for answers? . . ." Major, *My Amputations : A Novel*, 153. ellipses in original. Subsequent references to this work will be given parenthetically in the text.

As such, his travails are mostly cast as in the service of fixing himself. In France, Mason visits African Doctor Wongo, who stands among the trappings of his extreme hot water therapy, "huge wooden cross," and blood-stained walls, insisting a bit too strenuously that he is "approved by the World Health Organization"(85). In a desperate phase of seeking his lost sense of self, Mason offers the following monologue with little prompting:

I see myself trapped in an air-conditioned hotel room somewhere . . . I want to—to . . . Somebody is trying to get a message to me but I'm in a remote part of the world. I'm guilty, like Kafka. The message might have something to do with my release: no separation of body and spirit possible. But I'm not sure . . . My children condemn me. Or did I simply dream that? Or they worship me too much . . . Somehow I'm part of a plot: a scheme: I'm supposed to free a girl held captive. Exactly where I don't know. I can hear her speak, 'My parents must not know . . .' Army guns are stacked in my closet. I have no idea how they got there. I keep expecting to be arrested and, uh, I've done nothing. I tell you I've done no wrong! (87, ellipses in original)

Given its many contradictions, it would be easy to classify this rambling answer to the seemingly simple invitation to "tell me all about it" as a critique of psychobabble (86). But there is too much going on to put it so simply.

It is first worth noting that the defensiveness with which he concludes is indeed the paranoia of the genuinely guilty. Many truths populate an otherwise confusing and contradictory litany of complaints, including the sources of his confusion.³⁵ Mason would have little way of knowing how his children regard him and so his two interpretations of either condemnation or worship are both mutually exclusive and equally accurate as demonstrations of his state of ignorance on the subject.³⁶ And so we find hints but no answers: echoes of Ellis' past and manifestations of his present burdens of guilt and fear of being caught or of being miscast.

³⁵ Mason has kidnapped an author (who was held up in a hotel room) and assumed his identity. He has robbed a bank. He did serve in the army, and has abandoned children of an undetermined quantity.

³⁶ He is, likewise, both unable to find and supposedly can hear the words of his imaginary damsel in distress. Is she merely a fictional trope he feels compelled to live up to? Why should she be both near and elusive?

To the violent upheaval in Ellis' identity, the cure that Wongo offers is yet more violence. "There's no army guns in my closet," he promises, "only peace and love. Undress" (86). The options Ellis is undressing for include: being nailed to a cross, submerging in the hot bath, and being strung up and struck with many small arrows. Against advice, Ellis takes the bath: "Water. Warmth. Womb stuff. Pleasure?" he mumbles or thinks to himself (87). He is assured it will not be pleasurable. We are not present to know how it turns out.

Like so much of Major's novel, this section of prose breaks not only in medias res, but with no promise of return or conclusion. Given the novel's ending—a journey back to an Africa that is neither home nor especially less hostile to Ellis's existence—we are left to conclude that, like Kafka, Ellis is left unresolved. The text mirrors Wongo's treatments. It invites us in with great detail but proves sharp and alienating, simply cutting off before any of the problems presented find any resolution. More importantly, for our purposes, it is a fiction not too far from fact.

Historian Eva Moskowitz offers a chapter spanning 1970 to 1980 simply titled, "Feelings: Expressing the Self" in which she follows a series of popular albeit radical therapeutic interventions that make a terribly hot bath sound fairly standard. Those seeking access to their true self might, for instance, pay \$6000 to learn how to primal scream their way out of their hang-ups, suffer the verbal abuses of Esat-trainers as a means to cut through the bullshit, engage in group regurgitation, or participate in "nude group marathons" lead by Paul Bindrim, with special emphasis on "crotch-eyeballing," a public inspection of genitalia, the supposed locus of our "negative conditioning."³⁷ While Doctor Wongo's offerings are far more riddled with

³⁷ Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust : America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment*, 229-43. This emphasis on the more base aspects of the body parallels equally well with Major's employment of the grotesque, further discussed later in this chapter.

religious iconography and slightly less pornographic, they have in common with their real-world analogs an attention to the body loosed or jolted from the control of the mind, a faith that there is a “before” one can return to and that such a return would be desirable, and often times, an element of humiliation and degradation.

Scenes alluding to the Encounter movement are particularly apt for a book as meandering as *My Amputations*. The Encounter movement rather boastfully defied clear boundaries around its practices. Carl Rogers wrung his hands over the mere task of description, fearing any account of the group “would be so homogenised that its every truth would also be a falsehood.”³⁸ Rogers’ subsequent and reluctant description makes clear the simultaneous, if somewhat contradictory, emphasis on individual choice and group dynamics. The Encounter is a fugitive of reason: “To me the group seems like an organism, having a sense of its own direction even though it could not define that direction intellectually.”³⁹ It “[avoids] interpretation” and demands the all-in of an emotive facilitator.⁴⁰ It must not be planned.⁴¹ Openness is thereby, ironically, imperative. The promise of getting there if only you let go is a pressure acutely felt by a character like Mason, one with no group and no capacity to be the author of his own identity.

Some of the practices Moskowitz narrates match rather specifically with Mason's expectations.⁴² Mason was not alone in his desire to be reborn: “By 1977 there were twenty-nine

³⁸ Carl Rogers, “Carl Rogers Describes His Way of Facilitating Encounter Groups,” *AJN The American Journal of Nursing* 71, no. 2 (1971): 275.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 278-79.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 278. In Maslow’s insistence on the free and wholly unempirical nature of the Encounter we can hear the rejection of both Behaviorist methods of experimental observation with objectivity at the helm and the Cognitivist obsession with information systems.

⁴² Major, *My Amputations : A Novel*, 87.

Rebirthing centers in the United States, with more than ten thousand graduates of happy birth."⁴³ For adherents, birth was a trauma one was forever reeling from and so must be re-submerged, recovered from the water, and sufficiently comforted: "Many patients had to undergo the treatment several times before they were 'totally free of birth trauma.'"⁴⁴ Major's incredulity for such possibilities is everywhere apparent. Mason's decision to take the hot bath consists of four fragments: The tangible ("Water."). The experiential ("Warmth.") The analogy so unsure of its likeness as to fall under the rubric of stuff ("Womb Stuff.") And the question ("Pleasure?"). It is a dramatic decision based on knowledge so incomplete so as not to warrant full sentences. The African doctor senses these western idealizations motivating his patient—a weak tie between meaning and bodily experience, clouding Mason's judgment. He condescends, "It's very hot, son. But if that's what you want. . ."⁴⁵

Moskowitz's portrait of the 1970's "me generation" is rife with the kind of desperation and panic that motivates much of Mason's journey. "In their struggle to feel," she writes, "advocates of the therapeutic gospel wavered between optimism and pessimism. On the one hand [. . .] certain that intimacy, communication, and self awareness could be achieved, and by all. On the other hand they were apocalyptic about the anti-expressive forces dominating American life. [. . .] They also viewed Americans as nearing emotional death. The goal of the Encounter-group movement was to keep them alive."⁴⁶ For those profiled in Moskowitz's history and for Mason Ellis, the seemingly extreme nature of their practices which include substantial bodily harm, are

⁴³ Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust : America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment*, 241.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Major, *My Amputations : A Novel*, 87. Ellipses in original.

⁴⁶ Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust : America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment*, 244.

necessary to meet the profound state of their self-alienation. And yet, if Major shares in the optimistic half of the seventies Encounter movement at all (and it is not clear that he does), the cure isn't something his audience is invited to.

If Major provides us a window into such an Encounter, only to shut it in our face by simply ceasing to narrate the events, if our protagonist is never cured, but merely "kept" by novel's end, it would stand to reason that on the subject of self-healing, *My Amputations* is argument only for "emotional death."⁴⁷ In many respects Major's recounting of the Encounter experience is more generous than Moskowitz's. Where the latter presents only the most absurd manifestations of cooperative therapeutic practice, typically with price-tag attached to suggest naivete at best and swindling at worst, Major's Doctor Wongo is not himself especially a figure of suspicion. Unorthodox as he may be, he doesn't seem to share Mason's objectives. Moreover, the "body reading" that takes place in his office aims to interpret internal disconnections. It makes no claims to treat the way that body meets the world. Perhaps Mason is correct in his rambling, "no separation of body and spirit possible." Unlike Moskowitz's history, it is less clear that for Major, "intimacy and communication" are impossible or self-indulgent desires. It is not

⁴⁷ The novel concludes with Mason Ellis arriving at a hut in the village of Tabli-Gablah in Liberia. The old man the devil has urged Mason to see opens the note Mason carries which reads, "Keep this nigger!" (204, emphasis in original). It is a clear allusion to the note in *Invisible Man*. As Byerman explains, "The Invisible Man was to be kept running, and the message is delivered early in that novel to announce a key theme. Mason is to be *kept*, to be fixed by his African ancestry. The mad pursuit of self ends in a prison house of race." (Byerman, *The Art and Life of Clarence Major*, 163.emphasis in original). To this observation I would add that Mason is defined by his race only to the extent that he is defined at all. It is the only thing that won't shake loose in his process of self deterioration, a deterioration hastened, it would seem, by the very act of self-seeking. Mason is asked, "Are you the person referred to here?" We know that he responds but not how: "Mason didn't think to hesitate. He chirped." His head spins through a series of associations and then to an examination of the man behind the mask: "He thought he recognized the flicker of an eye in a slit, the gesture of a body, the turn of a head, the shape of a set of breasts, the curve of a big toe. But he couldn't be sure. Not absolutely." (205). This blur of confusion could be mapped onto Mason's efforts at self-recognition. At the same time, the implication of a female form suggests the person in the mask could be his long lost muse, Celt CuRoi. The question of whether what lies before him is greater indeterminance or the entity of future creation is marked as irrelevant by the contents of the note. Whatever might lie ahead, Mason isn't going anywhere.

so much that they can't happen, as it is that they remain the kinds of luxuries one black man, so hardly distinguishable from any other, has no access to.

The humor of *My Amputations* is especially sharp because it puts forth contending critiques simultaneously (evidence of the aforementioned ambiguity unique to fictional critique). Absent of any real plot, the novel is propelled by tension. *My Amputations* jests about clichéd self-involvement and then critiques all that is mean and problematic about those very jokes. Mason may well be a silly sort, but the narrator is equally exposed as one whose callousness seems indicative of loaded cultural assumptions. Readers are thus asked, mid-laugh, why they should be so quick to mock this picaresque attempt at personhood, even or perhaps especially when it falls beyond the familiar.

In an earlier stage of his unravelling, we witness Mason performing both ends of this critique. Standing before a crowd of college students at Georgetown, pretending to be a man he is not, Mason launches into the kind of self-important narrativizing Moskowitz is so critical of:

After the host introduced him, Mason stood in front of the podium. I'll spare you the whole bit but you've got to get the drift: "Thank you," he said, "I come here with my life before you: I am a writer whose muse ran off. I'm just beginning to find myself on my own. I want to speak to you about my new effort to recreate myself. . ." the most interesting reference he made was to something he described as "self betrayal." Anyway, the "body" of his talk would make you hit the ceiling. And I like you too much for that.⁴⁸

So much is happening here. Most notably, our narrator has stepped in to roll his proverbial eyes and express his concern for what is sure to be our rapidly fraying patience for such a man. It could hardly be more dismissive of Mason's self-characterization. The part that is said to have been "interesting" is succinctly paraphrased as "self betrayal." It is followed immediately with

⁴⁸ Major, *My Amputations : A Novel*, 59. Ellipses in original.

the most hand-waving of prepositions, "Anyway." The content of Mason's speech is scare quoted to suggest it is no more than a so-called "body."

The very next sentence of the section proceeds with the Q&A portion of the talk:

The questions were a curious set: "Did you write a book called *Native Son*?" "No? How about *Invisible Man*?" "Are you the author of *Miss Jane Pittman*?" "If you're so terrific how come I never heard of you?" "Do you know Toni Morrison? How about James Baldwin? What're they like?" (59)

No sooner are we assured that the inner identity of this man could be of no real interest to us, than we are met by the impolitic and impolite students who, even having suffered Mason's lengthy introspection, simply cannot scrounge together the impression of him as a unique individual.

Their voices are equally commented upon through Major's precise employment of form. The colloquial contraction "What're" in "What're they like?" lets us know this student A) does not regard this as a formal interaction and/or cannot be bothered to pull simple words apart. B) Is impatient to put forth his or her questions regarding Toni Morrison and James Baldwin, the two black authors everyone can name. No time is given to reply as to whether Mason knows them. Of course he does, "What're they like?" Similarly, the conspicuous absence of a comma after the would-be conditional phrase, "If you're so terrific" implies a speaker who has in fact already decided whether or not the author is so terrific. "If you're so terrific why haven't we heard of you?" is not a rude question; robbed of its pause it isn't a question at all but an accusation.

This scene provides strong evidence for Keith Byerman's reading of the novel "as a postmodern response to the condition of difference."⁴⁹ Mason is easily able to steal the identity of another black author because even those who met the original author don't seem to recognize

⁴⁹ Byerman, *The Art and Life of Clarence Major*, 163.

any distinction between them. As Byerman notes, this kind of fulfilling of expectations for black men is a constant throughout the novel: "Mason's claim of unaccountable children is not challenged by the narrator because everyone 'knows' that black men are promiscuous and irresponsible."⁵⁰ I might take this a step further. The narrator doesn't simply fail to challenge stereotypes as they present themselves; he steps in to knowingly shake his head on our behalf.

The sprawling introduction to Mason's backstory that opens the novel breaks for this observation by our narrator: "The background of such a madman is at least of clinical interest. I strain to find something good to say."⁵¹ The question of clinical interest proceeds with a brief consideration of the typical sources of psychological distress—"Does such a personality evolve from insecurity, a feeling of worthlessness churning beneath the façade?"⁵²—before we are returned yet again to a first person account from Mason, making many and varied claims about the life and character of his father, concluding dramatically with the revelation of his father's humble janitorial career for the very foundation from which Mason extorts royalties (transgenerational back pay?)⁵³ and followed promptly by a corrective from the narrator: "Mason's father—I'll have you know, wasn't a janitor for *anybody*—ever."⁵⁴

The whole account is then undone and an alternative backstory of Mason's father is proffered. One effect of the disparity between character and narrator is to undermine both versions of the story. But, importantly, the corrections only ever do, only ever can, run in one

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Major, *My Amputations : A Novel*, 15.

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ *ibid.*, 16-17.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 18. emphasis in original

direction. The image of Mason's father the narrator provides is more forgiving, and as such, serves to strip Mason of his best excuse for bad behavior. Mason is, in a sense, "free" to tell his own story but powerless against the commentary that might seek to undermine it and unable to force his audience to meet it as a thing in and of itself without cramming it into a box called black fiction or distorting its contents to more suitably account for the kinds of experiences one expects a black American man to live.

Thus we are led through the story of Mason Ellis by a voice impatient with and only vaguely curious about Mason's existence. Psychoanalytic discourse is employed as a point of contrast. The inner lives of some people may be worth probing, but Mason is both insignificant and precisely what is expected. He is "at least of clinical interest," which is to say of interest as a specimen, a certain sort of person, but no one person in particular.

The scene of Mason performing as author at Georgetown is one of Major's more outrightly humorous. Everyone in it is openly presented as ridiculous, both Mason in the delivery of his speech and the students in their response. The real work of these humorous moments, however, has much less to do with the ways in which they function independently and is more apparent in the friction between them. In one instance we are welcomed into the assumption that Mason's move to recognition is absurd. In the next, we are abutted by the racial core of such an assumption. The emotional "Encounter" call to be recognized, to be individuated, to be free to feel openly, publicly, cooperatively is brought forth in the novel, less as a means of critique for such endeavors, as Moskowitz would have it, than as an example of the limitations of popularized psychological practices to provide much of anything to non-white middle-class subjects. To be self-actualized, one would need to first take Mason's selfhood seriously. Our narrator cannot much be bothered.

In Major's blocks of prose we find the 70's Encounter movement in all its silliness, but also this question: who in the "me generation" can afford to get back to basics, to strip themselves of social inhibition? Whose body can be said to exist under and before the weight of modern life and thus can be prized as a retreat from the pain of living? Surely the supreme amount of privilege and security that prefaces any such letting go is not to be found in one who desperately brands himself with his own initials. Mason Ellis: ME.

Performing Emotion in *Heathers*

Where *My Amputations* ventriloquizes the denial of a black male identity unique and free, *Heathers* focuses on a demographic thoroughly convinced of the relevance of their inner lives: beautiful, white, rich, suburban, teenage girls. *Heathers* marks the transition from a perhaps self-indulgent and pseudo-inclusive but sincere emphasis on personal well-being of the 1970s to the increasingly instrumentalized, market-friendly investment in self-improvement of the 1980s. I return to Pauline Fleming, the sole adult who seems affected at all by the horror of the high school's events. Fleming is obsessed with the discussion of emotion, a word she uses numerous times. She functions as the film's feel-good, self-help guru; yet the very thinly veiled opportunism of her commitment to the students' feelings is quickly exposed, primarily as it moves from sentiment to spectacle.⁵⁵ In the faculty meeting to discuss the death of Heather Chandler, Pauline offers this critique: "I find it profoundly disturbing that we are told of the tragic destruction of a human and all we can think to talk about is adequate mourning time and

⁵⁵ As Roz Kaveny similarly observes, "Fleming talks a language of sensitivity that is actually all about showing off and ego." Her performances of concern both epitomize and ignite further "self-serving" claptrap" amongst the teens. Roz Kaveny, *Teen Dreams : Reading Teen Film from Heathers to Veronica Mars* (London ; New York: I.B. Tauris ; In the United States of America and in Canada distributed by Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

misused vocabulary words?”⁵⁶ In this shot, framing only Pauline’s upper body, she expresses a sense of disgust likely to be shared by viewers of the film; thus far the discussion of Chandler’s end has been entirely insensitive. Yet no sooner are we given this moment of reprieve from the callousness of this ensemble, than the camera cuts to a wider shot, displaying the entire table and thus contextualizing Pauline’s pathos, broadening its scope to include her audience just in time for her to exclaim, “We must revel in this revealing moment!”

The camerawork lays bare an important distinction between privately held feelings and public performance of one’s emotional responses to events. In so doing it raises the question of how the line between concern and posturing came to be so thin.⁵⁷ Dana Cloud’s investigation of therapeutic rhetoric in service of political aims, *Control and Consolation in Culture and Politics*, suggests that the post-1968 left found themselves increasingly fatigued in the early 1970s. She quotes from sociologist and political writer Todd Gitlin, looking back from the vantage point of 1987: “If society was impenetrable and politics a simple reshuffling of elite credentials, the self could still be transformed at will [. . .] In the early seventies the journey to the interior preoccupied a good half of my old movement friends [. . .] Systems that some took up for the temporary licking of wounds, or anesthesia, for others became substitute faiths.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Waters et al., *Heathers*.

⁵⁷ As Moskowitz charts, “Calls to air personal problems have a long history. In the 1850s Phineas P. Quimby called upon his fellow Americans to examine the false ideas that made them sick at heart.” Warren Susman likewise characterized an earlier time, the turn of the twentieth century, as the period in which emphasis on “character” shifts to an emphasis on “personality,” the latter being a more superficial and performative construction of qualities and of self-understanding. Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust : America’s Obsession with Self-Fulfillment*, 276. Public suffering as means of attention-getting may well be an old practice, older still than Susman or Moskowitz call back to. Yet, even as its origins extend far back before the period of interest to this chapter, more recent developments in the trajectory of therapeutic culture color Pauline’s desire to “revel.”

⁵⁸ Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. New York: Bantam, 1987, 426 quoted in Cloud, *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics : Rhetoric of Therapy*, 35.

Disillusionment with the promise of wide-scale social change in the face of a resurgence in conservative ideals or, as Thomas Frank claims the easy and inevitable cooptation of left aesthetics and rhetoric into a kitsch form of neoliberal hippy nostalgia,⁵⁹ forced the problems facing the American public wanting to maintain a certain credibility and lifestyle as enlightened and awake to scale back to a more manageable subject: themselves. By this logic, Gitlin's friends engage in their "Ghost Dance" with "psychotherapeutic and New Age sects"⁶⁰ as a means both to rechannel political energy and to recover from what they may have perceived, with, for example, the election of Richard Nixon and the continuation of the war in Vietnam, as a lost battle for the soul of the nation.

Pauline Fleming fits the stereotype of such a lone and out-of-touch liberal idealist down to the last detail. Her call to "revel" and subsequent suggestion that the school's population be brought together to "just talk and feel" is rounded out by her accessories: butterfly earrings, bulky bracelets made seemingly of dice, and, of course, a brooch of cats. Her principal responds with insincere thanks and the request to "call [him] when the shuttle lands."⁶¹ If we take Pauline to be a humorous caricature of the kind of disenfranchised, inward-turning post-radical Gitlin and Cloud describe, it frames her "substitute faith" in the world of feelings to be dwelled upon

⁵⁹ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool : Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁶⁰ Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. New York: Bantam, 1987, 426 quoted in Cloud, *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics : Rhetoric of Therapy*, 35.

⁶¹ An insult that implies she is "high" if not chemically then mentally or otherwise from another planet or expecting visitors from one at any moment.

and expressed openly, in a particular light. She is not only given to self-absorption and an over-emphasis on emotional life as an individual, she is a missionary.⁶²

Shortly after the scene at the faculty meeting, Pauline embarks on her lone-quest to tap into the tragedy of Heather Chandler's death. To a classroom full of students she proclaims to be "thrilled" to have discovered "profound sensitivity" in Heather Chandler's suicide note (unbeknownst to Fleming, the note is a forgery made by Veronica and J.D.). She passes it around the room so that her students can "experience its pathetic beauty" themselves, but not before pacing between her students, note clutched to chest, pausing for the dramatic revelation: "I have her note." The students gasp, some smile, others nod in approval. The understated monotone in which Fleming announces this rather shocking acquisition is undermined by her theatrical posturing. She hoists it aloft. She pauses. The camera angle changes to once again account for her audience, this time teenagers arranged in a messy unconventional circle, some in seats others on desks, all seemingly wrapped with attention. A student gleefully and accurately recounts the rumors of Heather Chandler's cause of death, ingesting a cup of "multipurpose deodorizing disinfectant," and is cut off by Fleming, who prefers another sort of sensationalism. "Let's talk emotions," she insists.

⁶² If Fleming is the last zealot, a holdout of hopeless liberal idealism, Patrick Bateman is the devil come to collect. Georgina Colby traces Easton Ellis's creation along a similar political trajectory. Bateman is politically correct on the surface and savagely racist and misogynistic just beneath. Shallow gestures of social justice are what the late eighties has left to offer. There are, according to Colby, further ways Easton Ellis represents dried up movements of the 1960s. The graffiti present in the book harkens back to graffiti of May 68, for which it "epitomized the avant-garde dream of art realized in the practice of everyday life." Now it expresses desperation and despair: "FEAR" on a McDonald's and "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE," a tagging of Dante on the side of a bank and the very start of the book. This is one way "Ellis represents a cultural territory in the wake of the liquidation of two-dimensional culture in which the existence of a counterculture, such as the Counterculture Revolution of the 1960s is no longer possible." Georgina Colby, *Bret Easton Ellis : Underwriting the Contemporary*, American Literature Readings in the Twenty-First Century (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 77.

The performance and its staging within the film bear a strong resemblance to the increasingly popular formulas of day-time television talk shows. At the time of *Heathers* release, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is only three years old and yet already wildly popular.⁶³ *Time* magazine tried to explain her ratings victory over Donahue in 1988: “What she lacks in journalistic toughness, she makes up for in plainspoken curiosity, robust humor and, *above all empathy*.”⁶⁴ Winfrey’s rise is justifiably seen as remarkable “in a field [that was] dominated by white males.”⁶⁵ Her method and demeanor were also, however, especially well-suited to a moment in which the trend toward emotions themselves as possessing exchange value seemed to be at an all-time high. On *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, one could, for the small price of one’s intimate feelings, purchase attention, recognition, even fame.

As Illouz follows emotion’s evolution as a form of capital, she considers the “self-realization narrative” rooted in the work of “Heinz Hartmann, Ernst Kris, Rudolph Loewenstein, Alfred Adler, Erich Fromm, Karen Horney and Albert Ellis,” all of whom, though distinct, shared that they “rejected the Freudian determinism of the psyche and similarly preferred a more flexible and open-ended view of the self, thus opening up new possibilities for a greater compatibility between psychology and the (distinctly American) moral view that people could

⁶³ Richard Zoglin, “Oprah: Lady with a Calling,” *Time* August 8 1988. While the Oprah Winfrey of the eighties was not the taste-making, squeaky-clean media brand established in the late nineties and through to the present day (in the early years her show was home to as many paternity disputes and other sordid sexual fiascos as any other), she nevertheless went on the air in 1986 with a weapon new to television.

⁶⁴ *ibid.* emphasis mine. While I concur with Zoglin’s read of Winfrey as especially adept at an empathetic approach to television, the conclusion that this should undercut her seriousness as a journalist is riddled with assumptions. Stoicism as a feature of serious journalism is a deeply gendered standard, having often to do with the ineffable quality of gravitas attributed often to aging men with low voices. As Zoglin reports, Oprah struggled in her work as a reporter in Baltimore precisely because she once cried interviewing a woman who had lost her children in a fire. Yet, even with evidence to Oprah’s susceptibility to emotion, in the summation that this quality of necessity constitutes a failing, I cannot help but hear ways in which the interviewer makes sense of a black woman’s success by relegating it to an achievement in a less serious endeavor.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

and should shape their destinies.”⁶⁶ This pivot from treating the sick to improving upon the relatively well would find its clearest expression in the field of Humanist psychology. Carl Rogers carried this “Humanist movement” with force into the 1950s and 1960s, but it was, for Illouz, Abraham Maslow who in the 1970s succeeded in making self-actualization or ‘self-help’ a part of the popular lexicon, who would have the greatest impact. Maslow’s theories influenced the future of clinical practice; they also suggested a lay method of organizing emotional experience that would profoundly impact the very concept of self, on and off the couch, in the latter part of the twentieth century.⁶⁷

“‘The people we call “sick”,’” Maslow wrote, “‘are the people who are not themselves, the people who have built up all sorts of neurotic defenses against being human.’”⁶⁸ While a base level of social functioning had long been a part of psychological study and diagnosis, Maslow’s attention to “fear of success” and promotion of “psychological ideals of self-fulfillment” broke new ground in the attitude toward emotional well-being.⁶⁹ Now, to be unproductive or

⁶⁶ Illouz, *Cold Intimacies : The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, 43. See also Tim Dartington on the mutual influence of specific economic policy and the development of medical therapeutic practice. In his essay, “The Therapeutic Fantasy: Self-Love and Quick Wins,” Dartington convincingly marries economic theory and practices with the dissolution and perversion of psychoanalysis. For example, Dartington exposes the “powerful myth that wealth is individually generated and attracts personal moral worth”—epitomized by George W. Bush’s election-cycle battle cry, “‘It’s Your Money,’” and certainly derivative of Reaganomic approaches to corporate enablement and welfare disinheritance—as “essential to the instrumental core of the therapeutic project, because it is a denial of the human interdependence of each of us.” The boot-strap narrative dominating the politics of the moment further encouraged individuals to look on pain as personal and not social problems (even if they were personal problems that would be publicly addressed), but it also served as the *modus operandi* for the mental health industry. Dartington describes the trajectory of mental health care in this country as growing over time to be less based in the concept of patient-doctor relationship and exchange, and increasingly cast as the provision of a service. This shift, he suspects, is a byproduct of shame surrounding the very idea of interdependence. Cast as a commodity, the provision of therapy can survive and thrive through an adherence to an “instrumental and rationalist” approach to “human relations.” Tim Dartington, “The Therapeutic Fantasy,” *Politics and the Emotions: The Affective Turn in Contemporary Political Studies* (2012).

⁶⁷ Illouz, *Cold Intimacies : The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, 44-45.

⁶⁸ Quoted in .Ibid., 45.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

unsuccessful was to be ill. This sort of high-functioning neurotic ‘condition’ would, as Illouz notes, produce an entire class of patients well enough to be diagnosed and treated publicly and without any special expertise, opening up market possibilities.

It is thus into this mix, amid a predominantly Maslovian vision of the healthy self and the pinnacle of Reaganite dream-fueled optimism for unadulterated individualism, that Oprah, certainly not the first but perhaps the most successful emotional capitalist, enters the public arena. In mimicking Oprah’s methods—the sympathetic and casual tone, a teasing secret scoop (here, in the form of the suicide note), the insistence that in tragedy there is opportunity for personal emotional growth, and the implicit assumption that a sympathetic ear is all the qualification one requires to unburden complex psychological conditions, including trauma—the characterization of Pauline Fleming forms a particularly stinging critique of the Oprah franchise and the new mode of empathetic, ostensibly problem-solving talk show it gave rise to.

Heathers is unforgiving of Fleming, not because she expresses her emotions but because she capitalizes on them. As Illouz explains, by attempting to isolate and intellectualize an emotional encounter, "the therapeutic persuasion offers a variety of techniques to enable awareness of one's needs and emotions, but it also makes emotions into objects external to the subject, to be observed and controlled."⁷⁰ Therapeutic practices, particularly those which could be said to be performed without direct professional help, emphasized an “injunction to manage feelings by using neutral procedures of expression and speech,” which may or may not have proven useful in the diffusing of private arguments or the assessment of destructive emotional habits, but certainly ran counter to the definition of emotion Illouz adheres to and which runs

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 35.

parallel to the contextualized and dependent vision of emotional life set forth in the introduction to this dissertation.⁷¹

Illouz summarizes this perspective in clear terms: “Emotions are by their very nature situational and indexical; they point to the ways in which the self is positioned within a particular interaction, and in that respect, they are a sort of shorthand for the self to understand how and where it is positioned in a particular situation.”⁷² And so to seek to better understand and control emotions by stripping them of context, detaching them from a subjective and complex arena of other emotions, motivations, and relations, is a form of instrumentalism that runs a very real risk of redefining the spheres into which emotions can fall.

As free-floating objects—belonging to but external from human bodies and psyches—emotions, like all objects, are free to take on exchange value, to become yet another part of the marketplace. Critics of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* argue that a platform built on the concept that empathy is entertaining perfected such a marketplace, a place where one could trade trauma, fear, anxiety, depression, insecurity, elation, doubt, and even misery for attention.⁷³ Fleming encourages her students to seek that spotlight out. The critique of the practice is most evident as we witness how making a tragedy about the emotional responses of those surrounding it serves to refocus the horror of what has happened on one’s self. If it is all about your emotions, it’s all about you.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² *ibid.*, 38.

⁷³ *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery : An Essay on Popular Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

A genuinely boring preppy student, Peter Dawson, has the following epiphany regarding the genuinely mean and recently deceased Heather Chandler: "Heather and I used to go out but she said I was boring, but now I realize I really wasn't boring; it's just that she was dissatisfied with her life." In addition to being funny and rather beside the point in the wake of a supposed friend's suicide, this therapeutic reassessment of Peter's own worth is of course too convenient to be anything less than preposterous.⁷⁴ Soon after this revelation, students flood the airways with tales of their grief, or at least grief expressed by proof of personal connection to Heather. Shannen Doherty's character (a Heather) goes to several news outlets to tell a story about her and Heather borrowing one another's clothes. It's a perfect anecdote: it flatters her by way of comparison to a famously attractive girl and it establishes her credibility as her close friend and thereby a more direct victim of the death than others. Most importantly, it gets her feelings on T.V.

These texts have moved us some distance from the Encounter movement of the 1970s. And yet, each phase of therapeutic culture serves as necessary precursor to the next. The retreat to the self of the 1970s has been interpreted by scholars like Moskowitz, Ferudi, and Cloud, among others, as an important step toward a dangerous encouragement for narcissistic behavior and an invitation to diagnose the well but reasonably troubled as "sick." Therapeutic cultures of the 1970s not only championed emotional life, they also promoted the notion that one's inner turmoil was best addressed in public.⁷⁵ Edgley and Brisatt explain the appeal: "Talk television is

⁷⁴ Veronica is the only one that notices. She lets out a much too inappropriate burst of laughter which she then disguises as weeping.

⁷⁵ Moskowitz traces the path from private to public largely through "the church basement" and the meteoric rise of 12 steps programs. (Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust : America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment*. 259) The methods born in Alcoholics Anonymous were appropriated across a wide range of potential problems. The barrier of entry to Emotions Anonymous was nothing more than the presence of "emotional distress." (252) There might be

one more demonstration that the allure of victims is powerful because it forces attention on them. Being meddled with pushes people to the front stage, their lives now the object of analysis, curiosity, sympathy, and fascination."⁷⁶ The television talk show may be the most fully realized marketplace for emotional capital. As these fictional texts illustrate, however, emotional objects are a boom market; opportunities abound.

American Psycho: Affect as Value Added

Heathers provides one rather grim view of emotions as saleable commodities. Its lusty, angsty teenagers prove to be born capitalists once the integration of a rogue element (the deranged J.D.) upsets their economy just enough for them to see how far their personal suffering can get them. But even in the halls of this fictive Ohio high school, emotions maintain some positive association. If feeling, empathy, pain were truly reduced to just things among other things, they might look less like Shannen Doherty's immodest and unconvincing public claims of grief and more like the inner workings of the mind of Patrick Bateman in the 1991 novel, *American Psycho*.

little harm in an association that could apply to more or less anyone, if it didn't also carry with it a self-diagnostic component. As in programs aimed to treat chemical addictions which demanded a faith in god, required a denial of personal agency, and assumed a rhetoric of disease, members of Emotions Anonymous prefaced any steps toward a better life with the mantra that "we are powerless over our emotions—that our lives have become unmanageable." (Moskowitz 252)

The twelve-step program is not itself here a target of the critique of commodified emotional life. It is, however, an important intermediary step toward a public arena of feeling. In *A Nation of Meddlers*, Edgley and Brissett rather caustically argue that "'Even the most cursory look at what Jane Shattuc calls "teletherapy" emanating from television talk shows, will demonstrate that victimage is in full bloom." (74) One's status as powerless or victimized is made acceptable for a television audience by the slow moving amateruization of therapeutic practice most evident in the proliferation of twelve step programs. It is not only newly permissible to seek help from non-credentialed strangers, it is acceptable to air the most profoundly personal and vulnerable pieces of one's life before others. Moskowitz claims that 12 step programs expanded "religious medicine" making way for the open embrace of therapy everywhere and anywhere. (Moskowitz 251) Yet the condition of anonymity is a far cry from a pursuit of notoriety. Seeking emotional help in a televised public forum may well satisfy a distinct set of emotional needs altogether.

⁷⁶ Charles Edgley and Dennis Brissett, *A Nation of Meddlers* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999), 78.

American Psycho is unequivocally a book about stuff. The following example of brand-listing and in-depth sartorial description represents the standard introduction to any new scene as it is told in the first person by its serial killer main character Patrick Bateman.

Armstrong is wearing a four-button double-breasted chalk-striped spread-collar cotton shirt by Christian Dior and a large paisley-patterned silk tie by Givenchy Gentleman. His leather agenda and leather envelope, both by Bottega Veneta, lie on the third chair of our table, a good one, up front by the window. I'm wearing a nailhead-patterned worsted wool suit with overplaid from DeRigueur by Schoeneman, a cotton broadcloth shirt by Bill Blass, a Macclesfield silk tie by Savoy and a cotton handkerchief by Ashear Bros. A muzak rendition of the score from *Les Misérables* plays lightly throughout the restaurant.⁷⁷

Bateman is obsessed with naming and assessing relative value of the many things he encounters.⁷⁸ On its surface, this serves as a straightforward critique of rampant consumerism. In such descriptions, emotion would appear to be the thing, the only thing, in disturbingly low supply. Bateman's life is an unending catwalk of prized items. And yet, emotions are not what is missing from all this high-end hording; rather, they are casually and consistently among the many things to be consumed.⁷⁹

Like *My Amputations*, *American Psycho* has little in the way of plot. Bateman goes in and out of his days, naming things, acquiring things, brutally murdering many people, primarily women. He narrates these activities with similar levels of interest and with the very same

⁷⁷ Ellis, *American Psycho : A Novel*, 137.

⁷⁸ He tends to his favorite thing, his own body, through extreme hours of exercise, persistent tanning, facials, manicures, and a host of carefully selected and enumerated hair and skin products.

⁷⁹ Consider for a moment the "muzak" of the above selection. There are tens if not hundreds of references to *Les Misérables* in *American Psycho*. The most overwrought and sentimental production of a generation plays on and on in the background. If a dying Eponine seems a peculiar soundtrack for the 1980s Wall Street set, it is worth noting that in all the very many times it is mentioned, nothing is said of the emotional impact of the musical's many heart-wrenching tunes (ranging from calls to arms, to exhortations of love, to last words). The soundtrack is prized for being the hottest thing on Broadway. Bateman uses people's preferences for American vs. British cast recordings to sort the sophisticates from the philistines. That is the extent of anyone's "feelings" about the production.

attention to detail. Bateman's life differs from Mason Ellis's, clearly in the level of their reprehensibility, but also in their objectives. Ellis, shaped by the seventies Encounter movement, encouraged by the self-actualizing act of other's writerly careers, seeks out the self to a fault. Bateman refines the self, but only the self of the surface. And it is all surface. He is not cold. He is both passionately attentive to his superficial desires and capable of recognizing inter- or inner-personal conflict: these concerns—material and emotional—simply don't warrant a distinction in status.

To demonstrate how Bateman accounts for his inner and outer self simultaneously and with equal measure I must quote a paragraph in full:

Some kind of existential chasm opens before me while I'm browsing at Bloomingdale's and causes me to first locate a phone and check my messages, then, near tears, after taking three Halcion (since my body has mutated and adapted to the drug it no longer causes sleep—it just seems to ward off total madness), I head toward the Clinique counter where with my platinum American Express card I buy six tubes of shaving cream while flirting nervously with the girls who work there and I decide this emptiness has, at least in part, some connection with the way I treated Evelyn at Barcadia the other night, though there is always the possibility it could just as easily have something to do with the tracking device on my VCR, and while I am making a mental note to put in an appearance at Evelyn's Christmas party—I'm even tempted to ask one of the Clinique girls to escort me—I also remind myself to look through my VCR handbook and deal with the tracking device problem. I see a ten year old girl standing by her mother, who is buying a scarf, some jewelry, and I'm thinking: Not bad. I'm wearing a cashmere topcoat, a double-breasted plaid wool and alpaca sport coat, pleated wool trousers, patterned silk tie, all by Valentino Couture, and leather lace-ups with Allen Edmonds.⁸⁰

In this scene, Bateman finds it difficult to decide if the yawning “existential chasm” that appears suddenly before him is caused by regret or guilt surrounding his treatment of a love interest or if it is caused by a feature of his VCR that has recently failed to function properly. Bateman isn't absent any concern for other people and their feelings. He cares about them just as

⁸⁰ Ellis, *American Psycho : A Novel*, 179-80.

much as he cares about minor defects in nonessential electronic equipment. His crisis is over as soon as it begins. He returns to scrutinizing those around him and listing components of his attire. Feelings are on a par with other stuff, no nearer to the self than a busted VCR. His feelings are ambiguous and mercurial across many fronts.

Take for example, that disturbing sentence in which he spots a young girl shopping with her mother. The reader can't tell if he is weighing the merits of this extremely young child, her mother, or the assorted goods they are purchasing.⁸¹ But here is what is important about that sentence in the context of the novel as a whole: Neither can he. The book is relentless. In Easton Ellis's own words, "unendurable,"⁸² not just because it is brutal but because it is a tedious monologue from a man with an opinion about absolutely everything. Best business card. Best pants. Best shaving cream. Best stereo. Best album by a band. Best looking woman in the room.

⁸¹ There are some who would credit such ambiguity less to Easton Ellis's deliberate machinations and more to a simple lack of skill. In perhaps the most negative advanced review of a novel ever published, Roger Rosenblatt questioned Easton Ellis' writerly abilities particularly though not exclusively on the matter of grammar (Norman Mailer similarly commented in *Vanity Fair* that the novel was poorly written). Easton Ellis dismissed this critique, stating, "complaining about the grammar in a book that's narrated by a madman is not only foolish, but it's irresponsible." This slide from goods to girl has the same effect for me regardless of whether Easton Ellis intended it as an insight into Bateman's thinking or simply adopted the kind of carelessness I am ascribing to Bateman himself. I am inclined, however, to favor the interpretation that this passage marks a subtle derision the author has woven into Bateman's own thoughts. I make that call, in part, in response to Beverly Haviland's work on another Easton Ellis novel, *Less Than Zero*. As I do here, Haviland finds a subtle message that some acts are too terrible to be surrendered to an "anything goes" mentality in the grammar of the work. She concludes her essay with a reading of Easton Ellis' move into the past tense: "Up to this point the action was narrated in the present - another of the stylistic tics of minimalism - and the narratological expression of the belief that now is all there is. It is as if returning to the East, the grammatical possibilities increase because there is some sense of and responsibility to the past. Perspective is reintroduced, and with it some standard by which to measure." I believe that Easton Ellis mostly drowns us in this amoral eternal present but finds opportunities such as the slide from girls to things, the move from present to past, in which to stand in judgment of his unforgivable characters. Reading *American Psycho* many years since both its publication and its film adaptation makes the subtle, sometimes simply grammatical moments of condemnation stand out all the more. This is compounded by the fact that the only character Bateman truly reveres and has no harsh words for is Donald Trump. A soulless Bateman's boyish reverence for the man with no need for manners seems to make something simple like the slide from goods to girls seem prophetic in its quiet disgust. Roger Rosenblatt, "Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away with Murder?," *New York Times Book Review* 16 (1990); Robert Love, "Bret Easton Ellis: Psycho Analysis," *Rolling Stone*, April 4 1991. Beverly Haviland, "Minimal Manners or, the Novel of Manners in an Age with Few," *Southwest Review* 73, no. 4 (1988): 463.

⁸² Love, "Bret Easton Ellis: Psycho Analysis."

In the next room. And the next. Perhaps Bateman means to register his opinion on all three: the girl, the woman, the goods. Given the litany of assessments on relative quality, however, one could forgive him for losing track, for weighing in on everything and nothing in particular. The problem with such an ambiguous habit of ranking is accentuated only by the age of the girl. Maybe it doesn't matter if Bateman is so fast to judge the materiality of all around him that we can't be sure if he likes a scarf, a drink, or a dinner table. But when an especially vulnerable person enters the mix, it becomes suddenly clear that the slide of stuff to people matters a great deal. What it primarily demonstrates, however, are the shallows of Bateman himself, not necessarily a commentary on emotions as objects of exchange.

This is why Bateman's favorite television program matters. There is nothing cold-blooded about Patrick Bateman's existence. He lives a life deeply saturated by emotional performance. The most outrageous and injurious moments of the lives of others cascade before him on the program he never misses: *The Patty Winters Show*. We are introduced to the program with this: "While I'm dressing the TV is kept on to *The Patty Winters Show*. Today's guests are women with multiple personalities. A nondescript overweight older woman is on the screen and Patty's voice is heard asking, "Well, is it schizophrenia or what's the deal? *Tell us*."⁸³ And so the stage is set for profound psychological distress as background entertainment. This television program's presence is persistent.⁸⁴ From the deeply personal to the entirely superficial, from

⁸³ Ellis, *American Psycho : A Novel*, 29.emphasis in original

⁸⁴ Winters' additional talk show topics include: Autism; "descendants of members of the Donner Party"; "UFOs That Kill"; Toddler Murderers; Shark Attack Victims; "women who've had mastectomies"; "women who married homosexuals"; Teenage Girls Who Trade Sex for Crack; Aerobic Exercise; "Deformed People"; "Salad Bars"; "Has Patrick Swayze Become Cynical or Not?"; Talking Animals; "best restaurants in the Middle East"; "People Who Weigh Over Seven Hundred Pounds—What Can We do About Them?"; "Tips on How Your Pet Can Become a Movie Star"; "a boy who fell in love with a box of soap"; a split show: "The first was an exclusive interview with Donald Trump, the second was a report on women who've been tortured."; "Princess Di's Beauty Tips"; "a machine that lets people talk to the dead"; Human Dairies"; "an interview with a man who set his daughter on fire while she

genuine human tragedy to silly sideshows: all belong properly to the field of casual early-morning entertainment. It is unclear what precisely entices Patrick to be such a loyal viewer. He is on occasion disturbingly aroused by its grimmer subjects. He recalls the day's topics almost exclusively as non-sequiturs, serving as the place his mind wanders to in conversation or as a simple record of his thoughts while engaged in the detailed preparations of a homicide. The constant drone of *The Patty Winter's Show* serves at the least to demonstrate a passing interest in the circulation of private feeling to a public audience, even, or perhaps especially, to one so disinterested in the actual welfare of actual persons.

Patrick, furthermore, takes the affective power of objects into account in his evaluations of their worth. On a few separate occasions, Patrick uses the space of his story to put forth a detailed review of a musical artist—Genesis, Whitney Houston, and Huey Lewis and The News. His review of Houston's ballad, "The Greatest Love of All" marks, for instance, one of Bateman's best performances of emotional insight. He praises the song as,

One of the best, most powerful songs ever written about self-preservation and dignity. From the first line (Michael Masser and Linda Creed are credited as the writers) to the last, it's a state-of-the-art ballad about believing in yourself. It's a powerful statement and one that Whitney sings with a grandeur that approaches the sublime. Its universal message crosses all boundaries and instills one with the hope that it is not too late for us to better ourselves, to act kinder. Since it is impossible in the world we live in to empathize with others, we can always empathize with ourselves. It's an important message, crucial really, and it's beautifully stated on the album."⁸⁵

was giving birth."

Many of these references come up in moments of extreme horror. The machine that allows people to speak to the dead episode comes to Bateman's mind while also narrating the events of one of the novel's most upsetting torture scenes. This final example is offered amidst a description of what is for dinner. Everything is one-note.

Ellis, *American Psycho: A Novel*, 63, 107, 115, 138, 143, 161, 178, 181, 200, 219, 225, 231, 250, 278, 283, 291, 297, 256, 301, 326, 344, 347, respectively.

⁸⁵ Ellis, *American Psycho: A Novel*, 254.

Bateman lays it on thick, gushing praise.⁸⁶ Yet I wouldn't go so far as to call this performance fraudulent. There is no reason to doubt that Bateman has picked up on or even deeply felt the themes he describes, just as we shouldn't confuse Pauline Fleming's performativity with insincerity or Doctor Wongo's lock-step with the new age therapies as a con. As his offhand reference to the impossibility of empathetic relations in the real world suggests, Bateman likes empathy and feeling just fine. He buys them at Tower Records.⁸⁷ His world is precisely as saturated by passionate feeling as it is by Valentino.⁸⁸

In true darkly comedic fashion *American Psycho* attempts to observe a genuine phenomenon—which is here, among others, the decontextualization of emotions to the point of breaking free from any particular investment in authenticity and becoming mere objects of exchange—and ask what it would be like if the situation were even worse. If Bateman is correct in his review of Houston in surmising that empathy is dead, what is there to keep him from murdering anyone at all?⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Many elements betray this review as an amateur musing. He is a bit too hyperbolic in his claims to universality and total boundary crossing. He employs the same concepts, like “power” repetitively. Bateman, who wants ever to be in the know and on the forefront, does his best to impress us with his knowledge and sensitivity to the nuances of the music. He comes across instead as the thing he fears most, an average man with many opinions but no special understanding. He celebrates the emotional qualities of a work of pop music to seem attuned to the finer things.

⁸⁷ Along with Whitney, Phil Collins, and Huey Lewis, *The Miserables*, the dispossessed, (both acceptable translations of *Les Miserables*) play on in the background. They make for good entertainment, if you have the right recording.

⁸⁸ Dartington describes the late twentieth century turn to recast therapy as but another commodity among many. In becoming an object of purchase contemporary therapy encourages the classification of emotional relations as themselves items of exchange. “There is a difference,” he explains, “between highlighting the intrinsic value of a relationship [...] and what I suggest is now our everyday experience where the appearance of relationship is used to achieve a business objective—‘have a nice day.’” As a modern character, Bateman is remarkable in his disinterest in distinguishing between the *appearances* of relationships and genuine encounters. Dartington, “The Therapeutic Fantasy.”

⁸⁹ Bateman's love-sick secretary Jean tries to get him to understand her affections. “Haven't you ever wanted to make someone happy?” she pleads. In a moment of cognitive dissonance, he asks her to repeat her question, after which “a cold, distant wave of fright washes over [him], dousing something” (373). He changes the subject. As the conversation progresses Bateman is moved to ask Jean “how many people in this world are like me?” Jean believes

Reactions to the novel at the time of its publication focused almost as much on the efficacy of Easton Ellison's condemnation of 80's culture as they did on the representations of sexual violence. Norman Mailer seemed to believe there was a point to such nihilism, citing the sort of objectification I have here discussed: "We have entered a period of the absolute manipulation of humans by humans: the objective correlative of total manipulation is coldcock murder. Murder is now a lumber mill where humans can be treated with the same lack of respect as trees."⁹⁰ For others it simply wasn't enough to justify the torture. "On and on it goes," writes Jonathan Yardley of Mailer's review, "this exercise in shopworn if politically correct nihilism, all of it calculated to justify not merely the blood bath of "American Psycho" but the appetite of Mailer, and others of his persuasion, for the voyeuristic enjoyment of cheap thrills."⁹¹ For its contemporary critics, there was an equation to be balanced. The shock of it all could be accepted if it managed to make its point. Nearly thirty years out, I want to suggest that seeking balance between violence and meaningful critique within *American Psycho* is not the right question for an analysis that looks to the work as symptomatic. The violence visited on the reader, whether to shock them with purpose or simply as horror stories do, is potentially just as pointless as the violence visited on the blur of secondary characters.⁹² This is not to say that it is impotent.

him to be a true original, but we (and he) know this to be false. One of the novel's most prevalent jokes is the incessant confusion amongst powerful men in suits. Bateman is constantly mistaken for others, consistently mistaking the men around him for others. When Bateman towards book's end confesses to his reader "I simply am not there" he refers to the shallowness of feeling and experience that makes his indistinguishability complete. The horror of Patrick Bateman is that he is not an aberration (as evidenced by his indistinguishability from other, misogynistic, egomaniacal, well quaffed men), that he is correct in his childish insistence, "I do too add up." We are given in endless boring detail the elements of his days and nights and it is, for Easton Ellis at least, hard to argue with the sum. As grotesque as his crimes are, they are without legal, moral, or practical consequence.

⁹⁰ Quoted in Jonathan Yardley, "Norman Mailer's Shock Schlock," *The Washington Post*, March 4 1991.

⁹¹ *ibid.* To be clear, Mailer does not hold the novel in particularly high esteem. Mailer's review argues that the kind of shock the novel produces may be a necessary tactic for getting through to contemporary audiences and it is for this defense that he is here criticized by Yardley.

⁹² Critics both social and literary have registered harm done to them by reading the novel. Tammy Bruce, the Los

Sonia Baelo Allué argues that *American Psycho* recasts the serial killer genre. Where stories of serial violence typically focus on the aesthetics of disgust and fear, Easton Ellis numbs our aesthetic sensibilities with redundancy and turns our attention instead to ethics. She cites the anticlimactic close of the novel as securing its place as an ethical work: “For a serial killer narrative to be satisfactory, the “bad” serial killer must be caught at the end [. . .] this is a way of locating the violence in the killer's disorder, rather than in ourselves or in the social order.”⁹³ An ethical point is made, Allué states, because Bateman is not diseased or deformed or even disadvantaged. By epitomizing mainstream culture and failing to pay for his crimes, the culture he wears, rather literally, shares in his guilt.⁹⁴ If reading *American Psycho* is the odious task I and its own author claim it to be, if we come away from it with no satisfaction of resolution that Bateman or the culture that created him will do anything less than continue to flourish, we have been abused, in a sense, by the text—not because it offended us without sufficient moral purpose, but because it left us hopeless and complicit.

Angeles Coordinator of NOW and a leader in the move to boycott the publisher, called the novel “the most misogynistic communication we have ever come across” and, “in effect, a how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women.” I am distinguishing here between feelings of disgust in which a reader feels personally and specifically threatened and those which simply raise adrenalin in the moment. Critics at the time argued over whether the novel made enough of a social point to justify the violence. This debate may well matter to whether we read the text as feminist, antifeminist or neither and to considerations of its literary merit. I wish to suggest, however, that read in the tradition of cynical humor, disgust without a roadmap for better days can be taken as a commentary of another kind. Elizabeth Venant, “An ‘American Psycho’ Drama : Books: The Flap Surrounding Bret Easton Ellis’ Third Novel Flares Again. Now Is Seeking a Boycott of His New Publisher. Other Observers Raise Questions of Censorship.,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 11, 1990.

⁹³ Sonia Baelo Allué, “The Aesthetics of Serial Killing: Working against Ethics in “the Silence of the Lambs” (1988) and “American Psycho” (1991),” *Atlantis* 24, no. 2 (2002).

⁹⁴ I do not disagree, but would emphasize the distinction between ethics and morality. In a story with a moral, a person who has done wrong is punished, whether captured by a hero or run over by a train of comeuppance. The cynical serial killer comedy is surely one with far more gruesome detail than its counterparts—*The Bone Collector*, *Silence of the Lambs*, etc—it disgusts its readers and no one pays. What are we to do with if we have been implicated as Allué suggests and have so little resolution. The visceral sense of being abused and abandoned by a text would sit well, I suspect, with Diogenes.

Heathers, by its similarly troubling and morbid subject matter, takes the critiques offered by Dartington and Illouz further as well, suggesting the insincerity of relationships has broken free of the marketplace of T.V. and is everywhere the norm, among friends, students and teachers, families, entire towns. Even in extraordinarily potent emotional situations, there is seldom a hint of a genuine affective connection. Despite their great many differences and even their shared excesses of violence, this suspicion—that the public self forged in private interest can achieve little of value to human experience—is the most powerful commonality among *My Amputations*, *Heathers*, and *American Psycho*.

Cynicism

In the 1970s therapeutic discourses converted the social into the personal. The influential Transactional Psychology book of 1969, *I'm OK—You're OK* explicitly argues that the path to a more just society is through the well-adapted self.⁹⁵ Thomas Harris, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow worked hard to convince post-60s America that change continued to be possible if we engaged in therapeutic practices of self-realization. For this, the individual would be key. As Illouz argues, popular therapeutic practices asked us to take our emotions out of context to view them with a clear eye. It was not inevitable, however, that this kind of purposeful disassociation would lead to the preponderance of marketized, insincere emotional interplay that Dartington describes and which these artistic works amplify in their exaggerated depictions of characters who don't distinguish among commodities. The free-floating nature of emotions as therapeutic

⁹⁵ Harris proposes that the “American myth seems to me to be grounded in the We're OK—You're Not OK position.” (261) The examples of interactions throughout the book often feature racial slurs and sample prejudices best resolved by working through parent-adult-child dynamics preferably in a group setting. “Society cannot change until persons change” (267), Harris concludes, epitomizing the turn inward as a movement for social good. Harris, *I'm Ok, You're Ok; a Practical Guide to Transactional Analysis*.

objects is insufficient to explain such dire depictions of what became of the American spirit in the latter part of the century. The focus on individuals and their emotional lives—even those circulated on television—could only be imagined as this horribly corrosive and even dangerous if the very idea of individual growth were perverted by the new paranoid approach to private entitlement. Yet even as these fictional texts invite us to scoff at all this emphasis on “me,” we are actively denied access to any viable alternative.

In *Heathers*, when Veronica bursts into laughter during a public airing of feelings that very transparently glamorizes the victimhood of those suicide-adjacent, an audience may share in her ridicule. Her laugh may spur us to see the potential silliness of the practice of public emotion. But it is useful to remember that Veronica is at least an accomplice to that death and hardly a sympathetic heroine. Mason Ellis leads us through a series of false promises on the path to self-enlightenment, but, as he has little regard for others along the way, the nobility of his own quest is at best unclear. Bateman is the least subtle example of a protagonist who may shed light on the phony connections among Manhattanites by illustrating them in such monochrome with his own vacuous attention to others, but he is surely not the hero we’ve been waiting for. Critiques of therapeutic culture suggest alternative strategies for real problems; these strategies range from the call to toughen up to a plea for greater attention to shared material needs over coping strategies. Fiction, or more precisely, this strand of superlatively bleak dark humor, has no such obligation.

All three fictional texts covered here are cynical, to put it lightly, in the sense that they share a level of pessimism distinct from other comedies and works of cultural criticism of the

time.⁹⁶ Easton Ellis, defending his novel and demeaning a decade, told a *Rolling Stone* interviewer in 1991: “The Eighties seemed to me to be a very ugly decade, and this was what I came away with. And it's an ugly book.”⁹⁷ Indeed. These works, for all their aesthetic acuity, paint three very ugly representations of their times and the people in them. Yet, I wish to suggest a more exacting definition of cynicism as a means to frame the work these texts do to undermine the manifestations of public therapeutic practice in the era of private gain. This cynicism is not merely dark or hopeless. It is the laughing refusal to engage in a discussion of moral truth. This brand of cynicism is not itself an affect but a denial of the very call to perform emotional experience itself.

Such a characterization of cynicism as repudiation can be found in the contemporaneous philosophical work of Peter Sloterdijk. One central objective of Sloterdijk’s *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983) is to distinguish the cynicism of the contemporary period, one of “pervasive malaise and discontent in contemporary culture” from the ancient cynicism practiced by Diogenes of Sinope which has at its center laughter and irreverence.⁹⁸ Diogenes’ major contributions to philosophical debates of the time were interruptive.⁹⁹ “In *kynismos*” Sloterdijk writes, “a kind of argumentation was discovered that, to the present day, respectable thinking

⁹⁶ Comedic novels of the mid-eighties would include, for example, the more silly than satirical works of Douglas Adams and Garrison Keilor’s sweet and earnest *Lake Wobegone Days*. Popular comedic films of the mid-eighties include *Spaceballs*, *Three Amigos*, *Roxanne*. Satire is an element of all these works and yet they are decidedly “light.”

⁹⁷ Love, “Bret Easton Ellis: Psycho Analysis.”

⁹⁸ Andreas Hussyen, “Introduction,” in *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 9.

⁹⁹ As a 5th century BC figure, much of what we know of Diogenes is pieced together and open to interpretation. By way of his influence he is meant to have established the philosophical field of cynicism almost entirely biographically. He is said to have believed that there was no place for abstract philosophy; he would only assert his values through actual living. He was ascetic to the extreme, living—the story goes—in a large clay pot.

does not know how to deal with.”¹⁰⁰ These methods of argumentation include not only practical philosophy through willful poverty, but the renouncement of ideology (Sophic, Platonic, of any sort) via public defecation, well-timed farting, and purportedly attending the academe so as to masturbate during the lectures of his philosophical rivals. For Sloterdijk, the 1980s represent a breaking point in which progressive counters to conservative ideology have so clearly and utterly failed that the bodily rejection of dominant thought is the only remaining recourse.¹⁰¹

For Sloterdijk, the eighties are the era of critical exhaustion. When even self-making has become reified and exploitable, the self must turn to this special kind of cynicism. In the defense against the encroaching commodification of the very feelings of the human subject, cynicism marks, not the first defense—surely these things were contested in the 1920s, in the 1960s—but the very last, the point when direct ideological critique is no longer expected to be of material consequence even by those framing it. There is no evidence to suggest that the fictional texts I have selected fall deliberately within the tradition of cynic philosophy; to view them through this cynical lens is, rather, to better see the positive force of these otherwise largely negative works.

I am thereby defining cynical humor as afforded by a confluence of those developments in therapy, politics, and economic culture already discussed and the aesthetic and ideological

¹⁰⁰ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* [Kritik der zynischen Vernunft], trans. Michael Eldred, 5 ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), 101. From the Greek, κυνισμός, Sloterdijk translates this school of philosophy to Kynismós, a differentiation in spelling meant to distinguish this school of thought from more modern definitions of “cynicism.” As this section clearly refers to Sloterdijk’s use of the term, I will maintain the traditional English spelling.

¹⁰¹ First published in 1983 in German and 1987 in English, *Critique of Cynical Reason* speaks, often rather specifically, to a “huge range of cultural phenomena” gathered from German life. (William D. Desmond, *Cynics, Ancient Philosophies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 235. Yet, as Andreas Huyssen writes in the introduction to the translation, Sloterdijk sets out to critique cynicism in “local traditions and politics” but the practices he describes are “as much a reality today in the United States as in West Germany or, for that matter France.” To an ever more globalized neoliberal Western world Sloterdijk means to offer cynicism “as a counter strategy, as the only form of subversive reason left after the failure and broken promises of ideology critique in the tradition of Western Marxism.” Huyssen, “Introduction,” 9-10.

commitments of postmodernism. I want to be careful to present the notion of cross-affordances in its full complexity. Cynical humor is not the wily offspring of static or concrete parent-concepts. Cave writes that to think with affordances is to make “the essential move from a formalistic type of analysis to a dynamic, agent driven, purpose-directed perspective, where ‘genre’, for example is considered as a pool of resources, accumulated over centuries and constantly renewed, adapted, manipulated, transformed by skillful instrument makers.”¹⁰² Even the premise of postmodernism as a genre with certain conventions is thereby a moving target. And yet, we can locate in these works of cynical humor many of its identifying markers as they come to bear on the question of emotional selfhood. Cynicism as Sloterdijk describes is something of a particular kind of postmodernism (even if Sloterdijk himself denies it). The cynical laugh brings the embodiment of the Bakhtinian grotesque and a Diogenic irreverence into the mix with such common traits of the postmodern condition as the denial of progress, the insufficiencies of language, and the accumulation of meanings in the absence of a more unified grand narrative.

The features of cynicism common to these texts are the employment of humor as, or in the place of, critique and a clever evasion of drawing moral conclusions.¹⁰³ “Ancient cynicism” Sloterdijk argues was “in principle cheeky.”¹⁰⁴ He goes on to explain this curious term as etymologically complex. It is “only in the last few centuries [that] the word ‘cheeky’ gained a

¹⁰² Cave, *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism*, 39.

¹⁰³ Like the philosophy Sloterdijk is contemporaneously producing, these works present perspectives in which “moralism and amoralism are [. . .] curiously inverted. The former, although it has good intentions encourages the climate of negativity; the latter, although it acts so foolishly or sinisterly, elevates morale considerably. And this amoral good humor is what must attract us as enlighteners onto the pre-Christian, the cynical terrain.” (Sloterdijk 165).

¹⁰⁴ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 101.

negative connotation. Initially, as for example in Old High German, it meant a productive aggressivity, letting fly at the enemy: brave, bold, lively, plucky, untamed, ardent.”¹⁰⁵ By this definition, cheekiness maintains its ties to humor but specifically the sort of good-humored hubris, observable, for instance, in the character of David facing Goliath.¹⁰⁶ To understand the role of cheekiness as ‘productive’ is not to confuse it with a witty, directly engaged form of satire. As William Desmond explains, Sloterdijk understands the cheek of the cynic as an embodied commentary which could both incite laughter and effectively produce ridicule: “They did not argue with tyrants, but laughed, danced capers and farted at all self-appointed authorities.”¹⁰⁷ The characterization of cynic humor as, frankly, crass, seems at first at odds with the traditionally cerebral sub-genre of dark comedy.

Major’s, Lehmann’s and Easton Ellis’s works are darkly humorous to the extent that they are funny at all. Wes D. Gehring sums these boundaries up in stating that “black humor neither embraces the personality comedy genre of Jerry Lewis nor parody as redefined by Mel Brooks,” the latter of which would surely be the preferred source of fart jokes.¹⁰⁸ This may well be simply a way in which the absurdly Romantic figure of a monocle wearing Winona Ryder in *Heathers*, the mildly comic and deeply ironic near indecipherability of *My Amputations*, or the disturbing

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 103.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Desmond, *Cynics*, 235.

¹⁰⁸ Wes D. Gehring, *American Dark Comedy : Beyond Satire*, Contributions to the Study of Popular Culture, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 112.

references to Lassie and Ted Bundy uttered by an unhinged Bateman, part ways from the form of humor Sloterdijk values in cynic philosophy.¹⁰⁹

At the same time, if dark humor, as cynical humor, expresses a vision of self and society against the grain of a normalizing force, then as such norms deviate over time, the most subversive means by which comedy can meet them must shift in kind. Gehring sees the preponderance of dark comedy in the twentieth century as directly resultant of the influence of two powerful ideas of the time: “While Darwin’s work destroyed belief in a rational, God-centered universe, Freud effectively called into question the possibility of even not being in control of one’s own mind. Both represent fertile ground for dark comedy.”¹¹⁰ While certainly the foundations of evolutionary theory and psychoanalytic thought continue to be so anxiety-producing that they make space for darkly comic visions of limited agency, I would counter that by the late eighties public discourse surrounding therapeutic culture has so prized the ever-improving individual that some comedic enterprises begin to find the apprehension requisite for unsettling humor, not in fears of a self or society too chaotic to control, but in the form of an overly managed and manageable subjectivity. It is the over-examined life that has become not worth living.

¹⁰⁹ The distinction between cynical humor and the farce, for example, is also a matter of interest to delineating the lines between modernist and postmodernist aesthetic commitments. Jameson claims that when a culture had lost its linguistic and cultural common ground, “that is the moment at which pastiche appears and parody has become impossible.” Parody, which of necessity maintains its love for the object it mocks and makes a moralistic point, relies upon the aesthetic identifiability that objects of modernism promised (i.e. in the writing styles of Hemingway or the like). The pastiche doesn’t quite go for the laugh or the betterment of society that satire would imply. It is “blank parody; parody that has lost its sense of humor.” Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism: Second Edition*, ed. V.B. and Cain Leitch, W.E. (W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 1849.

¹¹⁰ Gehring, *American Dark Comedy : Beyond Satire*, 165.

My Amputations might suggest something nearer to Gehring's nervous laughter at the uncontrollable drives and foundations of man or society, if it were clear that Mason Ellis's journey toward self-identification—spanning several countries, under the guise of numerous masks, constituted of innumerable lies, and so blatantly inconsistent with the laws or logic of any one reality that the man ultimately serves more as narrative stooge and genre jumper than a character of flesh and concern to any audience—is in fact intended to express any semblance of faith in the possibility of a unified self. There is little to critique of Freudian or Darwinian determinacy if the underlying threat of both is rejected. To fear the chaos of a life led by an unwieldy unconscious or tooth and claw forces beyond one's control, is first to accept the premise that it is necessary or desirable to feel in control of one's self. As *My Amputations* progresses it is, however, the promise of ever being wholly one's self, rather than the pitfalls of the journey toward that self, that is increasingly exposed to be the joke.

The narrative indecipherability I speak of is perhaps better described by Stuart Klawans when he states that as readers, “we must pick [our] way through the pieces,” knowing that “at any moment, the people we were so busy with might disappear.”¹¹¹ This is because this chapterless, never indented, segmented only by extra page space ‘novel’ sees Mason relocated in time and space with no warning. Unlike most novels subject to such seemingly whimsical arrangement, however, the sense of whiplash in *My Amputations* is not reserved for readers alone. Mason appears to register being yanked around by the text:

It was midnight and somehow he hadn't gotten very far: hadn't he been trying to cross Piazza Saint Giovanni since noon? Had time caved in on him? Sunlight at one point—now a full moon?

¹¹¹ Stuart Klawans, “‘I Was a Weird Example of Art’: *My Amputations* as Cubist Confession,” *African American review* 28, no. 1 (1994): 77.

[. . .]

What had set him off? Bartoli's question: "Are you for real?"¹¹²

This moment of total displacement, and others like it, can be attributed to Mason's not infrequent inebriation or habitual bouts of paranoia; yet it is not the first or last time the story will seem to dictate his reality.

Where the text meets Mason is where he begins. Even though we know Mason is a fictional character, he seemingly does not and is therefore rather surprised and horrified that when the narrator ceases to write him, he ceases to be. As Klawans keenly observes:

This is not the first time that a fictional character has claimed the right to an independent existence. This is, however, the most troubled relationship between a writer and his fictional double [. . .]. How fortunate for Mason that he is wrong about his own existence—he is the object of the text, and so he can't really be harmed.¹¹³

Mason, desperate to self-actualize, is just a story. Major takes the preoccupation that terrorizes Mason at every stage regarding the unsolvable mystery of who can or cannot claim the identity of author and turns it on himself, suggesting that in his inevitable failure to construct a whole Mason, the Narrator is exposed as himself equally and interchangeably manufactured and unknowable. The futility of both narrator and character is the peak of cynicism, cynicism specifically for the increasingly standard cultural compulsion to see the self as ultimately realizable or as Frederic Jameson describes it, the strong post-structuralist and postmodern theory that "not only is the bourgeois individual subject a thing of the past, it is also a myth; it *never* really existed in the first place."¹¹⁴

¹¹² Major, *My Amputations : A Novel*, 137.

¹¹³ Klawans, "'I Was a Weird Example of Art': My Amputations as Cubist Confession," 84.

¹¹⁴ Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society " 1850, emphasis in original. Original publication 1988.

The similarly doomed attempts to self-actualize experienced by *Heathers*' protagonist Veronica Sawyer echo the disillusionment Major portrays. Perhaps few scenes could better counter Gehring's claim that "the [dark comedy] genre's movement seems as much about the disintegration of the individual as the disintegration of the society" than the serene, redundant, well kempt croquet lawns of Sherwood, Ohio.¹¹⁵ The vision of high school and small-town middle American life in this film is both wholly depressing and entirely run-of-the-mill. Veronica is entirely successful at doing her "job," which she describes as "being popular and shit." Yet success is of the essence of her problem. Being a good daughter and loyal friend in a family and social circle, each oppressively normal and deeply hypocritical, sends Veronica toward a more Freudian drive-oriented and not wholly knowable vision of self. While one cannot truly argue that she resolves her problems, it is only in the reintroduction of chaos that she at least seems joyful.¹¹⁶

A life of intention is largely the joke of both *My Amputations* and *American Psycho* as well, though in strikingly different ways. While Ellis and Bateman share their ultimate irrelateability, Ellis's problem ultimately stems from the limitations to his capacity to self-narrate. As for Bateman, there is no other voice in *American Psycho*.¹¹⁷ Like the many born rich, ivy-educated, successful, white men of eighties Manhattan, including his many times mentioned

¹¹⁵ Gehring, *American Dark Comedy : Beyond Satire*, 166.

¹¹⁶ As evidence to Veronica's success as of the essence of her failure, *Heathers* demonstrates the breakdown of communication between Veronica and her perfectly pleasant, rich, oblivious parents. The three repeat the same dialogue on a variety of occasions, each concluding with Veronica's sendoff: "Great pate, but I have-ta motor if..." she is going to make it to wherever she is headed. Whether meeting her friends or attending their funerals, the conversation is the same. In the final scene of the film, we see Veronica covered in ash, having narrowly thwarted death, seemingly a bit pleased with herself for the first time.

¹¹⁷ Self-obsession is a problem not just for teenagers, but for those whose claims to selfhood will not be recognized, as in the case of Mason Ellis, and for those whose claims to selfhood will, as evidenced by Patrick Bateman, never be questioned.

personal hero Donald Trump, Bateman is entirely the author of his own circumstance.¹¹⁸ This is in fact, largely the problem of him. Having everything at arm's reach has only served to make him furious at the slightest disappointment, envious of minor oneupmanships. His religious devotion to self-improvement emerges as the cause of his dissolution. Even though Mason Ellis lives far from a universe of his own making, the well-cared for and self-aware identity is no better represented in *My Amputations*. It is in the desire for an orderly life that Ellis becomes a literal impostor.¹¹⁹

As such, these characters suffer less the move toward selfhood against the forces of Freudian urges or Darwinian-borne fear of animalistic nature, than they resent the premise that they should necessarily be required to 'be someone' in the Maslovian sense of becoming complete, actualized, recognizable. I mean to suggest that what these comedies offer is afforded both by the cynical postmodern surrender to a regrettably fractured self and a cynical strategy of laughter. As it is understood by Henri Bergson, laughter could well be the perfect instrument to counter the pervasive movement of self-help and diminish the sway of a highly emotional and morally loaded politic.

Bergson lays out several conditions and prerequisites for what constitutes a laugh.¹²⁰ Laughter, for Bergson, finds its audience by addressing shared aspects of life and thereby is, by

¹¹⁸Bateman acknowledges as much in a moment of further reflection on the indistinguishability of guys like him. Wondering about the inner workings of the life of a colleague, which he supposes, "is really the world of most of us [. . .] boy meets the world, boy gets it." Ellis, *American Psycho : A Novel*, 384.

¹¹⁹ An alternative reading of *My Amputations* sees Mason Ellis as the genuine author who has either violently reclaimed his life and then spun out of control or was never in fact two distinct person but only Claude McKay whose imposter syndrome has grown so complete as to manifest a new personality in his own mind. None of these readings, however, reflect well on the promise of mental health.

¹²⁰ The laugh is of its nature human, because while we may laugh at a hat, it is the human impact on the hat that strikes us as funny (9). A cat might be hilarious, but not he argues, of its own accord. In so much as it is

its very definition, implicated in the discussion of how social life does, can, or ought to happen. Yet even as laughter takes on this heuristic responsibility within a civilization, Bergson determines that while laughter must be socially significant, it is also, with few exceptions, devoid of emotion.¹²¹ Bergson's insistence that laughter is "usually [accompanied]" by an "*absence of feeling*" is key to understanding how *My Amputations*, *Heathers* and *American Psycho* manage to be anti-therapeutic works.¹²² For Bergson, the absence of emotion is not so much a part of the comedic scene depicted as it is a curious "symptom" experienced by he who laughs.¹²³

One of the ways in which *Heathers* avoids any particularly emotional engagement on the part of the viewer is by undermining our opportunities to sympathize. This is most evident in the scenes of community response to the multiple teen murders (passed off as suicides with very minimal effort). The scene of Heather Chandler's funeral, as example, has truly little to do with anything resembling genuine grief. It is outwardly more or less ordinary, yet is portrayed through a series of almost entirely self-serving monologues, each with something they want from their audience. The priest uses it as an opportunity to sell Sherwood's teens on that "Righteous Dude" Jesus Christ. The stream of internal monologues at Heather's coffin make extraneous requests as in Peter's pitch for "fast early acceptance to an Ivy League School and please let it be Harvard." Heather Duke similarly imagines her prayer has an audience who has come to recognize God owed her one by offing Heather Chandler. Ram goes so far as to imagine his God-audience as

anthropomorphized it is humorous (9). Tied to the human-centric perception that humans must employ to find comedy, "laughter must [also] answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have social signification" (Bergson 13).

¹²¹ Henri Bergson, *Laughter : An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* ([CreateSpace], 2015), 9.

¹²² *ibid.* emphasis in original

¹²³ *ibid.*

hostile, following his vulgar thoughts with “Hey man, it’s a joke!” Veronica too concludes her prayer with direct address, this in the form of a question: “Did that sound bitchy?” This sample goes from academically ambitious to socially ambitious, moronic, and finally narcissistically self-conscious.

Self-absorption is certainly not a new trait to attribute to the teen mind, but the successive images in which between camera and subject a corpse lies to be ignored elevates the critique of self-involvement. The sheer pageantry and absurdity of the funerals function, like several other elements in the film, to make its condemnation all the louder by not only portraying a community inured to and even a bit aroused by the notion of teen suicide, but by simultaneously projecting this failure of empathy onto its audience. There is no love lost for Heather Chandler and there is no moment of reflection or abatement of comedy in which to foster a more general sympathy, if only for the idea of young death. By not allowing you to feel much at all, *Heathers* troubles the means by which you might feel superior.¹²⁴ *Heathers*’ sense of humor and its capacity to alienate its audience aren’t separate elements of the film. It is a nervous, squeamish, self-conscious laugh the film looks for. It asks us to share in its callousness, to be made uncomfortable, and to find our own failing sympathies at least vaguely funny.

¹²⁴ This is not to say that the film lacks depictions of emotion. On the contrary, it is, true to the teen genre, a torrent of hormones run amuck. Veronica, for instance, begins as anything but aloof. She is, as Gehring describes a Rousseauian figure, scribbling furiously in her diary her daily dramas. Yet, the emotional scale of these scenes decreases throughout the course of the movie so that while Ryder depicts the purging of complaints about the humiliation suffered by her friend Heather Chandler in a complete frenzy, it is with relative calm that she later confesses to her journal: “Dear diary, my teen angst bullshit now has a body count.” It is through this admission, furthermore, that a more general mistrust of emotional expression is conveyed, since it was anger and lust that led Veronica to join forces with the “Mephistopheles figure” JD (Gehring 110) in the first place, but it will be only when she — cool, collected, expressionless — lights her cigarette with the flames of her exploded ex-boyfriend that Veronica will muster the self-confidence to be, in a sense, her own person. It is a stretch, a meaningful one, to argue that this film prescribes any action or attitude at all. While it may not provide a positive intervention, it does an extremely good job of answering ‘no’ to the means of managing difficult emotions (such as those that might lead a teen to suicide or even murder) popular in its day.

In the same vein, but with even greater unease, *American Psycho* mixes horror and absurdity so closely, one can forget it's a comedy at all. It is easy enough, for example, in the endless listing of things to be had, to take little notice of how nauseating the barrage of expensive food is. A single meal contains: "the shad-roë ravioli with apple compote as an appetizer and the meatloaf with chevre and quail-stock sauce for an entrée. She orders the red snapper with violets and pine nuts for an appetizer and a peanut butter soup with smoked duck and mashed squash."¹²⁵ Like the upscale people of Easton Ellis's Manhattan, the food is trying altogether too hard. The joke is, like everything in the book, redundant to the point of annoyance. We get a bit habituated to both the insane cuisine itself and to the obvious mockery of pretentious restaurant faire.

As largely unfunny as the novel is, the unfeeling laughs of *American Psycho*, stand out as fleeting reprieves from the rather intense emotions it seems to otherwise solicit. The power of feeling summoned by the book is evident in its controversial publication. There is no denying that the level of violence generally and sexual violence in particular is truly overwhelming. Even for those who understood Bateman as a villain, the question of why a reader should be subjected to so much gore in so much detail loomed large. Yet the book is infuriating on a number of levels and, for the purposes of this chapter, I am more interested in how they work together. There is so much monotony. It is, in Easton Ellis's own words, intensely "boring."¹²⁶ In turns, it is stomach-flipping and nightmare-inducing. As a first-person narrative, written by one driven by a kind of blind and meaningless rage, however, such abuse of the audience seems intended to induce us to something approximating his frame of mind. When Bateman confesses, "I found myself sobbing

¹²⁵ Ellis, *American Psycho : A Novel*, 77.

¹²⁶ Love, "Bret Easton Ellis: Psycho Analysis."

during an episode of *Alf* on Monday,” we don’t learn to like him, but we are given a second to stop hating or fearing him.¹²⁷ As something risible, he grows a bit more distant. The laugh lets us take the novel in by stepping, for a short moment, out of our emotional entanglement with it.

Even as the tension between private and public plays out often rather humorously and never with a pleasant result within the plot of *My Amputations*, it is again, the relation of character to author that is of greater interest. In this regard, the public to which a private life is prostrated is the reading public. Through recurrent incongruities, the form Major employs, and the gradual reveal that when Mason Ellis believes that the MRF has constructed a design for him “terrifying in its connections” he is, as a work of fiction, utterly correct, Major conveys that his character is at every moment in his, in our, hands.¹²⁸ Mason Ellis, therefore, though seeking desperately a permanent hold on his identity, is unlike the people of Sherwood, Ohio in that he is less a person working to objectify feeling for public consumption, and more himself, helplessly, an object.

Still, the cynicism is on par with that of *Heathers* and *American Psycho*: at the conclusion of Mason’s violent, dehumanizing quest toward selfhood he finds only the smell of “cow rocks, turtle piss, and smoke.”¹²⁹ *Heathers* closes on the charred visage of its heroine, fresh from the explosion of her boyfriend. *American Psycho*’s concluding sentence conjures an image to suggest merely that this is not the way: a sign that reads, “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT.”¹³⁰ Sloterdijk describes the false consciousness of participating in and thereby perpetuating the very

¹²⁷ Ellis, *American Psycho : A Novel*, 386.

¹²⁸ Major, *My Amputations : A Novel*, 167.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*, 205.

¹³⁰ Ellis, *American Psycho : A Novel*, 399.

narratives one seeks to critique. The conclusions of these three narratives, however—emotionally dis-satisfying, confusing, hardly conclusive at all—illustrate the cynic’s rejection of enlightened false consciousness.

As “all grand narratives” become “suspect” in the era of postmodernism, a “general pessimism” sets in which leads in turn to enlightened false consciousness, “for the cynic knows (is 'enlightened') that reigning ideas are contingent and subjective, yet goes on acting according to them regardless ('false consciousness'). The result is internal division, unhappiness, hypocrisy and malaise,” four ideas that fairly well encapsulate all three works.¹³¹ In short, these fictional works cannot meaningfully critique the self-improvement crazed tendencies of therapy culture by seeing their despicable protagonists develop into better people. They cannot undermine the moral calling to self-fulfillment by offering up a moral of another shade. It is in this sense that their darkness is so complete and so cynical.

Still, the element of laughter offers this gloom another hue. Bergson argues that

Laughter [...] does not belong to the province of esthetics alone, since unconsciously (and even immorally in many particular instances) it pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement. And yet there is something esthetic about it, since the comic comes into being just when society and the individual, freed from the worry of self-preservation, begin to regard themselves as works of art.¹³²

As it was with *Heathers*, Mason Ellis is kept at a distance, though, here, through the failure to fully hear or believe his story and through the beautiful, funny, image-heavy, but not especially sentimental language Major employs. As a work of art, we can, Bergson tells us, view the

¹³¹ Desmond, *Cynics*, 235.

¹³² Bergson, *Laughter : An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, 23-24.

revelation that “self-preservation” is for Mason, for Bateman, for Veronica categorically impossible as opening the space for laughter.

Bergson’s most well-known philosophy of laughter is the claim that mechanization is what makes something humorous. Humor is based in the machine, or more precisely in the exaggerated metaphor of man and machine. A contorted face, an unnaturally stiff limb: these are examples of artifice in the place of nature. Bergson believes we find humor in the incongruity, in “any incident [...] that calls our attention to the physical in a person, when it is the moral side that is concerned.”¹³³ It is a useful perspective for considering three morally evasive works that meet their character’s desires for emotional and spiritual betterment instead with bodily farces.

Mason Ellis has his body reshaped and repurposed frequently throughout the text. From this, Major derives much of the book’s unsettling humor. In the “really sort of ironic” instance that Mason, in Greece finds himself invited to an American Civil War themed party (ironic, the house servant remarks, because Mason is black) he is dressed up in a tux and dubbed the “Black Faced Hermes” of the party.¹³⁴ Yet even as Major paints this party as a whirl of songs, glimpses, dances, clearly calling “our attention to the physical when it is the moral side that is concerned,” the cynicism of impossible self-governance is most strikingly revealed when Mason is without the novel’s many masks.

Mason is a striking example of the Bakhtinian grotesque, where “stress is laid on the parts of the body [. . .] through which the body itself goes out to meet the world”:¹³⁵ “the genital

¹³³ *ibid.*, 50.

¹³⁴ Major, *My Amputations : A Novel*, 167.

¹³⁵ M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968), 21.

organ, the belly and the buttocks.”¹³⁶ Yet, much like Rabelaisian carnival, the boundary between celebration of the abject and the move to violence is easy to cross. In a gesture of sexual provocation, Edna Coddington “[squeezes] his cock and balls together in one big grip.”¹³⁷ Two women on two occasions give Mason the “damned washing ritual,” one, he suspects, “to give him pleasure,” the other to “clinically [inspect] it.”¹³⁸ A young student he sleeps with decides he is not the author but The Impostor because he is too small to be the same man.¹³⁹ Even the moon “[has] him by the balls.”¹⁴⁰ As he is not an especially sympathetic character, Mason’s moments of bodily degradation maintain some element of perverse humor. At the same time, these scenes serve to demonstrate how, down to his skin, Mason is claimed and handled and not the master of the destiny of even his most intimate self.

Sloterdijk, in the tradition of Diogenes, claims that “to take what is base, separated, private out onto the street is subversive.”¹⁴¹ This view of the body as inherently political and yet above the influence of politics is at odds both with Mason’s experiences of objectification and with a great deal of twentieth century philosophy, such as when Bourdieu claims that the practice of habit formation “articulated in gestures” renders the body even “more ambiguous and more overdetermined” than the practice of language¹⁴² or in the move to understand the “body itself as

¹³⁶ *ibid.*

¹³⁷ Major, *My Amputations : A Novel*, 61.

¹³⁸ *ibid.*, 120.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*, 70.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 82.

¹⁴¹ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 105.

¹⁴² Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 120.

historical construct” with “layers of reification and power inscriptions which Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault have so cogently analyzed.”¹⁴³ As a work of cynicism, Major’s depiction of mistreatment of the body as public commodity can be seen as just this, in the service of criticizing “the way in which sexuality, the body, the corporeal have been deployed instrumentalized, and co-opted by the contemporary culture industry.”¹⁴⁴ From a cynical perspective we might, however, add to this that “by paying attention to what can be embodied, we remain protected from moral demagoguery and from the terror of radical abstractions that cannot be lived out”¹⁴⁵ not necessarily because the body lies beyond the boundaries of ideological influence, but because in resisting ““linguistification”¹⁴⁶ it can decline to enter into a conversation with “the consumer-focused therapeutic discourse” that is “not about a psychodynamic understanding of people interdependently relating to the world they are in,” but “rather a defense against that understanding.”¹⁴⁷

Cynical philosophy is in many ways more of a refusal to budge than a movement as we typically understand the term. Diogenes and his followers are for some perhaps the first and most “perfect rebels: they had no cause because they knew that today’s cause becomes tomorrow’s orthodoxy.”¹⁴⁸ In the place of moral crusade or intellectual indulgence, “they simply startled

¹⁴³ Hussyen, “Introduction,” 17.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 102.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Dartington, “The Therapeutic Fantasy,” 186. The narrator of *My Amputations* is particularly aware of how ill-equipped the drive to self understanding has left Mason for the actual life he leads. ““When moving into the wilderness,” he comments on Mason’s rush to the Ivory Coast, “one should take along more than a passionate search for self” (192).

¹⁴⁸ Desmond, *Cynics*, 236.

people back to the body.”¹⁴⁹ Whatever we want to make of the merits of the novel, this is a description that applies rather well to *American Psycho*. Norman Mailer reviewed the novel to the conclusion that it was not especially good, but was necessary in its shock value. While the merits of this shock as an intellectual exercise are debatable, the return to the visceral, as subject matter and reading experience, is undeniable.

Even though *Heathers* is less invested in a narrative of bodily function than *My Amputations* or *American Psycho*, it is neither shy on corpses nor invested in the dominant ideological language of its time, “the discourse of corporate selfhood.”¹⁵⁰ There are a few ways language fails in the film.¹⁵¹ Beyond empty and redundant, beyond inept at conveying genuine emotion, the language of the film sometimes enters the realm of the utterly meaningless. An adjectival phrase (Is it an insult? A compliment?) of choice for the popular clique, for example, is “How Very.” As Gehring explains, this “teenspeak discourages empathy with the Heathers (because they are kept foreign).”¹⁵²

Bateman is an alien from the island of Saks. But Easton Ellis’s prose doesn’t so much slip out of our grasp as it drowns us in signification. While I don’t wish to assume a universal readership, it is difficult to comprehend an individual who would or could truly read every word

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Illouz, *Cold Intimacies : The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, 16.

¹⁵¹ And in such failure, represent an opportunity for violence. As Roz Kaveney explains, Veronica’s wish to make Heather Chandler “‘puke her guts out’ is verbally ambiguous enough that he (J.D.) can exploit it.” (62). Language is here as it is with the villainous Chandler a weapon. J.D. uses it to twist the intentions of his girlfriend. The Heathers use it to abuse their classmates. And so on. An over-reliance on language to convey meaning is not only doomed to fail (because opportunities to manipulate and misconstrue abound) it is also dangerous. Kaveney, *Teen Dreams : Reading Teen Film from Heathers to Veronica Mars*.

¹⁵² Gehring, *American Dark Comedy : Beyond Satire*, 111.

of *American Psycho*. The lists keep coming and coming and just as we drift off, something unspeakable happens. It is a metaphor surely for an inured state of living in the 1980s. It is also a formal strategy of alienation in a text that would stand to betray the totality of its cynicism were it to let us find any comfort in the act of reading. It is almost as if Easton Ellis in 1991 speaks directly to the question Jameson posed in 1988: "What would happen if one no longer believed in the existence of normal language, of ordinary speech, of the linguistic norm?" Jameson offers his own reply, that "perhaps the intense fragmentation and privatization of modern literature –its explosion into a host of distinct private styles and mannerisms—foreshadows deeper and more general tendencies in social life as a whole."¹⁵³ Easton Ellis is every bit as cynical about the possibilities of language which he has quite literally privatized through the rehashing of a million-and-one brand names. Bateman's language incessant self-referentiality leads to a social reality every bit as vacuous and impossible as Jameson fears.

Heathers, *My Amputations* and *American Psycho* fall at least in part into the cynic tradition in that, in turning their back on the sufficiency of language, they disavow any allegiance to the assertion that the public semantic airing of emotions will bring the self to a place of completion. Yet it is not only the language in the works, interrupted, downplayed, or indecipherable, that serves this end. It is also the ways in which both film and novels leave their readers at a loss for words, at least in response to their humor.

Of cynical laughter Desmond claims, "such elemental glee and irrepressible laughter cannot be spun into a sinister, grand narrative because it is non-verbal and transcends narrative

¹⁵³ Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society " 1849.

per se.”¹⁵⁴ While hardly glee-full, I would argue that laughter produced through darkly comedic works such as these is even more equipped to undermine the grand narrative, as it delivers the kind of laughter that not only cannot be translated into speech itself, but is too nervous and inappropriate to be sufficiently, openly spoken of.

These works further endorse a cynical perspective in that, even in the company of rather amoralistic works of the post-modern period, they stand out as lacking any didactic stance whatsoever. This is not to say that in their humor they cannot ridicule, but that beyond such ridicule they offer little or no prescription. These three fictive works meet at an intersection of affordances from the history of therapy, the Diogenic/Cynical laugh, the political exhaustion of the 1980s and this anti-ideology so important to postmodern thinking. Lyotard cites Adorno’s now famous use of “the name Auschwitz to point out the irrelevance of empirical matter, the stuff of recent past history, in terms of the modern claim to help mankind to emancipate itself.”¹⁵⁵ The critique of progress is not simply that it has plainly—as evidenced by the existence of a place called Auschwitz—failed to occur thus far, but that faith that it was part and parcel of the project of modernization has been exposed as a lie. In its place we find only “complexification” and “accumulation” of the sort of fashioned emotional self these novels seek to expose. They expose the emptiness, but just as meaningfully, refuse to replace it with a now powerless notion of moral progress.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Desmond, *Cynics*, 236.

¹⁵⁵ Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Defining the Postmodern," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism: Second Edition*, ed. V.B. and Cain Leitch, W.E. (W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 1467. Originally published in 1986. The notion of the “grand narrative” is also Lyotard’s term.

¹⁵⁶ This critique of progress as a common goal will be important again in the final chapter of this dissertation that turns to the project of artificial intelligence.

What possible moral could be extracted from the manufactured meanderings of Mason Ellis that do not so much conclude as simply cease to be told? Even within the relatively ‘happy ending’ of Veronica reclaiming her life at the close of *Heathers*, there is cause to believe that she has turned against her murderous boyfriend, “retiring from her Bonnie and Clyde union with J.D.” with little explanation beyond her “realization that the popular and yet cruel students she and JD killed all ended up being praised in martyrdom.”¹⁵⁷ There is perhaps some ethic, if not simply vengeful satisfaction, to witnessing JD blowing up himself instead of his fellow students, but to his final speech on the inevitable fame and tragic import that would be piled onto “the ashes of Westborough High” Veronica and the film offer no reply. He may not succeed, but at no point does the script offer hope or virtue enough to argue against J.D.’s pessimistic view of society.

“The lack of any form of moral, political or aesthetic redemption in the narrative is precisely the literary value of the work,” writes Georgina Colby on the subject of *American Psycho* and its detractors.¹⁵⁸ The final feature of the triad is especially telling. Colby is claiming, on the heels of Timothy Bewes, that the irreconcilable fissures of the text, its aesthetic incongruity, is central to its denial of moral promise. Bateman is “unreliable,” he “cannot exist.”¹⁵⁹ The story is too outrageous and incongruous to be seriously argued as condemning much of anything. For Colby, this is what makes it unique as a literary artifact. For me, this is what binds it to *Heathers* and to *My Amputations*. This is what makes them cynical.

¹⁵⁷ Gehring, *American Dark Comedy : Beyond Satire*, 115.

¹⁵⁸ Colby, *Bret Easton Ellis : Underwriting the Contemporary*, 61.

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*

Not An Exit

In her book *The Politics of Abandonment*, Elizabeth Povinelli takes a position against the “fundamental rule of scholarship,” that “every critical social analysis must have a normative horizon against which progressive action and social movements can be assessed.”¹⁶⁰ She offers instead series of arguments for an ethics of “not this.”¹⁶¹ In the midst of a decade heavy with talk of morality and of what one and all must do to be complete and well, I submit that *My Amputations*, *Heathers*, and *American Psycho* “dance a caper,” rather than play along. Like Sloterdijk and Diogenes before her, Povinelli insists that in so doing “what appears to be a radically empty gesture [...] is revealed to be a positive act.”¹⁶²

Furthermore, cynical reason would suggest that the two streams of thought which I argue these works contest—the morally tinged pull to private interest typified by the rhetoric emanating from and around president Reagan and “the Maslovian ideal of self-actualization” which while “including a capacity for relationships, [...] fails to recognize that the individual is also a product of his group identity”¹⁶³—when put into contact with one another, fall apart. Sloterdijk states what “where moralism is, fright necessarily dominates—as the spirit of self-denial and fright excludes happiness.”¹⁶⁴ The cloth banner draped behind Pauline Fleming in the high school cafeteria reads, “The New Happiness.” So long as such happiness is rooted in the

¹⁶⁰ Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment : Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 189.

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*

¹⁶² *ibid.*

¹⁶³ Dartington, “The Therapeutic Fantasy,” 193.

¹⁶⁴ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 126.

private enterprise of personal recognition, whether as a moral authority or simply as a validated emotional subject, the cynical perspective suggests that happiness remains fantasy. It may, however, be viscerally, furtively experienced in moments in which “all ‘little’ people” feel “the urge to stick out their tongues at the whole of politics”¹⁶⁵ and laugh.

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 106.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FAMILY WELL

BIOMYTHOGRAPHY AND THE DEPTHS OF FEMININE FEELING

Each shape or pattern, social or literary, lays claim to a limited range of potentialities.

Caroline Levine¹

The commonplace of the emotional woman is available in Western cultures in a variety of genres, from television melodramas to news reporting, from novels to pharmaceutical advertising campaigns. Importantly, this topos encodes a number of understandings and beliefs: that women are ruled by volatile emotions (not only do women feel more emotions, they experience them more forcefully and have less control over them than men do); that such emotions can, and often do, slip across invisible boundaries into illness (hysteria, mania, depression, premenstrual dysphoric disorder); and that these emotions define femininity itself.

Kimberly Emmons²

¹ Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, 6.

² Kimberly Emmons, "Narrating the Emotional Woman: Uptake and Gender in Discourses on Depression," in *Depression and Narrative: Telling the Dark*, ed. Hilary Clark (SUNY Press, 2008), 112.

Some commonplaces on the subject of femininity and emotion are so well rehearsed as to scarcely need mentioning. Women are said, for better and worse, to be more emotionally attuned, more emotionally driven, more likely to cede control of their lives to passions seemingly beyond their rational control. Through her discussion of scripts and commonplaces, linguist Kimberly Emmons explores the narrative possibilities for feminine emotional suffering. We have, she argues, a particular set of linguistic opportunities, what Levine and Terrence Cave might label *affordances*, to speak of emotional pain. The limits of this expression, however, signify not only our limits to represent, but our capacity to understand our own experience. Women may well press upon these boundaries in practice—"playing" with the rhetoric available to them—but they are ultimately "unable to tell their stories without it."³

In this chapter I approach the period between 1968 and 1995 as a moment in which such commonplaces begin to come apart. Over the course of the late twentieth century, well-worn notions in feminine emotional excess would give way to both greater investment in uncovering the social factors of feminine discontent and an increasingly medical approach to emotional management, generally and especially in the case of women.⁴ For many, an increasingly

³ *ibid.*, 122.

⁴ The tension of becoming at once more and less invested in the social factors of mental health concerns is well summarized by Charles Rosenberg when he writes, "We are in a moment of peculiar and revealing paradox, a complex and structured mix of reductionist hopes and widespread criticism of such sanguine assumptions. As a culture we are relentlessly reductionist in presuming somatic (and ultimately genetic) causation for behavior, yet at the same time we are reflexive, critical, and relativist in our approach to existing disease classifications and therapeutic modalities. We have never been more aware of the arbitrary and constructed quality of psychiatric diagnoses, yet in an era characterized by the increasingly bureaucratic management of health care and an increasingly pervasive reductionism in the explanation of normal as well as pathological behavior, we have never been more dependent on them." While Rosenberg is writing in 2006, I argue that the origins of this paradox reach well back into the last thirty years of the twentieth century. That such a dilemma should be even more urgent for women is borne out by their increased rate of diagnosis and the challenge for a historically oppressed community to draw boundaries around which of the problems they face are inborn or physical and which are better approached as fundamental flaws of our social fabric. Charles Rosenberg, "Contested Boundaries. Psychiatry, Disease, and Diagnosis," *Biology and Medicine* 49, no. 3 (2006): 130.

medicalized vision of emotional pain was both legitimizing and liberating.⁵ It meant women's experiences were being newly afforded the attention of scientific communities and were finally free of the designation of easily dismissed discontent or as the natural byproduct of women who strayed from their biological imperatives.⁶

I argue that the concomitant popularity of memoir as a genre is part of this history. The call to be recognized and acknowledged is well represented through the offering of personal life stories, many of which tell rather directly of the trials of fleeting emotional well-being. The interrelated histories of feminism and the post-war psychological boom created a space for women's stories and delimited that space in the same breath. I am in good company in locating a feminist call to recognition through memoir. In 2001 Adrienne Rich looked back upon the evolution of autobiography as a major factor in the move to make the personal political. "Feminism" she writes, "has depended heavily on the concrete testimony of individual women, a testimony that was meant to accumulate toward collective understanding and practice." She notes her own efforts to self-represent as seeming potentially "illegitimate" in 1971, only to find that "Soon thereafter, personal narrative was becoming valued as the true coin of feminist expression." According to Rich, the period this dissertation covers is precisely that time in which

⁵ Laura Hirshbein presents women's investment in depression as a diagnosis with due criticality and compassion: "While many diseases diagnosed in the past in predominantly female patient populations were often the result of enforced patriarchal authority from physicians, the story of depression is more complicated than one of bias or simple sexist views of women. Instead there has been something about the diagnosis of depression that has captured the energy and efforts of women researchers and women patients, advocates who strongly believe that increased diagnosis and treatment of depression in women helps women achieve more in their lives." Hirshbein, *American Melancholy : Constructions of Depression in the Twentieth Century*, 7.

⁶ The balance of good to harm in exploring the history of depression diagnosis and treatment is difficult to gauge not simply from theory to theory but from person to person. The claim I make here and throughout is that for good reason some women sought to move away from the dismissal of being simply "too emotional" and instead toward a potentially more dignified medical classification. Such an acknowledgment of motive on my part is neither intended to endorse nor dismiss the diagnostic category itself.

memoir is at its greatest potency. Equally relevant to my work, however, is Rich's estimation of the rapid process of decay the genre underwent, no longer ushering in a radical politics, but replacing it. "By the late 1990s, in mainstream American public discourse, personal anecdote was replacing critical argument, true confessions were foregrounding the discussion of ideas. A feminism that sought to engage race and colonialism, the global monoculture of United States corporate and military interests, the specific locations and agencies of women within all this was being countered by the marketing of a United States model of female—or feminine—self-involvement and self-improvement, devoid of political context or content."⁷ This entropy is in part why I have selected biomythography, and not the larger umbrella of autobiography, as my focus. The critique of market interference and motivation also draws an interesting parallel to the histories of consumer solutions for mental and emotional struggles critiqued in the previous chapter.

As the countercultural revolution comes to a close, women are newly able to bring forward their own narratives, only to walk right into a system of pathologization and its, at times, attending aspects of paternalism and condescension. In my review of popular and clinical sources, I find many gendered and predictable narratives of depression, "madness," and familial discord. But I also found my own hunch that mobilized the work to come: Surely these scripts of emotional life didn't suit everyone. Surely women in this period were telling their own stories against the grain.

This chapter thus seeks alternative means of scripting the emotional life of American women in a select portion of the late twentieth century. These are not tales of joy and

⁷ Adrienne Rich, *Credo of a Passionate Skeptic*, vol. 53 (2001).

overcoming to chase away the bummer of too many depression narratives. In a period marked by a push toward a knowable, treatable feminine subject, the works to follow seek to simultaneously represent and obfuscate the most intimate details of a woman's life and of her feeling. In the previous chapter, I argued that the most stinging critique of therapy culture existed in the cracks between more familiar genres of horror and humor. For this chapter, I find myself again drawn between familiar distinctions. While memoir is a nuanced and varied genre, I located the most compelling narratives to counter (in this case, midcentury) mainstream therapeutic ethos, again, in a subgenre.

I locate alternative frameworks for feminine feeling in the pages of two genre-defining works of biomythography: Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* and Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*.⁸ I will consider these fictionalized autobiographies in conversation with the figure of the knowable, treatable woman as she was conceived before and during the time of their publication and suggest that they offer alternative modes of making emotional meaning in the space of a life.⁹

⁸ Like all genre categories, the boundaries of what does and does not belong to biomythography are fluid. In her definition of the genre, Karen Weekes lists Adrienne Kennedy's, *People Who Led to My Plays* (1987); Joan Nestle's, *A Restricted Country* (1987); Cherrie Moraga's, *Loving in the War Years* (1983); Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986); and Jeanette Winterson's, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), as well as Kingston and Lorde. A natural question that arises from the inclusion of Kingston, whose work predates the coinage of the term "biomythography," is whether the term ought to then be able to stretch even further into the past. I am open to such a discovery, but would caution an emphasis on the importance of myth in any such endeavor. Plath's *The Bell Jar* stands out as a natural precursor and, I suspect, a relevant influence. Sandra Gilbert has emphasized, however, a distinct sublimating function of the monstrous mythic tropes of *The Bell Jar* and its precursors, *Frankenstein* and *Jane Eyre*, among others. I would argue that the biomythographer employs myths in the service of self-representation and, paradoxically, obfuscation; whereas, Gilbert argues that gothic myth takes the place of self-expression for a constituency not afforded the liberty of openly expressive male Romanticists Karen Weekes, "Othered Writers, Other Forms: Biomythography and Automythography," *Genre* 39, no. 2 (2006). Sandra M. Gilbert, "'A Fine, White Flying Myth': Confessions of a Plath Addict," *The Massachusetts Review* 19, no. 3 (1978). See also S.M. Gilbert and S. Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Yale University Press, 1980).

⁹ It is worth noting that many of the texts I find Lorde and Kingston in conversation with predate them: The Moynihan Report (1965), the major texts of Momism (1940s and 1950s), and certain texts in the development of

The liminal genre of biomythography is othered on a number of levels. Invented and theorized in 1982 by Audre Lorde, the set of techniques it specifies have been taken up almost exclusively by women of color and by those existing outside heteronormative expectation. Karen Weekes argues that biomythography is a genre not coincidentally but of necessity Othered: "All of these texts exhibit similar characteristics: they are fragmented and non-linear, blend fiction with myth with fact, are highly imaginative and imagistic, speak both collectively and individually, and repudiate forces that attempt to distort the protagonist's development. The result is an identity-mosaic resonant with themes of Otherness and disenfranchisement. These authors, marginalized by race, class, sexual orientation, and gender, give wholeness and meaning to lives fraught with the cracks inscribed by multiple oppressions." She further argues that while Lorde coined the term, Kingston invented the practice with *Woman Warrior*, several years prior to Lorde's formulation of a name.¹⁰

It is perhaps unsurprising that Maxine Hong Kingston or Audre Lorde would not find themselves reflected in the glossy pages of *Cosmopolitan* (a publication that dispensed advice for women's mental health fervently and frequently) or consulted in psychological and sociological tracts that sought to analyze their mental fortitude. I do not suggest that authors of biomythography set out to specifically deny the pathologies employed to describe women's emotional lives. What I argue, rather, is that they brought stories of women who, perhaps of

postwar family therapy (1950s and 1960s). The period of gestation makes sense to me. It is between 1968 and 1995 that writers are able to gain perspective on the trends that (meaningfully for an autobiography) held sway in their childhood and young adulthood, and are I suspect doubly free to reconceive these trials before new forms of organizing emotional experience have truly taken hold of popular imagination.

¹⁰ Weekes, "Othered Writers, Other Forms: Biomythography and Automythography," 344.

necessity, constructed themselves in radically disparate ways into a culture saturated by normative stories of women's pain and responsibility.

I will be presenting biomythography in context, looking to the casting of feminine hurt through popular magazines and government sponsored sociological enterprises and reading these popular representations through a history of science lens on the gendered and racialized pathologization of emotional distress. From there, I will demonstrate how the intimacies of a mythologized life put forth a counter-narrative that is neither simple nor straight-forward. In the pages of biomythography I find complex processes of identity formation, taking place within but not bound by late twentieth century expectations for the emotional lives of women.

My interest in these materials is bound by the same theory of periodization that guides the dissertation in full. Changes within therapeutic practices and the coterminous cultural shifts mark the late sixties as the start of a period I have elsewhere characterized as a gap, between the broad humanistic objectives of the post-war psychological boom and the rising individuation of an increasingly medicalized understanding of emotional life. The end date is approximated. The FDA relaxes limitations for direct-to-consumer advertising by pharmaceutical companies over the course of the 1990s. The FDA approves the game-changing SSRI, Prozac in 1987. Even the form of Depression, elevated to the status of a standalone disorder by 1980's DSM III, differs from a twenty-first century understanding. Cumulatively, however, these developments across the eighties and nineties are important portents of the present period of medicalized emotional understanding and treatment. These are the early markers of the culture of emotional life and management that continues to dominate.

There is, just after WWII, a historical period fairly well theorized, and on the other end, the early foundations of the present state of emotional understanding, taking shape between the

late eighties and late nineties. While this chapter, and this dissertation, locates itself between more robust definitions of emotional life, one should not understand this gap as a lull. It is a busy decade-plus for feminism, it sees the rise of consumer advocacy, and experimentation with a host of therapeutic methods. The period doesn't halt; it differs. The seventies and eighties, a time when much was up in the air, are thereby a good place to seek unique frameworks. My objectives are thus two-fold: to uncover in works of biomyth a critique of, but also alternatives to, dominant expectations for women's emotional lives. I pursue these aims over the course of three sections.

In "Well Women" I compare biomythographic recollections of suicide and mourning to popular representations of depression.¹¹ The surplus of information promoting depression as a central concern to women in the 1970s, and 1980s sought, mercifully, to frame mental health problems as something experienced rather than caused by American women.¹² The increasingly

¹¹ It is somewhat anachronistic to use the term "Depression," with its thick contemporary significance to refer to a mental state or medico-cultural phenomena taking place before the fuzzy end-date of my period of inquiry (late 1980s to mid-1990s). There is a concrete etymological objection: "Depression," while widely in use and a frequent symptom of other pathologies, does not appear as a discreet disorder within the Psychiatric or Psychological communities until the publication of the DSM III in 1980. To cite uses prior to that date is quite literally to refer to something else. (For a history of depression as a diagnostic category see Alain Ehrenberg's *The Weariness of the Self* and Laura Hirshbein's *American Melancholy*.) Beyond the distinction between symptom and disorder, there is the phenomenological question of how one identifies his or her own mental states in relation to medical rhetoric available at the time, indeed, how one's very condition is itself impacted by the language that can be employed to give it shape. The hard claim, then, is that while many may have suffered from something very closely resembling contemporary definitions of depression prior to 1980, as a "rhetorical disease" the experience is itself transformed by the capacities with which we speak of it. Kimberly Emmons, *Black Dogs and Blue Words : Depression and Gender in the Age of Self-Care* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

None of this should suggest, however, that there is no use in seeking depression out in period in which its definitions differed from only the most current. It does mean that even as modern conceptions of illness trend toward precision and a particularly strong commitment to an as-yet unproven biological answer to depression's causes, speaking of depression's past means giving way to a more comfortably vague notion of what being depressed meant. It also compels me to look to its cultural margins, the sight in which clinical symptoms blur with notions of the blues, the dumps, anxiety, and even madness.

¹² As sources relevant to this chapter will demonstrate, the history of American medical interest in the psychological lives of women includes a fair share of blame for the effects of women on the psyches of others—most notably their sons. Attended by a new feminist attention on the inner lives of women, the move to diagnose women for their own

medicalized approach to emotional ills, partnered with a tone of increased responsibility for one's own potentially diseased state and that of those around her, however, saw to it that this break was less than the hoped-for revolution and more a continuation of long-standing pathologization of women's lives. This section seeks a distinction between the woman at risk and the woman meaningfully engaged with her own suffering and that of those she cares for. The image of a vulnerable female subject is interrupted by biomyth's permeable woman—knowingly participating in suffering rather than falling victim to it.

Having uncovered the ways in which Kingston and Lorde are in and out of step with mainstream understandings of depression, I will consider the specific projects of pathologization aimed at immigrant and of-color families at the time of their writing. In "Mothers and Daughters of Color" I turn toward the movement of Momism and the fallout from studies such as *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action* (more commonly known as The Moynihan Report). I look to the ways in which these systems of pathological understanding are undermined by the biomythographic emphasis on daughters. Neither cause nor casualty of mental health crises at a national level, girls represent a psychologically undertheorized category who were thus perhaps freer to self-define.

In the previous chapter, I sought out a subgenre that responded to a deeply moralizing approach to emotional well-being through a politics of refusal. The cynical laugh had, meaningfully, nothing to offer to a reconstruction of what ought to be done in the stead of commodified feeling. In biomythography I find something more akin to an alternative option.

troubles is a conscious move away from portraying them as objects acting upon others and instead as subjects deserving of treatment unto themselves.

This chapter concludes with a consideration of literary symbols— The Trickster, The Warrior, and The Ghost—figures of fancy necessary to spark a truly imaginative new way forward. The final section of this chapter introduces a circuit of particular mythic archetypes to the workings of family therapy—comparing these complex, and self-consciously fictionalized women to a generalized woman conscripted to manage familial pain and pathology. The midcentury turn to the family in the psy sciences rendered the object of study plural, while the mode of observation, even as it employed cooperative teams, maintained the direction of authority as singular. I argue that the biomyth offers a view from distinct identities within a single subject and across multiple subjects with little regard for the boundaries of minds or of time. Where social scientists, psy scientists, popular self-help, and clinical practices sought meaning in an intense focus on familial dynamics (dynamics often presumed to have been corrupted by matriarchal dysfunction), the figurative specters of biomyth guard the family from such scrutiny through an extension of their own ineffability. Safeguarded by the haze of too many subjects, too much fiction, families are able to construct meaning enfolded into tradition and thus granted the undying authority of the mythological.

There is no one-to-one relationship in partnering biomythographical works with popular and clinical narratives of depression, race, and family. These fictions won't always undo the stories of women's suffering that circulated in their time-period. In different moments they employ popular tropes, pivot from them, make them appear strange to actors ill-fitted to their constraints. And so I will work through them to find what each affords—examining the constructions of emotionally troubled characters within magazines, through the medical gaze, and within these semi-fictional works.

I ultimately mean to demonstrate that, while the memoirist assumes a certain level of vulnerability—to questions of credibility, judgment, and even diagnosis of her own character and struggles—the author of the biomythography interrupts such opportunities, bringing “true” experience forth while also insisting on it as a world of her own making. Half-truths cannot be cleanly read as symptoms. The individual subject, vulnerable to pathological scrutiny, cannot be fully determined so long as she remains plural, so long as she insists on a life story inextricable from those of her foremothers, living or dead, real or imaginary.

Well Women

*"You must not tell anyone, my mother said, what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born."*¹³

The first setting of *The Woman Warrior* is a narrow downward passage into dark water—water intended to sustain the family but very poignantly and deliberately contaminated by death. The aunt's suicide is a fact plainly told. Suicide represented as it is at the start of *The Woman Warrior* and at the heart of *Zami*, serves as a window into the complicated construction of feminine despair and the troubling task of representing the real pain of others in literature. If mental wellness is a spectrum, the taking of one's own life can be understood as its farthest edge. It is a dreary but poignant place to question what it means to be well in this particular moment—

¹³ Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 3.

a moment just before Prozac, before Direct-To-Consumer (DTC) advertising, in the midst of depression's first appearance as a discreet disorder category in the DSM III (1980).

In this section I argue for a subtle distinction between permeability (the capacity to be affected by the pain of others) and vulnerability (a susceptibility to become overwhelmed by one's own suffering). I propose that these works of biomythography propose the former in ways that serve to critique the latter (the feminine vulnerability to psychic or emotional distress as an inherent weakness). In part, the distinction between the permeable and the vulnerable has to do with constructing subjectivity in relation to other characters. This distinction is equally dependent upon the important and much critiqued role of silence in both texts. The tropes of silences held and silences broken take on new meaning in conversation with the rhetorical nature of emotional pain as it is understood in the late twentieth century United States. Silence is something more than quiet when the comprehension and treatment of depression is understood as accessible solely and entirely through verbal communication.

In tracing the ways, the diagnostic category of depression grew in direct contact with psychopharmacological development, Laura Hirshbein offers this succinct historicizing frame: "This process was not inevitable."¹⁴ This caution guides both the periodization and purpose of this chapter. The world of pharmaceutically addressed unhappiness we have grown accustomed to since, roughly, the late 1980s and early 1990s might well have been otherwise. The course that cultural as well as clinical understandings of depression did take was an accumulation of independent actors responding to, harnessing, and furthering trends in science, politics, and personal management. It was, furthermore, not the only path open at the time. This is a story of

¹⁴ L.D. Hirshbein, *American Melancholy: Constructions of Depression in the Twentieth Century* (Rutgers University Press, 2009), 27.

those “well” and “unwell” women of a narrowly pre-Prozac America issuing alternative means to emotional life-making in the pages of literary works. Analyzed alongside depression narratives from popular magazines, these biomythographical works trouble the debate over biological vs. social origins of depression and lay bare the distinction between vulnerability and permeability to emotional suffering through deliberately ambiguous narrative frameworks and a commitment to intersubjective character development.

Searching the Women’s Magazine Archive produces a compelling distant read of Depression’s popular scope over the course of the late century¹⁵ A keyword search for depression in the 1950s yields 717 results, 977 in the 1960s, 1,844 in the 1970s, 2,172 in the 1980s. In the 1990s it pulls forth 3,267. Even as the number of articles, advertisements, and advice columns increases steadily and dramatically over time, alternative uses of the term steadily decrease.¹⁶ If depression itself wasn’t taking over the American woman in the late twentieth century, stories of depression most certainly were.

A few things jump out from these testimonials, advice columns, and news articles on the subject of depression that appear frequently in magazines aimed at American female audiences in the 1970s and 1980s. Stereotypically beautiful women with loose fitting clothing and perpetual bedhead seem especially prone to depressive symptoms. Even if it points one in the

¹⁵ The Women’s Magazine Archive houses two collections, consisting, each, of roughly 850,000 full color scanned pages of publications ranging between 1846 and 2005. The titles and dates accessible through this archive are: *Better Homes & Gardens* (1922 to 2005); *Chatelaine* (1928 to 2005); *Good Housekeeping* (1885 to 2005); *Ladies’ Home Journal* (1883 to 2005); *Parents* (1926 to 2005); *Redbook* (1903 to 2005); *Cosmopolitan* (1886 to 2005); *Essence* (1970 to 2005); *Seventeen* (1944 to 2005); *Town and Country* (1846 to 2005); *Woman’s Day* (1937 to 2005); *Women’s International Network News* (1975 to 2003). My access to this database was granted through the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University.

¹⁶ Economic depression is a still a topic of some conversation in the sixties. By the late eighties, however, “depression” is a word almost exclusive to the mental health condition in this medium.

direction of professional assistance, a magazine article by itself can help a depressed person to help herself. One may believe herself well but in fact be secretly depressed. And there is this oft-cited statistic: women are far more likely to suffer from depression than men.¹⁷ These claims (excepting the first example of the sexy depressed woman, which I include here as a joke, but also as a serious observation regarding the aesthetics surrounding depression) collectively form a picture of the popular life of Depression in a period in which understanding of this mood disorder/disease was very much in flux.

For both types of texts—fictionalized memoir and magazine articles alike—the origins, triggers, markers and underpinnings of grave emotional distress are indefinite and changeable. But it is only in fiction that such variability and ambiguity can be tolerated. Popular representations of depression, on the other hand, are as urgent as they are baffling. A typical list of warning signs from a 1982 issue of *Cosmopolitan* could be neatly summarized as 1. Eating less or eating more. 2. Sleeping less or sleeping more. 3. A lack of energy. 4. A surplus of energy 5. Loss of interest in activities including sex 6. Inability to focus 7. Feelings of sadness or guilt 8. Thoughts of suicide.¹⁸ This standard list is taken from the DSM checklist for clinicians and doctors and assumes both the diagnosis and the treatment (the article recommends antidepressants) to anyone meeting five or more signs for two or more weeks. These signs and their proposed solutions will be common knowledge to a modern audience. Acquainted with

¹⁷ Numerous sources cite the statistical fact that women are diagnosed with depression at greater rates than men. I select Hirshbein as my reference here because she has collected many of these voices in one place and because she provides a critical context for them, one in which the statistical reality of diagnosis may well fail to represent actual lived experiences beyond gender bias in the study of depression and in relation to rates of reporting. Hirshbein, *American Melancholy: Constructions of Depression in the Twentieth Century*.

¹⁸ LaDonna Green Bates, "What I Didn't Know About Depression Almost Killed Me," *Cosmopolitan*, May 1982.

them as we are, we may cease to observe the burden of sorting its internal contradictions such a survey places on the person suffering from emotional distress.

As difficult to disentangle as the signs of genuine depression might be, they were even further complicated by the high probability of misdiagnosis. A contemporaneous *Seventeen* article urges young audiences to learn to look out for red herrings. After years of supposedly pointless psychotherapy a young woman named Marie learns she is in fact anemic. Mononucleosis and influenza should also be ruled out. Viruses, blood disorders or the sheer vulnerability of entering into a time of life in which “your self-concept is especially fragile” could all equally be behind a seeming bout of depression.¹⁹ And while some diseases and disorders simply do remain mysteries longer than we would wish them to, the vast indecipherable landscape that is the depression diagnosis was, if not wholly avoidable, then possible to curtail.

Hirshbein traces the ties this diagnostic category has to the professional concerns of the field of psychiatry. “With agreement as a focus, Spitzer [lead author of the DSM III] made the explicit argument that a valid diagnosis (a diagnosis that reflected a disease in nature) mattered less than reliability (the agreement among professionals about the categories).”²⁰ The DSM was thus meant to bring conformity to disparate corners of the field; whether the things described in its pages perfectly matched anyone's problems was secondary to that uniformity of categorization. It's a fairly standard taxonomic principle: the big box is harder to dispute and easier to agree upon in terms of appropriate contents. But we see the consequences of its rampant

¹⁹ Julius and Zelda Segal, "Twelve Myths About the Blues," *Seventeen*, September 1981.

²⁰ Hirshbein, *American Melancholy : Constructions of Depression in the Twentieth Century*, 38.

inclusivity all over the pages of *Seventeen*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Ladies Home Journal*. The list of symptoms to watch for is not only ceaseless, but includes several contradictions (perhaps you are too tired or too energetic, too engaged or not engaged enough, and so on). In subsuming so many disparate possible symptoms, as England et al write, “all disturbances of emotion, cognition, relationships, and roles are attributed to the depression and the meaning of small daily events and the flux of everyday life is drawn from one grand interpretive frame—depression.”²¹ Even so, the oversized diagnostic category of depression might have lived a life of useful ambiguity in the pages of popular advice, were it not for the alarmist rhetorical strategies that accompanied it. The narrative formation employed to present this ambiguous and inexact process of identification and treatment is, however, confoundingly sure of itself.

The same 1981 article in *Seventeen* magazine that warned of the flu embarks upon a public health agenda of dispelling myths, some of which I suspect to be largely made of straw.²² Myth number six states that depression cannot destroy your desire for romantic life. Myth

²¹ Suzanne England, Carol Ganzer, and Carol Tosone, "Storying Sadness: Representations of Depression in the Writings of Sylvia Plath, Louise Glück, and Tracy Thompson," in *Depression and Narrative: Telling the Dark*, ed. Hilary Clark (Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2008), 83.

²² The question of gendered prevalence is addressed and dismissed here. The article vacillates between acknowledging that studies are inconclusive and arguing, with great emphasis, that women do indeed get depression more often than men. “At all stages in life, women appear to be somewhat more vulnerable to depression, although some researchers feel they’re simply more likely to admit they’re depressed and seek help. A growing number of experts, however, are convinced that the way women have traditionally been raised makes them more prone to feeling blue. The gesture toward considering both sides nearly collapses under its own strain. Two perspectives are offered and one triumphs because on one side we have mere “researchers” who “feel” a particular way and the other “experts” who are not only “convinced” but “growing” in number. That is how a point far short of proof gets worked into the number two spot of “A Dozen Common Myths” under the unequivocating subheading, “Depression is shared equally by both sexes.” In this case the “myth” every teen must avoid is a perfectly debatable opinion regarding gender prevalence. That it should receive such primary status on an admonitory list betrays what I take to be a genuine fear for the well-being of girls should they fail to take their emotional lows seriously, even if such insistence ultimately did a disservice to both our understanding of the condition and the men who suffer from it. Segal, "Twelve Myths About the Blues."

number 10 says you can treat yourself with medication to overcome depression.²³ It is hard to imagine any semi-reputable source arguing either claim. Certainly the implication that such misunderstandings are “common” is a bit of stretch. What the myths are of course is a thinly veiled list of don’ts (don’t try to self-medicate) and potential losses that might catch the eye of a teen (such as love life as a casualty of one’s depression). The Myth-busting narrative trope thus assumes first a reader’s miseducation. And it was not limited to the very young. As the vague but prevalent threat of depression would continue to raise alarms over the final decades of the century, publications such as these would double down on the message that the thing a woman understood least was herself.²⁴

In “What I Didn’t Know Almost Killed Me,” LaDonna Green Bates walks the reader through a series of failed interventions for her depressive symptoms. Like most of the women who populate these testimonials, “[She] wasn’t anybody’s stereotype of a woman likely to fall apart.”²⁵ But she does come apart and so embarks upon a “tortuous journey” of seeking help from “an internist, psychologist, minister, and psychiatrist.” Ms. Bates is understandably angry with the professionals who promised to help her but could not. They were, she claims, “basing treatment on information that was incomplete, inaccurate, or outdated,” implying as so many

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Elaine Showalter’s extensive work on the history of women and madness in British society concludes with a note on agency and depression. “We can predict,” she writes in 1985, “that if ‘depression’ is soon viewed as a meaningless catchall category, another female malady will appear to take its place for another generation.” This prediction falls on the heels of an unsuccessful push in the 1970s to depathologize feminine feeling. In essence, for Showalter, there will always be a disproportionate mental ailment ready at hand to describe a great swath of feminine behavior so “long as women are overrepresented among mental patients and family caretakers and underrepresented among psychiatrists, administrators, and politicians, their lives will continue to be unhappily affected by decisions in which they take no part.” These statements resonate with the magazine articles presented here in that these publications targeted to women cater so thoroughly to authoritative psychiatric scripts, and in their calls to action for suffering women, they consistently encourage the handing over of one’s treatment to a genuine professional (see also Kimberly Emmons on the rhetorics of ceding authority). Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady : Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 249.

²⁵ Bates, “What I Didn’t Know About Depression Almost Killed Me.”

articles do that the scientific facts are newly and fully available. In the end Bates recovers when an inpatient clinic greatly increases the dose of the same antidepressants her internist had prescribed. There is no need to question her recovery or her opinions about what can and cannot be useful. What is interesting about this narrative and others of its kind is the way it balances the equation of life experiences and explanations for them.

Bates describes her descent in great detail: her loss of spirit, appetite, sleep, waking in the middle of the night, “heart pounding, jaws clenched, eyes frozen open—gripped with a generalized feeling of terror.”²⁶ Key to her recovery, however, is not simply finding the right treatment, but recasting the problem—no longer these many exquisitely described phenomena, her many-faced problem becomes “primary depression, unipolar type.” In such a narrative this scientific labeling does not simply give the experiences a name. It does not offer the explanation; it replaces it. The loss is not merely aesthetic. Emmons explains:

The prototypical depressed woman, meant to stand in for all women (and, potentially, all men as well), serves as an icon in the discourse that oversimplifies identity, just as the biochemical explanation for her illness oversimplifies etiology. Both mask more complex realities and experiences.²⁷

Bates presents the path to healing as one of reduction. The over-broad definition of “depression” is tailored by her more precise diagnosis (of unipolar type, which is in truth more or less the default category) and yet reproduced in these pages as bound to the general category of depression as a far more useful catch-all for would-be readers. It is hard not to see the comfort in

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Emmons, *Black Dogs and Blue Words : Depression and Gender in the Age of Self-Care*, 29.

giving one's pain a name, a name that in turn demands you give your pain over to someone better qualified to fix it.

We can compare these persuasive means to reduce and to demythologize with the myth-making Lorde and Kingston engage in. In biomythography suffering is not reduced to a place of manageability; it is given greater scope and complexity. It is the special privilege of narrative, and even more so of the liminally fictive, to craft a complicated tale; yet I wish to suggest that in their efforts to seek out the origins of suffering for two women lost to suicide, Lorde and Kingston don't merely tell stories, but make meaningful contributions to a discourse on depression, pain, and vulnerability.

Kingston's unnamed aunt has dropped herself and her newly born child down the well because, in having a baby too long after her husband's departure for it to be his, she has been disowned by her family, all of whom have been visited by the townspeople in a late-night raid in which the bulk of the family's belongings were stolen or destroyed. The telling is buttressed by complementary invocations of shame, shame in the act of telling for anyone who should speak of the aunt, and the shame of the event itself in 1924, not for the aunt's death, but for the fact of her existence.²⁸ To this callousness, Kingston offers various hypotheticals, each centered on the otherwise unreported feelings of her deceased aunt.

She begins with the most likely scenario. In her own life the narrator has come to understand the ways in which Chinese immigrants, and even more so women in an "old China,"

²⁸ This is one early example of the ways in which feeling has indefinite boundaries in Kingston's work. Shame is presented as not simply recurring but transferable from one temporality to another.

would not give themselves up to the “extravagance” of adultery.²⁹ It is far more likely the unnamed aunt was raped: “Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil.”³⁰ The event is banal in its likelihood—rape without consequence or taboo is scarcely legible within such a community as rape at all. But Kingston, decades later, grants the event both the name it deserves and the wealth of feeling that would have surrounded it: “She might have separated the rapes from the rest of living if only she did not have to buy her oil from him or gather wood in the same forest. I want her fear to have lasted just as long as the rape lasted so that the fear could have been contained. No drawn-out fear. But women at sex hazarded birth and hence lifetimes. The fear did not stop but permeated everywhere” (7). This narrative grants feelings to a woman whose inner life was of little interest to anyone in her own time, yet the story is driven by the feelings of its narrator.

Kingston begins this proposal with the suggestion that the man participated in the raid. As her anger grows in the telling, so too does his role: “She told the man, ‘I think I’m pregnant.’ He organized the raid against her” (7). Such a bold and unknowable claim is accentuated by the simple declarative sentences, by the surety implied by placing these two would-be facts back to back, by the assumption that it took only the mention of a possible pregnancy to incite such violence. The narrator brings her ancestor forward to suppose how her life might have been, but also as vehicle for her own rage. How strange that such a compassionate indignation should be so quickly followed by imagined feelings of an altogether different sort.

²⁹ Kingston, *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 6. Citations to follow will be given parenthetically in the text.

³⁰ Kingston further suspects that the man responsible was neither sought out for punishment nor reluctant to participate in the aunt’s condemnation: “I wonder whether he masked himself when he joined the raid on her family” (6). In this plausible account of the aunt’s life, what is said and how are telling. Kingston does not question *if* the man took part in his victim-cum-mistress’s punishment, merely whether he felt at all conflicted in his role as both the true perpetrator and the executioner.

Perhaps the aunt was not raped, but in a loving, consensual relationship. Kingston depicts the aunt falling in love as at once a beautiful gentle human story and as a callow whim that sacrificed the family for fleeting attraction. These are not conflicting accounts. The aunt might have done something as beautiful as it was reckless and vain. In this version the aunt is something both marvelously aesthetically attuned and frivolous— “for warm eyes or a soft voice or a slow walk—that’s all—a few hairs, a line, a brightness, a sound, a pace, she gave up family”—but she remains as fragile as she appears in the tale that imagines her utter victimization (8).

A third alternative—that the aunt was something fierce and defiant—is only briefly entertained. “It could very well have been, however, that my aunt did not take subtle enjoyment of her friend, but, a wild woman, kept rollicking company.” That is all her tenacity and agency: one sentence. It follows, “Imagining her free with sex doesn’t fit though. I don’t know any women like that, or men either. Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help” (8). Kingston returns quickly to the story of a fool for love, primping herself coquettishly in the mirror. Thus, posthumously, Kingston gives the unnamed aunt a bit of unlikely joy and with it a fair helping of disdain. There are limits—reaching forward from the past and backward from the present—to bind the kinds of emotions the aunt might have had the liberty to take on.

From the past, she is limited by cultural acceptability, not in the shallow sense that she would have been frowned upon, but in the more pressing suggestion that sexual profligacy would have been beyond comprehension, much less action. From the present, the aunt is constrained by her function within the narrative. Amidst the life or death drama of her aunt’s imagined lives, the narrator tangentially considers her own fairly normal childhood difficulties with boys as

stemming from an “atavism deeper than fear.” The young narrator tried to imagine herself as related to and therefore not a sexual possibility for every male she met, so as to avoid the wrong kind of entanglements. She regrets it: “I should have stood up, both arms waving, and shouted across libraries, ‘Hey, you! Love me back. ‘I had no idea, though, how to make attraction selective, how to control its direction and magnitude” (12). It’s a surprising turn to put on such even footing the pressures faced by the “old China” aunt, whether she was routinely raped or shattered by the shame of her own ecstasy, with a young girl unsure how to make “the Chinese boys in the class” fall for her without inviting the attention of every boy in sight. But they draw together in representing a lineage of women as ever in relation to and fear of men, and in demonstrating, even in ways consciously self-indulgent and absurd, a narrator grasping to make connections with nearly nothing to go on.

There is a net effect to moving quickly to radically different hypothetical states of mind and interweaving the stories with their utility for self-reflection in the present moment. Perhaps there is a way in which it matters little what really happened. For all this artful reclamation, the narrator cannot escape the simple conclusion that is the only known fact of the No Name Woman. Whatever the aunt felt, the well is where it became irrelevant. She did not simply cease to feel there; the complexities of her circumstance, the depth of if not her despair, then her love, her fear, her vengeance become things—like her name—that never happened. Our introduction into the emotional lives of our heroines follows both a conflicted and, in a sense opportunistic narrator, and a nameless woman who cannot possibly be reclaimed. Their striking proximity on the page, however, suggests that confusion over the sources of emotional distress are not simply a matter of memories lost. Our knowledge of the inner lives of others is always incomplete—a nameless aunt is merely an extreme—and as our own feelings are contingent upon our

interpretations of others', an at least partial incomprehension, even of ourselves, is here presented as the norm.

My examination of depression in biomythographical works begins peering down this well to wonder because, punning homonyms notwithstanding, the memory of the drowned aunt serves as a useful meditation on the form and function of mental and emotional well-being in the novel. For all the wealth of feeling and possibilities of a life lived granted in absentia to the aunt, there is no version in which this suicidal woman is understood as purely sick or purely wronged. It is not such a bold claim to suggest a relatively well state in a suicidal woman who, even as the truth of her life cannot be pinpointed, is understood to have in any case suffered great injustice. This injustice is, however, given an indefinite shape and scope because a genuinely traumatic history is conflated with the far less harrowing tale of the awkward narrator's failed adventures in youthful love. The quick slip between lives causes us to question less what it does touch than what it does not.

To further demonstrate the ways in which such fiction-making cuts into popular rhetorics of pain, it is useful to extend the investigation of injustice into another work with a self-inflicted death at its center—*Zami*. Much like the aunt whose tragedy is amplified by the efforts to subsume it in a narrative of familial rumor and cautionary tale, Gennie's eventual death is forecasted parenthetically, highlighting the event by calling attention to the ways it is hidden: "That summer, Genevieve met her father, Phillip Thompson, for the first time. She fell completely under his charming net. He was a quick and bitter man of much wit and little love, who preyed upon whatever admiration he could find. (Genevieve was fifteen when she first met

her father. She was two months short of sixteen when she died).”³¹ Leading up to this moment, Gennie's story is one of the work's most unambiguously joyful. She is the friend closest and best suited to our protagonist. The warmth of their friendship fills a void of familial love in Audre's life.³²

Like the aunt, Gennie's death is a foregone conclusion, one she regards with little emotional attachment. "Gennie spoke about killing herself," our narrator recounts, "as an irreversible and already finished decision, as if there were no more questions and I had only to accept it with the finality that I accepted approaching winter."³³ The reasons for Gennie's death are both too many and too few. We are not provided a definitive cause. The drive that motivates Gennie to first attempt and later succeed in taking her life might be akin to something a contemporary reader would recognize as chronic depression; it is both a sum of her experience—particularly that to do with her father—and something deeper and independent of circumstance. Nevertheless, it is presented as less pathological than it is inevitable. "None of us had given her a good enough reason to stay here, not even me," writes Lorde.³⁴ There is guilt in the statement but also a simple calculus. The promise Gennie's life held wasn't enough.

³¹ Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1982), 91. Short declarative sentences are juxtaposed in a telling manner. Captured together within a parenthetical that contains, in fact, the passage's most crucial information, these two facts—Gennie's suicide, the meeting of her father—are implied to be related.

³² The protagonist of *Zami* is herein referred to as Audre, the name she gives in the beginning pages. The author of this story is cited as Lorde. The narrator of *The Woman Warrior* is simply called the narrator as she never assigns herself a name. In both cases I mean to suggest a distinction between the characters/narrators and the authors of these texts.

³³ Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, 91.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 100.

Unlike the No Name Woman, Gennie was known intimately to the narrator of her passing, and yet the fullness of her feeling and motivation for her end remain as elusive as they are in *The Woman Warrior*, perhaps more so as there is less license to weave fictions for actual lost friends. Devastating as the death is, it also bears in common with Kingston's approach an ultimate fatalism: "But all this was so beside the point [. . .] *Gennie was dead. Dead dead dead, a nickel a rabbit's head.*"³⁵ This morbid imagery presented in nursery rhyme form and italics conveys a simultaneous sense of astonishment and resignation. One imagines Audre singing it to herself in a bit of a removed trance, as one who has given up. If the narrator ever truly felt it was useless to seek out causes after the fact, however, it was an impulse that did not survive to the time of the biomythography's construction. As Kingston seeks to uncover the truth of her aunt, Lorde engages in a tug-of-war between her competing impulses to frame Gennie's death as an unspeakable tragedy and to call forth the causes she has kept secret from herself.

Here is a conversation that takes place just before Gennie's suicide:

"Don't die, Gennie. Do you still want to?"

"Of course, I do. Didn't I tell you I was going to?"

I bent close to her and touched her forehead, "Oh why, Gennie, why?" whispered.

Her great black eyes flashed open. Her head moved on the pillow in parody of her old arrogance. Her brows came down in the center. "Why what?" she snapped. "Now don't be silly. You know why."

But I did not know why.³⁶

³⁵ *ibid.*, 101.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 100. One reason to doubt the narrator's claim to ignorance is that it is given too absolutely. At a formal level, we are presented with a narrator who doth protest too much. In conversation, Audre and Gennie utilize contractions: "Don't die", "Didn't I tell you." As an insistence of her ignorance, the narrator takes a more formal tone: "I did not know why." In a situation in which "I didn't" would suffice both contextually and tonally to match the rest of the recollection, "I did not know why" reads as forced, rehearsed.

A page later the narrator troubles this claim to ignorance. Gennie's mother pleads with Audre, "Do you know why she did it?": "No, ma'am. I looked up, again. I remembered my mother's words, resisting them, 'That man call himself father was using that girl for I don't know what.'"³⁷ Lorde looks back from the present moment with suspicion, for the father and for the seemingly slightly disingenuous claim that she did not or does not know what troubled Gennie.

There are suggestions elsewhere in *Zami* that Gennie is a victim of sexual abuse or the like at the hands of her newly rediscovered father. Here I want to be quite clear. It is not one and the same to suffer depression and to be a victim of assault, but we have no way to tell to what extent Gennie was one, the other, or both. What is of interest to my evaluation of the stories of these two suicidal women is that they are presented in a sea of plausible, improvable motives, water that runs through the hands of those left behind who seek to tell their stories. The profound ambivalence both narrators demonstrate between knowing and accepting an impassable distance is paramount to constructions of the emotionally well within these works.

It is Lorde who provides this subtext of breadcrumbs and Lorde who sweeps it away. We are not meant to know anymore definitively than she can what took place; at the same time, we are placed in a position to be critical of the narrator's own attempts at denial. Neither Kingston nor Lorde will settle on a definitive interpretation of what became of the abused and suicidal women who have affected them because they are A) invested in resisting a mode of narrativizing loss as learning opportunity and B) reluctant to draw a circle around sources of pain lest we lose sight of the ways in which they bleed from one to another.

³⁷ *ibid.*, 102.

As further evidence of this ambivalence, these authors both strenuously resist the interpretation of these young suicides as stories “to grow up on” and feature prominently the means by which their mothers retooled them as educational opportunities.³⁸ “Now that you have started to menstruate,” warns Kingston’s mother figure, “what happened to her [the No Name Woman] could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us.”³⁹ “I know she [Gennie] was your friend and you feel bad,” states Audre’s mother, “but this is what I been cautioning you about.”⁴⁰ These two immigrant mothers, eager to keep their daughters from harm, lack all subtlety and—what the later generation of American daughters long for—sensitivity. It is a violence, both authors insist, to relegate the lives of women cut short to the education of an ostensibly stronger woman who would go on to survive. And yet the mothers’ perspectives are made central. The lessons are rejected in word but not in deed, for here they are, not merely represented in the account of lives lost, but central to configuration of these events as they touch on the lives of daughter authors.

The foregrounding of these stories of suicide walk a thin line. Lost friends and relatives inform the lives of the narrators, serve to artfully introduce metaphors central to their own lives, and yet are resisted as utilitarian narrative structures. The blatantly false recreations of unnamed aunt’s possible lives aren’t so simple as an ancestral offering. Kingston imagines the aunt’s ghost as hostile to her writing.⁴¹ Kingston’s momentary admission—that stories about the aunt that don’t serve to improve an understanding of the narrator’s own life don’t warrant telling—is hardly indicative of a drive to represent her aunt faithfully. Placed within a page of Audre’s own

³⁸ Kingston, *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 5.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, 101.

⁴¹ Kingston, *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 16.

battle with depression, Lorde casts Gennie's death both as a cause for her own despair, but also, reluctantly but unavoidably, as a piece of her own coming of age. Elaborate, illustrative, conflicting, and even fantastic, the retelling of these suicides is, in the context of memoir, nevertheless integral to the development of the first-person protagonists.

The narrative interweaving from person to person, past to present, makes it clear that both authors are keenly aware of this fact. To consider these deaths as part of their own education and yet resist such utilitarianism in the same breath requires, therefore, an inventive take on subjectivity. The isolating nature of depression nosology and treatment is well summarized by Adrienne Rich, who writes in 1996 that "suffering is diagnosed as relentlessly personal."⁴² Popular narratives of emotional pain support this observation. But to her claim that "we lack a vocabulary for thinking about pain as communal and public" I would offer these two works of biomythography as counterweight.

These authors are protecting the memories of these individual women through the close integration of their histories, a move that suggests little difference exists between themselves and those who took their own lives. It isn't so simple or blithe as a proposed sisterhood: as women in particular cultural circumstances, living is a matter of luck. While a bit of a pun, I therefore, mean to suggest that—due to deliberate narrative entanglement—the "well" equally represents the unwell. The concepts of wellness in these works are slippery and indistinguishable from their would-be opposites. No woman represented in these pages is simply healthy or sick. No contagion, if one wants to think of life-ending depression in such terms, is confined to the body of a single individual. Anne Louise Keating observes that "Lorde's mythic vision in *Zami*

⁴² A. Rich, "Defying the Space That Separates," in *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations* (W. W. Norton, 2002).

encompasses far more than a personal quest leading to self-transformation. As she [Lorde] explains in an interview with Claudia Tate, when she writes, she speaks ‘from the center of consciousness, from the *I am* out to the *we are* and then out to the *we can*.’”⁴³ In this way, we can more optimistically understand the character of Audre has having been a recipient of Gennie’s pain, but Gennie too as partaking in Audre’s survival.

I wish to suggest here that narrative cross-contamination is so thorough that it signals more than a simple reprioritization of likely causes for women’s emotional pain. Elizabeth Wilson’s work on the minded gut demonstrates the difference between siding with biological or social causes and denying a distinction between them: “The logic of interaction, addition, or supplementarity presumes that the entities at stake are already detached and can be brought into a relation for the purposes of specific pathologies.”⁴⁴ To say that Gennie’s familial situation contributed to her clinical (physiological) depression or even that No Name Woman’s drive to suicide was entirely social is to give credence to the notion that causes can be neatly determined, that one or the other explanation can be found to be purely true. By way of hopelessly intermingled subjectivity, however, these narratives subvert a tidy approach to pathology. And so these stories trouble causation as it pertains to suicide. On the surface they represent dueling leading theories: the entirely social (an aunt driven through the violent actions of her culture and family) and the entirely biological (a girl who is mysteriously and thereby, we assume, internally

⁴³ AnnLouise Keating, "Making "Our Shattered Faces Whole": The Black Goddess and Audre Lorde's Revision of Patriarchal Myth," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 13, no. 1 (1992): 31.

⁴⁴ Wilson’s examination of the “coevolved and coentangled” appears here in a discussion of bulimia, specifically, but is drawn into the larger discussion of depression and the gut: “because there is no radical (originary) distinction between biology and mood.” Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Gut Feminism*, Next Wave : New Directions in Women's Studies (2015).

ill).⁴⁵ Drawn into the context of the lives of the authors who recreate them, these causal lines are profoundly undermined.

These narrators struggle to honor these stories unto themselves but also place them in close proximity to the wealth of their own feeling. As the inner lives of the deceased remain unknowable, we have in its place the delicate and troubled feelings of those left behind, narrators who do not circumscribe big lives to tidy pathologies and who are further both moved and loathed to summarize the source or nature of problems faced by Gennie and No Name Woman. As I have demonstrated, Lorde and Kingston maintain incredulity for stories of their own construction. In so doing, they enter into a curious dialogue with the tropes of surprise and contradiction that characterize popular representations of depression at the time of their composition, replacing the terrifying notion of vulnerability with a willing participation to be instead permeable.

As clinical depression congealed into a diagnostic category of its own over the course of the late sixties up to and beyond its arrival as not merely a symptom but a stand-alone disorder in 1980's DSM III, popular publications heeded the call to make more women aware of the risks they faced, often in remarkably similar ways. "Susan seemed to have everything going for her,"

⁴⁵ The binary of social vs. biological explanations of depression and like disorders continues to dominate debates regarding diagnosis and treatment. Wilson's recent work seeks to complicate this divide: "The most potent response to the claims by Big Pharma that depression is a (narrowly defined) serotonin deficiency might not be to argue that the identification of depression with a chemical is fallacious. Rather, we could show how those very chemical actions are multifaceted and peripatetic and that their association with depression might be a way of disseminating, multiplying, and mobilizing mind." (106) To this end, Wilson will trace the life of an SSRI as it is taken in and altered by biological systems other than and below (both in terms of physical location and historical reputation) the brain. The realities of chemical interaction are beyond the scope of this project. What I hope this work will share with Wilson's, however, is a transgression of the well-rehearsed boundaries for thinking through depression. The bodies of the depressed in biomythography are eroticized, de and re-materialized through various fable-rich identities, and seldom contained by their association to just one person. In this way, emotional pain is represented as social and communitarian without leaving go of the body itself

Dan Karechear of *Better Homes and Gardens*, ominously begins.⁴⁶ “You wouldn’t think it would happen to Lisa” Jonathan Tucker of *Cosmopolitan* cautions.⁴⁷ “Depression,” David Alpern, informs us, “can turn the most agreeable of lives into a dungeon of despair.”⁴⁸ This is just a taste of an extremely common approach to depression testimonials and news stories, an approach that intimates surprise and intends to alarm.

As Emmons explains, “In the case of depression, a variety of rhetorical practices have contributed to a sense of ubiquity and nearly universal vulnerability.”⁴⁹ It may well be the case that depression can strike anyone and that it is of particular importance to understand that one can suffer depression even when life seems like it ought to be fulfilling or even joyful. The surprising revelation of a nice life in ruins places an emphasis on the need for diligence. Emmons draws forth the logical conclusions of such ubiquity and uniformity of messaging: “If women are assumed to be at greater risk of depression, their emotional lives become targets for additional scrutiny and surveillance.”⁵⁰ The “greater risk” Emmons refers to is the insistence that women suffer depression at greater rates than men, but the risk is greater still, terrifying really, presented as a precipice: to hear these popular sources tell it (time and again) one may be simply living life and go off the cliff of well-being without warning or provocation. Women are thus encouraged to consider themselves profoundly vulnerable and to arm themselves with a host of consumer

⁴⁶ Dan Kaercher, “New Treatments for Our Number One Mental Health Problem,” *Better Homes and Gardens*, April 1982.

⁴⁷ Jonathan Tucker, “The Scary Ups and Downs of Manic Depression,” *Cosmopolitan*, April 1985.

⁴⁸ David Alpern, “All About Depression,” *ibid.*, August 1974.

⁴⁹ Emmons, *Black Dogs and Blue Words : Depression and Gender in the Age of Self-Care*, 18.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 28.

solutions for the inevitable storm, even and especially as they are well:⁵¹“Any of us might someday need a shrink. Best though, to learn to shop for one when not unraveled by emotional woes.”⁵²

Statistical likelihood is on occasion propped up in the pages of glossy magazines as the forging of a sisterhood. “Beth shares the experience she is about to undertake [talking to a psychiatrist] with over three-and-a-half -million American women. Only the details vary,” writes Julius Segal.⁵³ He means to suggest that Beth is not alone, even as she enters into a process predicated on individuation. To such a tale Lorde and Kingston would counter both that the pursuance of individual consumer solutions will not fully solve the problem and, as their thick descriptions of difference attest, that the details matter very much.⁵⁴

The practice of a personal consumer-based approach to depressions of various types and severities has, Emmons argues, the effect of further detachment: “For individuals, a logical response includes various discursive and material practices of self-doctoring. These practices, however, reinforce individuals’ isolation and ignore additional discursive and material responses

⁵¹ Many critics of the psy-sciences have focused on the role of consumerism as corrosive to the otherwise important provision of mental health services. As covered in chapter one, Eva Illouz argues that emotional pain has taken on exchange value in the public marketplace, resulting in its objectification and to the detriment of those who experience it. Tim Dartington makes the case that therapeutic practice itself—the neatly billable fifty-minute session—has taken on the qualities of a cosmetic service, recasting well-being as a purchasable item. Emmons focuses on rhetorical strategies that construct narratives which begin with problems and conclude with a series of available goods to amend them—typically pharmaceuticals. Illouz, *Cold Intimacies : The Making of Emotional Capitalism*; Dartington, “The Therapeutic Fantasy.”; Emmons, *Black Dogs and Blue Words : Depression and Gender in the Age of Self-Care*.

⁵² Julius Segal, “Finding the Right Therapy for You,” *Cosmopolitan*, November 1978.

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Audre does indeed seek out a therapist, and even discussed its priority in her budget. This approach is close-bound however to so many other aspects of her autobiography that it has an altogether different effect than the decontextualized studies of sudden illness presented in so many magazines. It is notable also that Audre seeks a psychotherapist and not a psychiatrist. She is turned off by certain interventions like electroshock.

that may afford a more complex understanding of gender, the self, and mental health.”⁵⁵ The rhetoric of depression rubs elbows with other discourses on its way to the mainstream, namely the triumph of personal responsibility as the most crucial American virtue.⁵⁶ Yet of their own accord, Lorde and Kingston have barely one foot in the world of mainstream American culture. Vulnerability to an unforeseeable disease would only distract, it would seem, from lives with pressing issues to attend to, not because depression doesn’t exist within these biomythographies—it most certainly does—but because it precipitates distinct strategies of survival.

The lesson of popular accounts of depression and its effects in the seventies and eighties is one of preparedness: one can and should be ready for despair. When biomythographies of the period attend to coming of age and engage with emotional pain, the question becomes: How do their prescriptions for a life of feeling differ? Lorde describes her depression in close contact with her recollection of Gennie’s suicide. Kingston’s aunt is self-consciously mobilized as a tool of bildungsroman. Yet these narratives of pain in close proximity have less in common with the suggested vulnerability of a population on the edge and are better understood as a testament to permeability. As I use it here, permeability is something akin to empathy but with less emphasis on discreet subjectivities’ feelings for one another. Vulnerability has eminently less to do with other people. It indicates the fragile state within a single person. It reflects a psychotherapeutic discourse that emphasizes individuality.

⁵⁵ Emmons, *Black Dogs and Blue Words : Depression and Gender in the Age of Self-Care*, 16.

⁵⁶ In her examination of these intersecting discourses, Emmons further elucidates how depression scripts offer the contradictory advice of taking care of one’s self through the process of sublimating your own interpretations and insights to those of a medical professional. It is your personal responsibility to hand responsibility over to one more qualified.

I suspect that this subtle distinction is easier to notice in a written literary work than in more ephemeral forms of communication. Different narratives of suffering are rather literally juxtaposed. And so, while magazine pages cry out for the women of America to arm themselves against a “plague” of depression,⁵⁷ the semi-fictional lives of biomythography belie the very notion of contagion. As Wilson argues of depression itself—understood not as the meeting of the social and the biological but as always already both—so too cross-contamination from one life to another in *Zami* and *The Woman Warrior* cannot occur when those lives are presented as of a unit from the very start.

Permeability is not vulnerability in part due to the posture it assumes in relation to the world around it. The permeable cannot help but seek interaction. Both authors keep their own feelings close, not only to the tragically lost, but to many fellow women they encounter. For Lorde, this is often an erotic and healing confluence. “Slowly but surely Muriel became more like a vulnerable piece of myself [. . .] With no intent and less insight I fashioned this girl of wind and ravens into a symbol of surrogate survival and fell into love like a stone off a cliff.”⁵⁸ As the passage indicates, there is a naivete to the belief that one can carry another’s problems for them and the hint that mistake was made in the way the tired metaphor of falling in love is here rejuvenated by the invocation of speed and the sense of having been in pursuit of both an object in and conditions for flight. While Lorde may characterize her belief in the healing powers of love as a youthful indulgence,⁵⁹ she does not express regret or even an altered predilection for

⁵⁷ “Imagine an epidemic. No a plague. . .one of history’s *worst* plagues.” Jeffrey Kluger, “Shedding New Light on Depression,” *Cosmopolitan* 1988, 304.emphasis in original

⁵⁸ Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, 190.

⁵⁹ Muriel has serious mental health problems—diagnosed as schizophrenia—which our protagonist is not able to reverse or avoid

love of all kinds as an incautious fusing together. While not invested in the ways in which Lorde's work specifically challenges traditional notions of individual emotional suffering, Kara Provost's work on Lorde keenly pursues the ways in which the erotic is expanded to a consideration of the intersubjective: "Lorde moves eroticism beyond issues of pleasure, intimacy, and transformation at the individual level," a point I will return to in this section and later ones.⁶⁰ A wild and unwieldy incapacity to separate out subjects is often, in *Zami*, an act of erotic coupling.

In *The Woman Warrior* this intersubjectivity is ever more violent, if just as inescapable. The concluding chapter "A Song for A Barbarian Reed Pipe" enacts a youthful self-loathing almost too painful to read. As a girl, the narrator has bullied and physically assaulted another young Chinese girl in a bathroom after school. She seeks to make the girl talk. She hates everything about the girl we already know to be true of herself as well: she is quiet, unnoticed, perceived as fragile. This burst of hostility in a room full of mirrors reaches its crescendo as the subjects become even less distinguishable. The aggressor too succumbs to tears: "Her sobs and my sobs were bouncing wildly off the tile, sometimes together sometimes alternating."⁶¹ It is strange to align such abuse with empathy, but the primary effect of this scene is less the harm done than the tremendously powerful negative identification with another. Though narrated in the past tense, this scene is absent the recriminations or even forgiveness of an adult voice: "I reached up and took the fatty part of her cheek [. . .] I pulled the hair at her temples [. . .] I started

⁶⁰ Kara Provost and Audre Lorde, "Becoming Afrekete: The Trickster in the Work of Audre Lorde," *MELUS* 20, no. 4 (1995): 52.

⁶¹ Kingston, *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 181.

to cry.”⁶² The story is brought forth without commentary or judgment until it is through, at which time a simple acknowledgment of harm done is offered as autobiographical fact: “The world is sometimes just, and I spent the next eighteen months sick in bed with a mysterious illness.”⁶³ These girls’ shared inability to express themselves in public ties into a longer conversation within the chapter about tradition, immigration, and, ultimately, pathology: “I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn’t explain themselves.”⁶⁴ Emmons argues that “to recognize a particular string of words as referring to or explaining depression, speakers draw on a collective memory that results from repeated patterns of articulation. In the act of recognition, speakers and hearers validate and perpetuate the discourse’s structuring power.”⁶⁵ If depression is itself constructed from shared vocabulary and the capacity to employ it, then the young narrator’s fear that being untranslatable is akin to being ill is strikingly accurate within the liminal spaces that constitute her home. If giving a problem its ‘proper’ name is the first step on the path to wellness, the incurably shy and foreign are especially set adrift.

Even as the narrator describes her youth in complex terms of long sustained silence, interrupted by bursts of bombastic sound, the text of the biomyth has been itself both lauded and reviled too simplistically as a breaker of silence. The value of speaking is tightly bound to the controversy over the book’s ethnic representation. In her 1982 rebuttal to reviews both praising and diminishing her work, Kingston writes, “The critics who said how the book was good

⁶² *ibid.*, 176, 78, 80 respectively.

⁶³ *ibid.*, 181-82.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 186.

⁶⁵ Emmons, *Black Dogs and Blue Words : Depression and Gender in the Age of Self-Care*, 13.

because it was, or was not, like the oriental fantasy in their heads might as well have said how weak it was, since it in fact did not break through that fantasy.”⁶⁶ She quotes several reviews that praise the work in terms magical and patently absurd, relishing their new found access to the previously “inscrutable” Chinese (“How dare they call their ignorance our inscrutability!”⁶⁷). Speaking to or for a category of people is a matter I will return to in a later section. As it concerns the question of silence and emotional despair, the binary constructed by the book’s reception—hailed as the great reveal, the giving-voice-to; taken as a betrayal, saying too much to an untrustworthy audience—this needlessly stratified debate says more about the primacy of speech than it does the worth or aims of *The Woman Warrior*.

In *Tell This Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech*, Patti Duncan writes, “Invisibility, loss, absence, repression, oppression, the unspoken, the unknown — these concepts continue to be equated with silence, while visibility, gain, presence, liberation, and ‘truth’ are equated with the act of speech itself. As such, silence becomes antithetical to liberatory agendas and practices in the realm of political activism and in fields of scholarship.”⁶⁸ She offers as example rhetoric surrounding the AIDS crisis (“silence=death”). She cites activist groups of the sixties and seventies fighting oppression on the basis of race, gender, or sexual orientation who powerfully employed the rhetoric of finding their voice and of speaking out. The silence breaking Duncan here describes might well include popular narratives around emotional

⁶⁶ Maxine Hong Kingston, “Cultural Mis-Readings by American Reviewers,” in *Asian and Western Writers in Dialogue*, ed. Amirthanayagam G. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982), 55.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 57.

⁶⁸ P. Duncan, *Tell This Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech* (University of Iowa Press, 2009), 7.

distress as well. “Speak up!” is perhaps the most consistent cry from public health campaigns and well-meaning journalists alike.

Duncan acknowledges the power of these calls to speech while also reclaiming the notion of silence as thereby implicitly and inherently evidence that one is suppressed or oppressed: “Writers such as Kingston have recognized the ways in which enforced silence is oppressive, yet they also suggest that coerced speech too, enacts domination.”⁶⁹ Jill Parrot similarly contends that Kingston’s uses of silence are many. We are perhaps primed to make too much of the power of speaking up by an introductory chapter that does seem to give voice to the voiceless: “In ‘No Name Woman,’ silence is the most powerful weapon the family possesses, and they use it to force one another into submission.”⁷⁰ By telling the story against orders, Kingston opens the work in a way that sides with speech. Parrot argues there are in fact three functions of silence in the work: “suppression by self-restraint, suppression by force, and suppression in translation.” Kingston has acknowledged some play in her translations of Chinese terms and culture. Similarly, “suppression by self-restraint” can function as a rhetorical strategy for a master of fiction—a coy means to keep the reader engaged—but also as an assertion the entirety of one’s experience is not owed to a reader. In this way, Parrott argues, Kingston’s silences held a rhetorical function as well as her words.

In admonishing critics and journalists who “praise the wrong things” Kingston is speaking against celebratory white audiences overjoyed to finally get the inside scoop on a

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 218.

⁷⁰ M. Parrott Jill, “Power and Discourse: Silence as Rhetorical Choice in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *the Woman Warrior*,” *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 30, no. 4 (2012): 378.

“mysterious” people for reasons that should be obvious. She is also reminding critics who accuse her of saying too much or too little of the oft forgotten fact that her truth whether in part or entirety is not something she owes them. In an interview many years later, Kingston addresses the book’s dual identity as fiction and nonfictions stating that “the borders and the margins [between fiction and nonfiction] are very wide — and that we could live in that wide border, that wide margin.”⁷¹

A many-sided approach to silence is useful to our evaluation of emotional representation in which a woman’s confession of her feeling—full and honest—is repeatedly set forth as the one true path to wellness. The rhetorical nature of depression presents a problem, then, not only for the shy or the poorly understood, but for one who would take silence as her own, to do with as she sees fit. To accept speaking one’s truth as the command one must follow to be politically understood and emotionally well would be to surrender what Parrot calls “the weapon of silence” Kingston assumes as one of her many literary tools.

Interestingly, Duncan begins her examination of Asian authors, including Kingston, by drawing a parallel to Audre Lorde. The title of her introduction, “The Uses of Silence,” is meant to “invoke Audre Lorde’s essay “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” in which she discusses anger as an appropriate, viable, and useful response to racism. Anger, she writes, when “expressed and translated in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification [. . .] [It] is loaded with information and energy.”⁷² For Duncan, the connection is generative because in this essay Lorde identifies an intersection of gendered

⁷¹ Kingston, “Cultural Mis-Readings by American Reviewers.”

⁷² Duncan, *Tell This Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech*, 127.

and racial violence that Duncan proposes to take on, but also because she wishes to find a place for silence in a discussion of the political potential of negative affects. Like anger, silence is derided as wasteful and counterproductive. Like anger, silence, Duncan claims, can be both unavoidable and strategically valuable.

Lorde herself may seem more unequivocally on the side of speaking out. The subtext of silence in her inability or refusal to name the causes behind Gennie's death is, after all, given an element of shame. More evidence exists that Lorde promotes breaking away from speech acts or silences as the responsibilities of individuals than in an endorsement of silence as useful unto itself as a response to popular narratives of depression and feminine emotional and psychic well-being. Near the end of her remembrances, Lorde speaks explicitly to the experience of being trapped by a definition of disease as solitary:

I lost my sister Gennie, to my silence and her pain and despair, to both our angers and to a world's cruelty that destroys its own young in passing—not even as a rebel gesture or sacrifice or hope for another living of the spirit, but out of not noticing or caring about the destruction. I have never been able to blind myself to that cruelty, which according to one popular definition of mental health, makes me mentally unhealthy.⁷³

The inability to go without noticing as an ostensible mental health failing makes clear the dueling definitions of permeability vs. vulnerability taking place between biomythography and the rising tide of depression rhetoric. The latter is cast as a susceptibility to a pathogen—the former, a needlessly pathologized insistence on an empathetic life. To remain sharp to the cruelties of the world, and what is more, to allow yourself to feel them profoundly, this is precisely the opposite of steeling yourself against vulnerabilities to depression, sadness, unhappiness. As I will further explore in the sections to come, Lorde consciously elects

⁷³ Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, 252.

perviousness. Kingston will learn to speak but, in her life as “an outlaw knot-maker,” speak in ways that fail magnificently to answer the call to explain one’s self.⁷⁴ Permeable rather than vulnerable, these narrators cast half-truths with no promise of disentangling life from life, nor fact from fiction, raising the important quandary I will explore in greater depths in the pages to come: What is it to create myth in an era obsessed with claims of myths debunked?

The Lindas, Carols, and Beths doing everything right and living what appeared to be happy lives open so many cautionary tales so as to highlight the probability that women are harboring a dark and unpredictable side to themselves even they are unable to recognize. “Depression,” Emmons argues, “is a rhetorical illness. Our comprehension and experience of it starts from and returns to the language we have available to describe it.”⁷⁵ While I, and these biomythographers, would argue against the implication that depression is only or mostly the work of words, leaving the body behind, Emmons’ characterization does offer a lens through which to view depression as mediated. Narratives of myths-busted and surprise sufferers revealed are far more persuasive than they are illuminating. They succeed in frightening women into believing they live on the edge of wellness, but fail to issue the called-for humility of their authority on the matter, and fail to empower women with a clear view of the present state of research on the disease. In a word, they condescend.

Women of the 70s and 80s were widely exposed to efforts to demythologize a poorly understood disease. They lived in constant earshot of the alarm to put their feelings on lock, lest they fall victim to “the common cold” of depression. Looking back on the early days of the

⁷⁴ Kingston, *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 163.

⁷⁵ Emmons, *Black Dogs and Blue Words : Depression and Gender in the Age of Self-Care*, 16.

ongoing project of demystifying feminine pain and giving it its one true name, we are left to wonder: Who is helped by a tone that is equal parts absolutist and imprecise?

Women, particularly white, middle-class women, who read and accept messages about their affective lives, are especially vulnerable to the circulating messages about mental health and illness. For women of color, such messages are often only tangentially inclusive, affording them even fewer options for self-definition. These circumstances reflect the content and quality of statements directed at women and also the prevailing understanding of depression as primarily a middle-class (white) woman's illness.⁷⁶

I would suggest that the white women who flood these magazine pages are reluctant to trouble a diagnosis that gives them some means to understand and feel in control of their emotional lives and self-understanding.⁷⁷ For women like the authors of interest here, it is perhaps harder to find a resource for self-exploration or indeed, assistance, but easier in a sense to give up a categorization that offers you so little.⁷⁸ Perhaps that is why these women of color fictions afford

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 29.

⁷⁷ In ways that will prove important for the following section in which the notion of responsibility factors heavily, emergent narratives of depression were empowering but also burdensome in their call to self-correct. Alain Ehrenberg explains, "Depression teaches us about our current experience as an individual because it is the pathology of a society whose norm is no longer based on guilt and discipline but on responsibility and initiative. Yesterday's social rules demanded conformists, perhaps even automatons; today, initiative and mental capacities are required. The individual is confronted with a pathology of inadequacy more than a willing pathology of mistake, with the universe of dysfunction more than with a universe of law: the depressed person is a person out of gas" A. Ehrenberg, *Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 9. The metaphor of being out of gas is well suited to previously cited claims that depression emerged as a problem with consumer solutions. In this configuration, fuel for wellness is something external to the self which one purchases.

⁷⁸ White audiences tend to be the target market for advice on depression, but there are exceptions. A 1986 *Essence* article entitled, "Are You Blue? How to Beat Depression" gives interestingly tailored advice. The definition of depression, as mostly something one had willfully given into, wouldn't be well-received today, nor would the bootstrap-esque cure that accompanies it. Yet author Stephanie Renfrow Hamilton has some interesting things to say regarding the intersection of race and mood disorders. "Racism and sexism," she writes, "often block our ability to acquire quality education, earn a comfortable living, and raise a family decently." She goes on to cite high prevalence of depression amongst black women (data gathered from a survey in an earlier issue of *Essence*). She is furthermore attentive to cultural differences in seeking treatment. In what I think is an unintentionally funny juxtaposition, she remarks, "We may think therapy is for rich people, crazy people, or white people." Perhaps the most telling aspect of this article is, however, the graphic that accompanies it. A woman with African American features and a serious expression is depicted with blue skin. In a piece that gives credence to disproportionate stressors faced by black Americans replacing the most common indicator of racial difference with a metaphor for depression, together with the title of the article which now seems to ask a question more existential than situational,

recalculations of emotional well-being in such radical terms. To the genre of the millions of demythologized depressed, I offer in my third section the role of emotional pain in the particular myths of biomythography as response. Yet the lives of women of color do not simply rectify illusions consumed by white audiences. They speak, rather, both within these dominant discourses of increasingly medicalized approaches to emotional life and to those legacies of pathologization uniquely theirs to inherit.

Mothers & Daughters of Color

I turned my attention to archives of women's magazines to uncover the narrative underpinnings of the advice, testimonials, and news on women's emotional suffering of this period; I should not have been surprised to find the woes of others amply mixed in. "When her man wilts emotionally a woman may flip through a hundred unpleasant feelings and doubts about *herself*" begins an essay entitled "Surviving His Depression" featured in a 1980 edition of *Cosmopolitan*.⁷⁹ As the title suggests, this article stands out in its attention a woman's emotional needs, even as it asks her to identify and treat the symptoms of depression of those in her care. The charges are formidable: "To cope effectively with his depression, a woman needs to find out what's going on in her man, define what she is feeling, and get a fix on what she can (and cannot) do to help him, herself, and her relationship." "Her man" is of course not her only responsibility.

makes the case that racism and depression are intimately linked. Stephanie Renfrow Hamilton, "Are You Blue? How to Beat Depression," *Essence*, October 1986.

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Williams, "Surviving His Depression," *Cosmopolitan* 1980.emphasis in original

Articles of the period further warn about increased depression in the very young, the risks of teen suicide, and various means to recognize and intervene in the emotional struggles of children. A *Woman's Day* Article from 1979, "Children Get Depressed, Too" includes an intimate portrait of one family and bulleted lists to guide one through "Signs to Watch For" and "Helping the Depressed Child," and an added note on "When to Call for Help." The text is spliced around several ads for Boratem bleach chronicling the adventures of a smiling mother as she seeks to keep her colors crisp.⁸⁰ It includes, as many of its kind do, the admonition to not be "infected by your child's melancholy." The messages to mothers happening on any one page are thus many—some to do with the perceived needs of the child, others the family unit, still others the woman herself, be it her well-being or her image. The image that opens this feature, however, is rather singular in tone. A blue filtered photograph catches a young girl, resting her head on her hand, her face half cast in shadow. To either side of her are two photographs in which images of three children are rendered translucent and repeated in ways that cause them to cut across one another and themselves. These three have dissolved into sixteen cast off in different directions, most with their heads pointed down. These kids are disappearing. These kids have come apart.

By the mid-seventies Momism—a chapter of ego psychology that looked to the deleterious effects of poor mothering on men and the nation—was meant to have died out.⁸¹ It was no longer fashionable to propose the feminine as the locus of disease. Mother was no longer

⁸⁰ Julius Segal, "Children Get Depressed, Too," *Woman's Day*, June 26 1979.

⁸¹ Philip Wylie coined the phrase "Momism" to refer to mothering practices he saw as harmful—overprotecting, feminizing, castrating behaviors. The term has since come into use to refer to opinions such as those Wylie held. In this reconfiguration of the term, "Momism" refers to the tendency to blame and shame examples of motherhood and not aspects of motherhood itself. I employ the term in this chapter in the latter sense, as a reference to ego-psychological beliefs about motherhood. Mari Jo Buhle, *Feminism and Its Discontents : A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

the illness; she was the caretaker, and more specifically a caretaker who needed to keep her standards of self-care high if she was to tend to the ails of those around her. The boom in depression diagnoses aimed, in part, to contest the legacy of women as source rather than sufferer of mental illness. It may well have accomplished this goal, but it remained true to preceding logics of women's pain by insisting on pathology and dysfunction as the course of investigation. What is more, it overestimated the distinction between being the pathogen and being the pathologized. We are reminded that our depressed children need our optimism, after all, because a caretaker is both a healer and likely carrier of disease.

In this section I will investigate the means by which mothers were subject to pathologization through and beyond the reign of Momism, and the ways in which mothers of color were made especially vulnerable to narratives of illness and dysfunction. Emotional life of the mid to late twentieth century was understood as a byproduct of familial stability that was the special responsibility of the matriarch (even when the command to her was to step back). The semi-fictional recalculations of motherhood and of family taking place within *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* and *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* prove promising interlocutors for that history. They upset expectations for familial love with their turn toward eroticism and representations of madness. They also locate, just under the looming image of the powerful mother, the creative potential of the figure of the daughter.

To frame the mothers and daughters of *Zami* and *The Woman Warrior* in their historical contexts requires first an acknowledgment of the dual temporalities they represent. As works of semi-autobiographical fiction, the past of the authors' childhoods refers to particular moments in American history: for Lorde, born in 1934 and emphasizing preadolescence and adolescence, this period is roughly the mid-1940s; for Kingston, born in 1940, it is much the same but veering

more toward the late 40s and early 1950s. Dominant beliefs about matriarchal roles and responsibilities from the 1940s and 1950s might have affected both the mothers in question and the children's assessments of their mothers in the context of friends and popular representations. The memories, however, are also subject to the present moment—which is for these texts the mid-1970s and early 1980s. It is neither possible nor productive to pull period from period, influence from influence. Keeping the full scope of periodization in mind instead allows me to take a wide view on discourses of the maternal effects on emotional development. Binding these histories to singular lives does a service to the history of motherhood itself. Studied as discreet movements—stopping, starting, subsumed by other discourses—denies the rhetorics of motherhood what I believe to be a rather profound continuity. The memory of a mother changes as our notions of motherhood change, but they are not straightforwardly replaced or corrected. To this end, I will begin in a mother-obsessed mid-century and with the question of power.

Images of June Ward and her ilk cloud our vision of mid-century motherhood. A 2011 *New York Times* review offers this corrective to nostalgic feelings of a more mother-friendly past: “One of the most enduring myths about feminism is that 50 years ago women who stayed home full time with their children enjoyed higher social status and more satisfying lives than they do today”⁸² Contributor Stephanie Coontz continues this rebuttal to *The Flipside of Feminism*, a text authored by Suzanne Venker and noted ERA opponent Phyllis Schlafly, which argued that *The Feminine Mystique* marked the end of robust mother appreciation. The “time when fulltime mothers were held in great esteem,” she writes, “was not the 1950s or early 1960s.”⁸³ To deny that perfect moms commanded great power and prestige with their soft, clean

⁸² Stephanie Coontz, “When We Hated Mom,” *New York Times*, May 11 2011.

⁸³ *ibid.*

hands in the midcentury is to recall Momism and its widescale effort to better the course of humanity and the nation state through the critique and sometimes outright villainization of the mother figure.

Mari Jo Buhle's seminal *Feminism and Its Discontents* introduces readers to the concept of Momism by way of Philip Wylie's 1942 best seller *Generation of Vipers*, the purportedly nonfiction harangue that "[blamed] mothers for nearly everything, from thumb sucking to premature ejaculation to world war. Having crushed the men of America, Wylie's Mom is a domestic powerhouse."⁸⁴ The movement of Momism for which Wylie is but an especially explicit example, drew its power by twisting Freud's emphasis on ego formation to insist on an almost fate-sealing early childhood and subsequently tremendous power on the part of primary caregivers who were and ought to have been mothers.⁸⁵ The poor state of the world was testament enough to their incapacity to wield such power responsibly.⁸⁶

Wylie, (who swore in later years it was all just a joke), would become synonymous with a particular critique of motherhood—that the “cloying or domineering” tendencies of American

⁸⁴ Buhle, *Feminism and Its Discontents : A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis*, 126.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 131.

⁸⁶ The precursors to Momism that Buhle traces are many. Work in the Culture and Personality movement in the 1920s and 1930s by theorists like Ruth Benedict and Edward Sapir arrived at a “vague but gender-neutral concept of cultural conditioning” (141), which is to say they attempted to describe broader cultural phenomena as a macrocosm and extension of individual personalities and the ways cultural practices shaped those personalities. In the 1940s these broad extrapolations narrowed their focus to mothering through the work of not only Wylie but more subtle critics like Weston LaBare, Ralph Linton, the President of the American Psychiatric Association Edward Strecker. Much of this work focused out on Japanese and German child-rearing practices, seeking to find a root of evil in the decision to soothe a child or allow them to cry, the employment of discipline, the practices of potty training. (141-143). Erik Homberger Erikson analyzed Hitler's mother and, as the post-war became the cold war, Geoffrey Gorer turned his attention to the ways in which Soviet mothers set the stage for “leaders plagued with megalomania [. . .] unable to respond to inhumanity.” (145) *ibid.*

mothers were doing their children harm.⁸⁷ He was not alone. Just as importantly, his critique was well positioned to place American women in a bind of conflicting expectations:

As a number of historians have shown, Wylie's critique of pathological mother love represented an extreme articulation of arguments advanced by psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, and other psychological and social scientific experts during the 1940s and 1950s. However, what has not been adequately understood is that the momism critique was also a repudiation of a conception of maternal affectivity that had previously enjoyed widespread acceptance within mainstream American culture—the notion that mothers should strive to bind sons to the home with “silver cords” of love. Insisting that overly possessive mothers produced effeminate sons who weakened the nation, Wylie urged Americans to reassess certain maternal attitudes and behaviors, deeming what had once seemed natural and laudable as deviant and pathological.⁸⁸

Generation of Vipers demonized norms of motherhood in one breath and, because it was by all accounts a chaotic and disjointed book, never got around to even suggest a more palatable, for Wylie, approach. According to Rebecca Jo Plant, this work of “truly breathtaking” misogyny was all rant and no recourse and it sold, “as of 1945 [. . .], more than 75,000 copies, and the rate of sales was still rising. By 1955, when Wylie published an annotated edition of *Generation of Vipers* to commemorate its twentieth printing, the number of hardback copies purchased had topped 180,000, and the American Library Association had named it one of the most important nonfiction works of the first half of the twentieth century.”⁸⁹

⁸⁷ R.J. Plant, *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 21.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 46.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 19. Plant's approach to *Generation of Vipers* is unique in that she attends not only to the dominant narrative of the over-powering mom, but in the way this message fit into the broader themes of the book: “Maternal behavior toward children was by no means Wylie's sole concern, for he also railed against women's purported habits of consumption and the social and political activities that they pursued, often in the name of motherhood. He hoped to curb not only mothers' influence over their sons but also their power as consumers, their demands to be indulged by husbands and honored by the state, and, finally, the censorious and sentimentalizing force they exerted in American culture. At base, Wylie challenged the idea that women should be regarded as morally superior beings, entitled to special prerogatives and deserving of influence simply because of their sex or their status as mothers” (21).

In the previous section, I gestured to an ambivalent representation of motherhood present in both works of biomythography. *Zami*'s Audre and the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* both make pronouncements rejecting their mothers' views on the teaching opportunity that is young suicide, but they learn the lessons quietly, under their breath, nevertheless. The mothers of both works are powerful, profoundly flawed, and left unsettled. The question of the cut tongue in *The Woman Warrior*, for instance, remains unresolved. The narrator remarks several times on a seemingly confirmed suspicion that her mother cut her frenum. Her mother claims it was a "ghost country" necessity to free the narrator's tongue to "be able to move in any language."⁹⁰ The narrator is suspicious of the explanation and dubious of its impact upon her: "If my mother was not lying she should have cut more, scraped away the rest of the frenum skin, because I have a terrible time talking. Or she should not have cut it at all, tampering with my speech."⁹¹ The narrator's feeling about the act are as mercurial as her assessments of its possible effects: "Sometimes I felt very proud that my mother committed such a powerful act upon me. At other times I was terrified."⁹² Given so little to hold onto, we are open to consider an act that only maybe happened and its only maybe results. Is a physical intervention such as this a matter of good or bad mothering? What is the relationship between intention and consequence? How can we read the power suggested by bodily mutilation for good or ill in the context of the trope of the too powerful mother or more broadly, Wylie's over-celebrated woman?

Uncertain as Kingston's assessment of her mother may be, we can hear the echoes of the Momist impulse in the lack of any alternative framework. The narrator suggests dueling ways in

⁹⁰ Kingston, *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 164.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, 164-65.

⁹² *ibid.*, 164.

which her mother may be to blame, but offers no scenario in which troubles with speech experienced in adulthood are less than directly resultant from her mother's choices. There is no complex milieu over the course of a life: Brave Orchid is the cause of the narrator's troubles, one way or another.

Audre's mother is similarly held responsible, even as the nature of her influence is hazily defined. Lorde obfuscates any clear read on the relationship. Upon Audre's departure from her mother's house, she leaves her mother "a cryptic note": "I am moving out. Since the causes are obvious the results are well-known." She further reflects, "I think I meant it the other way around but I was very excited and very scared."⁹³ What would it mean to say it the other way around? The notion that obvious results equals well-known causes is only slightly less perplexing. This artifact may be a genuine item from Lorde's life, but it has literary significance nonetheless. From one perspective, the note and its role in Lorde's biomyth demonstrate, like Kingston, a tendency to find fault in the maternal figure (her father is not the addressee of this dear John, even if we might consider him equally responsible for Audre's home life). In this riddle of a cold goodbye, however, we find a girl on the verge of womanhood willing to expose (from the present) how confounded she was by her early years and in so doing, what little faith we can put in her evaluation of the complex figure of her mother.

In these fluctuating and emotionally laden depictions of motherhood, Lorde and Kingston offer critiques of their mother's roles in the emotional well-being of all around them. I want here to draw a pivot rather than an opposition. Where the pathologically responsible mother figure is, like Kingston's and Lorde's mother figures, in possession of much—perhaps too

⁹³ Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, 104.

much—power, I argue that there are meaningful distinctions between the legacy of Momism and mother blaming and these autobiographical accounts of maternal influence. For Lorde, these differences are drawn by the construction of a full round character in the form of her mother, a resistance to racialized logics of family dynamics, and a turn from gender to sexuality in the form of eroticized mother-daughter relations.

Lorde constructs a mother who is a powerful actor, but also a full character with multiple roles to play. Audre's mother in *Zami* is an undeniably imposing force. "Don't bother me with that nonsense" she curtly corrects Audre on her dreams to be class president.⁹⁴ The rules are many and unbending: "A request for privacy was treated like an outright act of insolence for which punishment was swift and painful".⁹⁵ Anne Louise Keating argues that Lorde finds offence in her mother's curt or silent regard: "Lorde associates her mother's use of language with [. . .] internalized oppression."⁹⁶ This may be so (though Lorde's own echoes of mother-blaming would complicate such a charge as disproportionate blame for mothers is a source of oppression unto itself). Yet the sum of Lorde's many invocations of her mother is forgiving. Audre's mother is a woman carved out of rather narrow spaces of expectation and unescapable realities. Her certainty is both a piece of her personality and a necessary accommodation to insufficient time: "My mother's intuitions had fastened upon something; she did not examine what. She could not

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 61.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 83.

⁹⁶ Keating, "Making "Our Shattered Faces Whole": The Black Goddess and Audre Lorde's Revision of Patriarchal Myth," 23.

question her perceptions; I could not utilize the concern in her voice.”⁹⁷ Her mother’s self-assuredness within the home is bound to her unjustified lack of authority beyond it.

Audre’s mother lets forth a rare expression of tears when Audre’s guidance counselor repeats everything Audre told her about her mother in confidence. “Whether she [the guidance counselor] saw my mother as an uppity Black woman refusing her help, or both of us as a sociological experiment not involving human feeling, confidentiality, or common sense, I will never know.”⁹⁸ The power of Audre’s mother is not a thing she contains within herself. It is a negotiation with both the world outside and with Audre herself. In the space of the biomythography it can be all of these things: a nearly unsurmountable force, a problem, an overwhelming influence, a source of fear, and something far less monolithic—the decisions of a real woman with more than one concern to handle and more than one influence of her own with which to forge her path.

The mother of Momism cannot sustain such roundness of character nor can her power be articulated with such traditionally masculinist authority. “This doting mom,” Buhle explains, “shields her son from his aggressive impulses, so much so that as a man he must ‘spend most of his energy denying the barbarism that howls in his brain.’” She “stunts her son’s masculine development, causing him to remain throughout his life in emotional ‘serfdom’ to her.”⁹⁹ Her power is a seemingly sweet but secretly malicious smothering of affection. Unless, of course, she is guilty instead of neglect. Contemporaneously with Wylie, Margaret Ribble warned of too little

⁹⁷ Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, 95-96.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 85.

⁹⁹ Buhle is here paraphrasing Wylie’s views. Buhle, *Feminism and Its Discontents : A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis*, 138.

“TLC- tender loving care.”¹⁰⁰ Buhle locates in midcentury psychoanalysis a “host of pernicious maternal influences” with little apology for their internal contradictions. There were a great many ways to be wrong, but little room to accommodate a personality forged as “*a reflection of her [Audre’s mother’s] secret poetry as well as of her hidden angers.*”¹⁰¹

The persistence of the mom wars throughout the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first can at least in part be attributed to this totality with which blame is readily available and ultimately unknowable for all possible options a mother might take. Buhle describes a postwar move amongst psychologists to let go their differences and unite under the banner of ego psychology, a consilience rooted in the urgent threat of the obvious and catastrophic failings of humanity as a whole.¹⁰² It is of little surprise that a desperate attempt to universalize closed the gaps of meaningful disagreement, sacrificed members of society with less social standing, and elided difference of all kinds, ultimately concluding that culturally specific approaches to the raising of children could only be taken as aberrations from the objective needs of the universal ego.

For Lorde’s part, her mother’s authority, though great and sometimes terrible, does not fit neatly in a narrative of “pernicious” influence. This is a consideration for which the long timespan of the book matters greatly. Lorde’s childhood took place at the height of Momism.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. Ribble is, according to Buhle, the inventor of this now common acronym.

¹⁰¹ Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, 32.emphasis in original

¹⁰² Hirshbein neatly summarizes one particularly influential psychiatric proponent of the woman as source of national decay, William Menninger. He argued “that the tremendous number of men rejected for military duty because of psychiatric illness was due to profound problems in American families, including the low birth rate, the increased divorce rate, and the escalating number of women working outside the home. In the worldview of Menninger and others, women’s failure to adhere to their gender roles could not only lead to their personal pathology but also to problems in the nation as a whole.” Hirshbein, *American Melancholy : Constructions of Depression in the Twentieth Century*.

Her reflections on her mother, a black woman in a largely white space, are, however, informed by the specifically racialized reconceptions of maternal influence put forth by several texts, though most notably, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, better known as The Moynihan Report.¹⁰³

Written in 1965, the Moynihan Report had many predecessors on the path to racialized pathologization. Hortense Spillers notes E. Franklin Frazier's 1939 text *Negro Family in the United States* as a direct ancestor¹⁰⁴ and traces the lineage of "narrative energies from the grid of associations, from the semantic and iconic folds buried deep in the collective past, that come around and signify the captive person," which is to say, ultimately rooted in the same beliefs in insufficiencies of the African or African American to manage their own lives which undergirded and justified the institution of slavery.¹⁰⁵ The Moynihan Report itself assumes a problem felt by Black families in America and locates the root of harm in matriarchal family structures which presume both the absence of fathers and the inherent harm of a female led-household.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Though I have not located any direct references to the Moynihan Report in Lorde's prolific writings, it is worth noting that while the specific ways in which I view her work as commentary upon that document are my own, I am entirely certain she was well aware and in dialogue with the Report's claims and those legacies drawing from it. We can hear, for example, in her address to the National Women's Studies Association Conference in 1981, a response to the notion that women of color ought to find themselves emotionally obligated to reduce themselves: "to turn aside from the anger of Black women with excuses or the pretexts of intimidation is to award no one power—it is merely another way of preserving racial blindness, the power of the unaddressed privilege, unbreeched, intact. Guilt is only another form of objectification. Oppressed peoples are always being asked to stretch a little more, to bridge the gap between blindness and humanity. Black women are expected to use our anger only in the service of other people's salvation or learning." Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984).

¹⁰⁴ Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 74.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 69.

¹⁰⁶ Good intentions aside, bias is plain as day in Moynihan's writing. For example, while he admits that "Negroes" are "arraigned much more casually," he dismisses that challenge to his conclusion that black Americans commit more serious crime by stating, "it may be doubted that the bias is great enough to affect the general proportions." In short, he argues that black men are arrested and convicted with prejudice but not prejudice enough to explain away the disparity. Of course, the limits of prejudice are unknowable within the data he provides and thus his claim is

Moynihan's Report, perhaps more than any other modern historical document, has become the ur-text of well-meaning pathologization and the prototypical text in which gender and race collide in a project of reductive cause and effect. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's Report is his acknowledgment of the arbitrary nature of the very cultural values he is so eager to see black families subscribe to: "There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred over a matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating by one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another."¹⁰⁷ We might question that assumption—that families of color flourish best when adhering to dominant logics—as we encounter Lorde, who leaves little space for apologists for the patriarchy.

Contrary to Moynihan's insistence that black excellence is a zero sum game being won by women very much at the expense of their sons and husbands, Audre's father, while less central, maintains a source of power unique and separate from the power of his partner.¹⁰⁸ While the role of Audre's father may be a simple fact of her upbringing, the recollection of his role is

subjective. Similarly, he labels a subsection, "Almost One-Fourth of Negro Families are Headed by Females" though his own numbers are nearer to one fifth than one-fourth. He claims that significant error in census data likely underestimates unemployment among black males, though the admission that not all are accounted for could surely cut either way. United States. Dept. of Labor. Office of Policy Planning and Research. and Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family, the Case for National Action* (Washington,: For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, 1965), 38, 9-10, 43 respectively.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰⁸ Audre's father is, in fact, described in a typically masculine but also endearing light: he is taciturn and a bit withholding, 6'4" of legendary if apocryphal strength and peaceful, he reads *The New York Times* and values privacy.

imperative for an autobiographer who would have been keenly aware of popular claims of paternal neglect in African American families.

Yet Lorde does not simply recuperate black fathers. To insist on a paternal presence would be to leave her history open to interpretation as an exception that proves the rule. She has a more fundamental challenge to traditionally conceived familial dynamics in mind. Spillers' interpretation of Moynihan allows me to locate an important pivot point in Lorde's depiction of maternal power. In Moynihan's report, Spillers identifies the rhetoric of the formidable slave woman, free except when her will contradicted that of the slave masters: "The 'exception' in this instance tends to be overwhelming as the African American female's 'dominance' and 'strength' come to be interpreted by later generations—both black and white, oddly enough—as a 'pathology,' as an instrument of castration."¹⁰⁹ Here we can observe the legacy of Momism and misogyny drawn through a discussion of race. All "dominance" assumed by a female family member is a direct and violent threat to the men she loves most, a threat to their ego and by extension, their virility. The sexual nature of the parental dynamic is not lost within Lorde; it is transformed into fantasy and made queer.

Audre's coming into an age of sexuality is both mundane and dressed in symbolism. Lorde takes the time to slowly describe the pleasure she takes in working the mortar and pestle in her childhood kitchen on the day of her first menstruation. Where she had previously experienced the grinding of garlic as a "bone-jarring" chore, she finds new potential in the rhythm and texture.¹¹⁰ It would be hard to account for the overwhelming sexuality of the scene without recreating it in full. A brief excerpt will suffice: "The downward thrust of the wooden

¹⁰⁹ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," 74.

¹¹⁰ Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, 80.

pestle slowed upon contact, rotated back and forth slowly, and then gently altered its rhythm to include and up and down beat. Back and forth, round, up and down, back, forth, round, round up and down . . . There was a heavy fullness at the root of me that was exciting and dangerous.”¹¹¹ Her mother returns in the midst and, finding Audre’s work too slow and inefficient, takes it from her: “In my mother’s kitchen, there was only one right way to do anything.”¹¹² Yet immediately after, as Audre grows sad for reasons she cannot yet articulate, the mother turns tender: “she put her heavy arm around my shoulders. I could smell the warm herness rising from between her arm and her body, mixed with the smell of glycerin and rosewater, and the smell of her thick bun of hair.”¹¹³ This “tenderness” is extended in the life of memory:

Years afterward when I was grown, whenever I thought about the way I smelled that day, I would have a fantasy of my mother, her hands wiped dry from the washing, and her apron untied and laid neatly away, looking down upon me lying on the couch, and then slowly, thoroughly, our touching and caressing each other’s most secret places.¹¹⁴

The feminine equivalent of a castrating force—the abrupt interruption in a moment of early sexual exploration—is thus replaced by a fictional erotic stemming from a brief moment of real intimacy.

Barbara DiBernard asserts that Lorde is unconflicted as artist and woman and given license to depict a feminine muse without fear of objectification because of her lesbianism: “As a lesbian, she never transfers her primary and emotional intensity to a man.”¹¹⁵ While I cannot see

¹¹¹ibid., 78.ellipses in original

¹¹² ibid., 80.

¹¹³ ibid.

¹¹⁴ ibid., 78.

¹¹⁵ DiBernard Barbara, "Zami: A Portrait of an Artist as a Black Lesbian," *The Kenyon Review* 13, no. 4 (1991): 198. Di Bernard cites Jean Baker Miller’s *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976), Nancy Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), and Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* (1982) as the seminal texts for “the

the loving of other women as inherently antipatriarchal, Lorde's presentation of a self forged in sexuality recalls not only the later work in women's psychology that DiBernard turns to, but rather directly rebuts an essential shift in American psychoanalytic thinking with direct ties to Momism.

Erik Homberger Erikson, author of *Childhood and Society* and influential voice for American psychoanalysis in the 1950s, was the champion of "the achievement of either masculine or feminine identity rather than [Freud's] male or female object choice," as "the teleological heart of the whole adventure" of psychoanalysis.¹¹⁶ In this way, questions of sex become more easily contained by questions of gender and the appropriate means by which gender can be performed to maximize the national character that was newly the object of the psychoanalytic project. Lorde's mix of sensual fantasy and harsh reality do more, therefore, than simply trouble a view of bad mothering; by balancing hard with soft, it reimbues the relation between parent and child with a dynamic rooted in sexuality rather than gender identity. Audre's mother cannot be found wanting on either scale of moms that spoil or else neglect their children out of their appropriate gender performances, as she has exited the gender-role obsessed realm of Momist and Moynihanian discourse.

The erotic coupling of daughter and mother jolts us into recalculation. It is true that Audre finds her mother's lessons ambivalent in their effects, but is also resistant to a

idea of connection as central to women's experience" (196). She describes their reworkings of early childhood as establishing a distinction between an ego which must separate to achieve proper gender identity (a male child with a female mother as his primary caregiver) and a child who can maintain a relational understanding to her mother (a daughter. Notably, for Freud this lack of break would turn one to resentment, not sisterhood). I argue here that Lorde does more to reimburse maternal relationships with sexual object choice than remain within a discourse of gender performance in which, by virtue of being a woman and being attracted to women, she is never called upon to reject her mother.

¹¹⁶ Buhle, *Feminism and Its Discontents : A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis*, 187.

psychological bend that might see them through the lens of pathology. Spillers' history locates an "elision of terms, 'mother' and 'enslavement' are indistinct categories of the illegitimate inasmuch as these synonymous elements define, in effect, a cultural situation that is *father-lacking*."¹¹⁷ Lorde's mythologized life story is both father-present and resistant to Moynihan's shrugging endorsement of patriarchal default culture in that it exposes how such expectations of a healthy family were predicated on a balance of heteronormative sexual desire and education. Later in life, Audre imagines what was an interrupted sexual experience as a "thorough" exploration, which is to say the circle of wanting and receiving is made complete through this reliving, without either insisting on a black family life free from the masculine nor requiring a masculine element to complete the picture.¹¹⁸

In the simplest terms, Momism had mirror accusations to make. Some mothers were too hard and cold, others too soft and warm. Audre's mother is hard and warm, committed to but not defined by a male partner, and furthermore the mother of a daughter, the vessel of potential influence of least concern to a psychoanalytic discourse focused on national character, a thing understood to be defined by the state and well-being of its men. Kingston's mothers are equally ill-suited to popular pathologies attributed to motherhood and race. Yet, I have separated the two works of biomythography for this section because I believe they answer related but distinct claims against the mother in related but distinct ways. Where Lorde speaks to the metaphor of illness attributed to African American families by giving the black body and its relationships a dynamism beyond well and ill, beyond blame and recrimination and into the erotic, Kingston sets

¹¹⁷ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," 80.

¹¹⁸ For more on judgment, management and interference with reproduction and the making of the Black family, see Dorothy Roberts' *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (1997).

up a mother and daughter in negotiation with madness—another failing disproportionately laid at the feet of women, but in her work, given a different tenor.

As Lorde doubles the lessons of her mother through fantasy, Kingston enriches her memories through the reconsideration of subtext. We are told of a mother who is direct and harsh. Who, as we witnessed in the previous section, makes little time for sentiment. We are also encouraged to believe that this is a strategy for survival, not an inherent trait. In China the narrator's mother—Brave Orchid—lost two children. But, “She did not leave for Canton immediately after the children died. In China, there was time to complete feelings.”¹¹⁹ Brave Orchid's haste and steeliness is thus presented as an adaptation for life in America. There is reason, therefore, to suppose a separation between Brave Orchid's true emotions and outward declarations. As such, assumptions about a maternal nature are complicated by a description of one as adaptive.

The narrator finds solace in the possibility that her mother said what was expedient and not always what was felt. Perhaps no piece of *The Woman Warrior* conveys the contradictions of the protagonist's Chinese migrant mother so succinctly as this: “She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman.”¹²⁰ Much in the way Lorde troubles her mother as either a positive or a negative force in her life, Kingston's mother brings her daughter fear and sorrow and also great pride and compassion. It is not so surprising to a modern audience to find complexity in the memories of either parental figure as drawn through memoir. The stark contrast it bears, however, to the flat characterization and easy causal chains of mid-century momism and mid and

¹¹⁹Kingston, *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 60.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, 20.

late century racialized pathology, makes clear the general disinterest these latter enterprises held for feminine subjectivity. Moynihan walks us patiently, condescendingly through the illness harming black families, an illness of their own doing. Women take a heavy role in Momism but as narrowly conceived actors whose work upon the main subjects (sons and thereby the nation) begin and end the means by which they are judged. For Kingston, recentering the narrative to allow for greater female agency means taking on the ever-present threat of a vague but ominous madness.

As Mary Zeiss Stange recalls:

Whether one agrees with the view summarized by Phyllis Chesler, that madness (or depression, or schizophrenia) amounts merely to a label patriarchy applies to the often sane but nonconforming woman, or with the position of someone like Maggie Scarf, that the demands of patriarchal society do indeed drive more women than men into depression and severe psychic disorders, it is clearly the case that in our society "madness" is a problem for women.¹²¹

Stange decides that the sheer fact of women's overrepresentation in asylums, on couches, and in the court of public opinion that seeks to weigh in on sanity, is enough that we should not be "[surprised] to find so many madwomen in Kingston's story."¹²² I would take this a step further and say Kingston's obsession with the sane and the insane feminine figures are due to the high prevalence of women's nonconformity to patriarchal standards of emotional expression further compounded by a disinterest in translation that causes immigrant families, and east Asian

¹²¹ Mary Zeiss Stange, "Treading the Narrative Way between Myth and Madness: Maxine Hong Kingston and Contemporary Women's Autobiography," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3, no. 1 (1987): 25.

¹²² *ibid.*, 26.

immigrant families in particular, to be dismissed as deviating from norms of Western behavior.¹²³

Sara Ahmed's investigation of happiness as a project of British empire discloses some of the fundamental assumptions about how an othered person comes to be seen as happy and mentally well. Following the empire-building logic of Utilitarianism à la James Mill and through the critiques of that work from Friedrich Nietzsche, Achille Mbembe, and Homi Bhaba, Ahmed explains how "happiness involves being 'redirected' or turned around. *To turn others into individuals is to turn them around, by turning them toward the norms, values, and practices of the colonizer.*"¹²⁴ Her observations extend out of colonized countries and into the assimilating tactics aimed at British migrants in the present day. A long history convenes upon a simple assumption, that "to be well adjusted is to be adjusted to colonial history."¹²⁵ For her part, Kingston walks a thin line between adaptive and assimilative. It is open to debate if in the competing histories of women who go mad and women who do not there is a prescription for falling in line with white, national standards of what happiness or wellness ought to involve.

So-called madness and happiness pose distinct questions and yet exist along the same continuum of internal well-being as ever in relation to a social, external, intractable system of

¹²³ The most common argument against migrant populations in U.S. history regards them less as mentally ill than as otherwise criminal or disloyal. In 2018 this is cast in vague assessments of MS-13. Early in the 20th century, Nativists feared Catholics were loyal "to a foreign prince" in the form of the papacy. (Priscilla Alvarez, "A Brief History of America's 'Love-Hate' Relationship with Immigration," *The Atlantic*, February 19 2017.) In fact, immigrant populations in Lorde's and Kingston's time of publication had lower institutionalization rates across the board—prisons, jails, psychiatric hospitals or other mental institutions. A great many pejorative traits assigned to migrant populations, however, blur into categories of mental deficiency or maladjustment. (Kristin F. Butcher and Anne Morrison Piehl, "Recent Immigrants: Unexpected Implications for Crime and Incarceration," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 51, no. 4 (1998).)

¹²⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, (Durham NC: Duke University Press,, 2010). 128.emphasis in original.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, 132.

measurement. Anne A. Cheng demonstrates how living with competing impulses to assimilate and to carry on a culture fixes the racialized body in an endless process of evaluating one's own place on this spectrum between sick and well. For Cheng, this relationship can be best understood in terms of susceptibility and melancholia. She argues that Kingston's "narrator's persistent, hypochondriacal identification with invalidism and its inverse functions as a mode of protection *against* a national sociability that was meant to exclude her in the first place."¹²⁶ Associating herself with the madwomen of her stories is not an act of straight-forward doubling or sympathy on behalf of Kingston's narrator, but evidence of "the text's acknowledged confusion between states of healing and illness."¹²⁷ In this manner, Cheng provides a framework for looking upon assimilating to states of normative wellness as a quest for sanity that neither achieving nor rejecting standard behaviors can ultimately promise.

The double bind plays out not only within the narrator but between characters. Kingston presents an eccentric mother torn between cultures but decidedly in control of her mental faculties. She stands in contrast to women unable to maintain sanity in the wake of aborted dreams. The chapter, "The Myth of The Western Palace," for example, makes a distinction between the madcap (Brave Orchid: the narrator's mother) and the genuinely mad (Moon Orchid: the narrator's aunt). The mother figure schemes. She invents numerous possible ways her reluctant sister might reunite with her long-separated husband from China, from simply moving into his house and pretending she had always been there to the plot they eventually pursue of pretending to have a broken leg in the street across from his medical practice. While

¹²⁶ A.A. Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 80. Emphasis in original

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, 100.

the mother figure is animated by indignance and exuberance, her sister wilts under the force of her suggestions and the inevitable rejection from her now American husband. She begins the chapter foreign and disoriented; she ends it institutionalized.

This aspect of *The Woman Warrior* bears much in common with Maggie Scarf's portrayals of feminine psychiatric disorders. While some early critics of the treatment of women within psychotherapeutic discourse chose, like Chesler, to focus on the ways in which traditionally feminine traits were first encouraged and later pathologized, Scarf attends rather to the hypothesis that women did in fact suffer emotional and mental disorders at greater rates as a result of the unique pressures placed upon them. Scarf's influential *Unfinished Business: Pressure Points in the Lives of Women* argues, for example, that women are encouraged from birth to locate their worth and well-being in the affirmations of others. This emotional dependency that comes as part of "the ordinary feminine sex-role package"¹²⁸ is, however, too precarious to support a woman throughout her lifetime as "Rupture and disintegration are not exceptions; they are cultural norms."¹²⁹ Moon Orchid, the aunt, while not subject to precisely those Americanized female pressures Scarf focuses on, is nevertheless an example of how a woman can be driven to a place of mental anguish by her culturally specific circumstances.¹³⁰

She is unmoored by her new life at a late age on foreign soil. She is convinced that various types of local non-Asian ethnic minorities are after her. She closes up all the blinds and insists on keeping the lights off lest she be found. "The next odd thing Moon Orchid did was to

¹²⁸ M. Scarf, *Unfinished Business: Pressure Points in the Lives of Women* (Ballantine, 1981), 357.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*, 536.

¹³⁰ I include Moon Orchid in a consideration of pathologized mothers because she is both literally a mother (of the narrator's cousin) and serves as one of the work's many foremother figures.

cry whenever anyone left the house,” Kingston writes, “She held on to them, pulled on their clothes, begged them not to go.”¹³¹ The story of a migrant undone by culture shock is perhaps not an especially fresh trope. Yet, Cheng’s insights are productive for thinking through the balance of sanity between mother and aunt. Moon Orchid’s response to the threat of illness is to become profoundly hypochondriacal—closing the blinds, pleading with family to avoid contagion—which in itself becomes the source of her disintegrating mental health. The relatively well Brave Orchid has her strategies also: “Brave Orchid saw that all variety had gone from her sister. She was indeed mad. ‘The difference between mad people and sane people,’ Brave Orchid explained to the children, ‘is that sane people have variety when they talk story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over.’”¹³² The irony is less explicit than it is for Moon Orchid (made ill by the avoidance of contamination), but in her insistence that an abundance of lies safeguard one as one lie never could, Brave Orchid too carves a narrow, if not impassable, space in which to find oneself well.

Just as Brave Orchid has thrown away the medications and suggestions of Western specialists attending to her sister, she has also altered their diagnosis, reframing it not beyond pathology, but as a disease of narrative and one which takes place between a person and her audience and not merely within herself.¹³³ Following Bonnie Melchoir, I would cast this as a cultural pivot on Kingston’s part, not a reversal: “Kingston’s challenge to American ideologies

¹³¹ Kingston, *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 158.

¹³² *ibid.*, 159.

¹³³ I would argue that this redefinition of madness deviates in some important ways from the concerns of more contemporary mad studies. Madness, for Kingston, remains something to be avoided and recovered from if possible. There is no call to willfully “make non(sense),” but rather to observe the limits of madness through narrative construction instead of medical disability. Richard A. Ingram, *Doing Mad Studies: Making (Non)Sense Together*, vol. 5, 2016 (2016).

does not [. . .] translate into an easy affirmation of the oral or the ‘Chinese.’”¹³⁴ Sanity may be achieved by story but the Chinese tradition is also frequently referred to as the one in which women are enslaved and driven mad by marriage. Of Kingston’s characters, Stange notes, “The madwomen are, after all, victims, having succumbed to the claims of patriarchy.”¹³⁵ In this way Kingston is kindred to feminist recalculations of psychoanalysis that sought out more dynamic relations between patient and pathogen. The conditions for sanity are worked out between an Americanized daughter and a Chinese educated and resourceful mother, through the character of an aunt with insufficient means to cope. But, just as meaningfully, the spectrum of sick to well is itself undermined by the fundamental similarities among characters of diverse fates. They are each, as Cheng describes, “hypochondriacs” in that each voice is concerned with, and developing strategies for, avoiding the ever-present threat of mental illness. The madwoman represents less a woman who is mad than a predicament with no rational means of escape.

I argue that for each of the narratives presented here, sanity and well-being are questions of story—as it passes between actors—and thus of genre. The slanderous illustrations of Philip Wylie, which, as Buhle explains, differ in degree and color but not content from clinical and popular work of his time, were surely interpreted by contemporary audiences more as a fable in service of particular and well-established biases than as simply works of research. To those more straight-forward charges of villainy, Kingston and Lorde offer mothers disfigured but not quite hideous. The women of a previous generation may be understood within these biomyths as

¹³⁴ Bonnie Melchior, "A Marginal 'I': The Autobiographical Self Deconstructed in Maxine Hong Kingston's 'the Woman Warrior'," *Biography* 17, no. 3 (1994): 282.

¹³⁵ Stange, "Treading the Narrative Way between Myth and Madness: Maxine Hong Kingston and Contemporary Women's Autobiography," 26.

dangerous or even mad, but the nature of their impact and insanity is negotiated with readers through a series of discontinuous representations.

Stange offers a unique perspective on what a reader can glean from Kingston's tales of the mad:

Perhaps the question is whether women's nonconforming madness is a matter of metaphor or of reality. (Is it, we might ask, a sign of strength or of weakness?) Certainly Kingston's descriptions suggest that Moon Orchid, Crazy Mary, Pee-A-Nah and the others were mad in conventional "real world" terms. The author identifies with them, using their stories to fashion her own, seeing herself through the darkness of their insane stories. Her insistence that sanity inheres in the very multiplicity of stories of the self, however, renders these tales of madness curious metaphors for sanity. In the world of the text, these madwomen become heroines of a sort. [. . .] In their very refusal to be what society says they must be, they achieve the status of martyrs for women's antipatriarchal cause. Significantly, they all seem to end happily, in their element, at peace with themselves.¹³⁶

It is a bold interpretation to grant happiness to the madwomen. On one hand it is explicitly stated in the text, through the words of Moon Orchid herself. Upon being visited at the asylum she proclaims, "Oh, Sister, I am so happy here. No one ever leaves. Isn't that wonderful?"¹³⁷ As a reader, however, it is a challenge to parse words as pathetic as they are elated from a source of limited mental faculty. At the same time, whose impression of the aunt's happiness should matter any more than her own? It is furthermore a joy she takes in and through the presence of others, notably deemed her "daughters" (the other institutionalized women whom she claims speak her language): "Sure enough, the women smiled back at her and reached out to touch her as she went by. She had a new story, and yet she slipped entirely away, not waking up one morning."¹³⁸ I

¹³⁶ *ibid.*

¹³⁷ Kingston, *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 160.

¹³⁸ *ibid.*

might agree with Stange that madness is a means of resistance, a suggestion that all a maternal figure needs are the right daughters who can hear her, were it not for Kingston's own wary use of the phrase, "and yet." While we may understand the aunt as elderly and her death as a peaceful one, Kingston's contradictory phrasing is perhaps her greatest testament to deny any one authority on the inner lives of others, even an optimistic authority.¹³⁹ Moon Orchid was not telling a new story "when" she died. She was telling a new story "and yet" she died, suggesting a hungry economy of ill-fate.¹⁴⁰ Either madness or death would have her.

Between the looming figure of a powerful mother complicated by racialized pathologization and the indefinite figure of the insane woman of circumstance, Lorde and Kingston paint portraits of women's wellbeing and power that cast the dominant themes of their times—Momism, blame, and illness—through a glass darkly. They do not stand in full opposition to these themes of feminine psychotherapeutic discourse, but neither do they reproduce them intact. At the heart of impertinent but very real questions of their age—Are black women to be the subjects of pathological scrutiny for not only their own mental states but for that of those around them? Is "madness" a matter of story, which is to say caught rather than inborn? —is the very important matter of who is asking and who ultimately decides. In this way,

¹³⁹ In the concluding section of this chapter I will return to the notion of authority on the mental and emotional lives of others. I argue that the work of analysis is not given over to the daughter or women generally, but fractured across subjectivities living and dead, real and fictional, undermining not simply the masculine knowing one but the claim to such authority itself.

¹⁴⁰ We might also read more into Kingston's use of the phrase, "slipped entirely away." First, it seems to deny an afterlife; the aunt is not merely away but entirely gone. Even if one were to read this generously as simply a passage from one space to another—a reading supported by the euphemism of 'slipping'—it remains clear that the aunt has been utterly stricken from the world of the narrator. The slippage itself, also seems to echo Moon Orchid's descent into madness. On either side of death, hers is a slow and passive journey, without intent or control, from one state unto the next. As I will demonstrate in the coming pages, this is of particular relevance in a book so heavily populated by ghosts.

I suggest that the very means by which stories are told can upset dynamics central to psychoanalytic frames of mother to daughter, patient to analyst, person to person interaction.

In 1996 Hortense Spillers put forth the following charge:

We traditionally understand the psychoanalytic in a pathological register, and there is the real question of whether it remains psychoanalysis without its principal features—a “third ear,” something like the “fourth wall,” or the speech that unfolds in the pristinely silent arena of two star witnesses—a patient and one “who is supposed to know.” The scene of assumptions is complicated in the privileged relation of client and doctor in the atmosphere of the confessional. But my interest in this ethical self-knowing is to unhook the psychoanalytic hermeneutic from its rigorous curative framework and recover it in a free-floating realm of self-didactic possibility that might decentralize and disperse the knowing one.¹⁴¹

Her aims meaningfully inform my own. As discussed in the previous section, both Kingston and Lorde engage—perhaps necessarily as part and parcel of the autobiographical form—in the realm of the self-didactic, even when they do so with some suspicion or self-recrimination. I suggested, furthermore, that the role of intersubjectivity was taking place on a separate register, one which at least complicated viewing these paths of self-discovery through a pathological lens. I will not argue that either Kingston or Lorde fulfilled Spillers’ call to unhook the curative and the lived before the call was even made. What I will suggest is that between the racially reconstituted psychoanalytic Spillers calls for and the mid to late-century projects of

¹⁴¹ Hortense J. Spillers, “All the Things You Could Be by Now If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother”: Psychoanalysis and Race,” *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 4 (1996): 152-53. A word on Spiller’s use of the phrase, “fourth wall.”: This term, common in media and performance studies, is one I am thus far unable to locate in texts dealing primarily with the psychoanalytic (and not also film analysis). As readers are no doubt aware, the fourth wall refers typically to the presumption that something which is being performed is done as if the audience were not present. Postmodernism famously breaks the fourth wall to address the audience directly or to suggest a knowledge of being watched within a presentation. I take Spillers invocation of it here to be loosely bound to this tradition: the analyst, though part of the scene, serves also as one who is meant to observe but not participate in events. In this context, the “third ear”, “the knowing one”, “the fourth wall” all serve as slightly distinct ways of conceptualizing a position of power and authority that makes a pretense of being objective and removed. As “the fourth wall” elicits complexities of performance and reception beyond the scope of this chapter, I will more make more use of her other two phrases for this phenomenon in the pages to come.

pathologizing those minds belonging to bodies of color, fictionalized selfhood formation could do worse than to cast as its third ear the psychoanalytic subject of the daughter.

Spillers believes the historical reframing—the one that would make possible a serious psychoanalytic framework for the understanding of a black life—is a linguistic undertaking. “I believe,” she writes, “that the problem here has more to do with evolving a language appropriate to the subjects differently constructed from the classical moment of psychoanalytic theory and its postmodern aftermath than deciding ‘for’ or ‘against’ the psychoanalytic aim.”¹⁴² If one is underrepresented (clinically and in the wealth of public information on emotional wellness), that does not mean the aim of self-discovery is undone. For Spillers, and I will argue Lorde and Kingston before her, it needs to be rearticulated.

I have sought to observe the means by which this recasting takes place, in the first part of this section by reading these narratives in the context of specific discourses of pathology aimed at immigrant and of-color families. There are two figures who factor heavily. The first is the mother, a subject of much concern, as a supposedly unsound head of household and subsequently unfortunate and ill-equipped shaper of men and the dismissed but unsettlingly pervasive figure of the madwoman. The work that remains marks the role with which our authors most closely align themselves: daughters. Too young to be the perpetrators of familial imbalance and too female to factor heavily in the consideration of its purported consequences, girls slipped under the pathological radar for a time.¹⁴³ It is my contention that some of them wrote about the space they

¹⁴² Franz Fanon similarly supports the thesis that Black lives are not well served by psychoanalytic frameworks written by and for white subjects: “Freud and Adler and even the cosmic Jung did not think of the Negro in all their investigations. And they were quite right not to have. It is too often forgotten that neurosis is not a basic element of human reality. Like it or not, the Oedipus complex is far from coming into being among Negroes.” F. Fanon and R. Philcox, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Press, 2008), 117.

¹⁴³ Even at its origins, the psychoanalytic project isn’t much invested in the role of the daughter. Elaine Showalter summarizes Freud’s short and late “views about female psychology and sexuality” as they are articulated in “three

found there and, in that voice and position, located something akin to the language Spillers sought to “decentralize and disperse the knowing one.”¹⁴⁴

This is yet another space in which I believe affordances cross one another in such a way that make these literary works possible. The racialized pathologization of the fifties and sixties are being turned over in the minds of our authors at the same time as they look back upon their childhood memories of mothers caught at the height of momism. They cast themselves—daughters—as audience to and interpreter of these movements during the seventies and eighties, just as daughters come to occupy a new space in psychodynamic thinking. It is true that boys were the primary concern of Philip Wylie and Patrick Moynihan, but the nation’s daughters will also come into view in the seventies when the subject of eating disorders is addressed with new fervor.

Works such as *Psychosomatic Families: Anorexia Nervosa in Context* (1978) and *The Golden Cage: The Enigma of Anorexia Nervosa* (1978) placed new focus on heretofore undertheorized girls, but also cast them in the unique context of family therapy. Minuchin et al address rather directly the importance of perspective: “The history of anorexia nervosa is an object lesson in the importance of point of view. The investigator’s point of view, or governing

brief essays of the late 1920s and early 1930s.” It is here that the theory of penis envy is put forth and from that inherent deficiency is borne a daughter’s natural “contempt” for her mother. In this formulation daughters may seek a “happy resolution” by orienting her sexual object choice to her father (and to men). Freud was of course eager to theorize the psychological circumstances of his many women patients, but generally in their relation to men, be it analyst or father. The relationship between mother and daughter is less integral. In Buhle’s history of mid-century Momism, daughters are conspicuously if unsurprisingly absent from the fear-mongering claims to societal psychological distress: “in undermining masculinity, Momism had placed in jeopardy the future of the free world.” (Buhle here uses the term “Momism” as Wylie intended, to refer to the purported actions of mothers, not the theories thereof). Showalter, *The Female Malady : Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*, 199. Buhle, *Feminism and Its Discontents : A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis*, 147.

¹⁴⁴ Spillers, “All the Things You Could Be by Now If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother”: Psychoanalysis and Race,” 153.

concept, is his blueprint. It determines the selection of events to be studied and also the methods to be used.”¹⁴⁵ In this case, the appropriate object of study is not the individual young woman suffering but the entire family and their patterns of communication. Minuchin goes so far as to suggest that it is the family unit that suffers from and brings about this psychosomatic disease. These investigations into anorexia are far more concerned with feedback loops (and middle class white girls) to be of specific relevance to Kingston’s and Lorde’s stories, but there is a symmetry between the newly psychoanalytically interesting figure of the daughter and the girls carved out of the space of the families Kingston and Lorde describe.

Both would-be-memoirists are attentive to their roles as daughter figures—both in the suggestion of ancestral responsibility and the particular cultural value of “daughters” within the worlds they inhabit. A telling passage in Kingston reveals much about how both the ingrained lack of respect for the daughter figure and the forms of her vengeance and self-assertion: “‘Maggots! Where are my grandsons? I want grandsons! Give me grandsons! Maggots!’ He pointed at each one of us, ‘Maggot! Maggot! Maggot! Maggot! Maggot! Maggot!’ [. . .] ‘He does that at every meal,’ the girls told us in English. ‘Yeah,’ we said, ‘our old man hates us too. What assholes.’”¹⁴⁶ This grandfather to six girls makes no secret of his disgust. On one hand, it is perhaps alarming that the girls take this abuse with such calm. Offense is clearly a part of their lives they have grown accustomed to.¹⁴⁷ The selection is illustrative, however, in its dialectal

¹⁴⁵ S. Minuchin, Rosman, B.L., Baker, L., *Psychosomatic Families: Anorexia Nervosa in Context* (Harvard University Press, 1978), 74.

¹⁴⁶ Kingston, *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 191.

¹⁴⁷ Scenes such as this fueled the backlash against *The Woman Warrior* for those who argued it cast Chinese men in a negative light. Sau Ling Cynthia Wong summarizes and responds to the controversy, explaining that while Kingston was charged with being simultaneously too inaccurate and too hard on the men of her experience, “In the final analysis, the main reason critics attack *The Woman Warrior* is that it is not insufficiently factual but that it is insufficiently fictional: that the author did not tamper more freely with her life story” in order to assure unsympathetic or judgmental white western readers would not find fault with her community. Sau-Ling Cynthia

switch. Mobilizing the English well known to them and foreign to their grandfather, they are empowered to insult him back, to his face but without his knowledge. Kingston drives this home by making the speakers plural. The cousins (here “the girls”) explain as one unit. The sisters (“we”) call him an “asshole” collectively. This daughters’ language is a shared power among a younger generation and one granted a particular air of American rebelliousness by the choice of a slang and scatological pejorative.

Lorde’s framing of Audre as in negotiation with her mother for a grip on identity similarly emphasizes the centrality of her role as a daughter. She remarks upon their similarities and a lineage of strength even as she distances herself from familial life. There is a line of continuity also in the aforementioned emphasis on the erotic. Lorde’s memoir runs on a chronology of female lovers which offputtingly but also generatively includes her mother, at least in fantasy. In this respect, Audre’s early awakenings to sexuality through a longing of physical intimacy with her mother mark her as ever the daughter figure, a daughter to many. This theory is born out in the ways in which many of Lorde’s earliest experiences with lovers or partners have an imbalance of power and serve as experiences in learning and growth.¹⁴⁸

Wong, “Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour? Maxine Hong Kingston’s the Woman Warrior and the Chinese-American Autobiographical Controversy” in *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*, ed. L.E. Skandera-Trombley (G.K. Hall, 1998), 154.

It is noteworthy that both the authors I focus on in this chapter have been accused of misandry (though Lorde more for her nonfiction essays and speeches than her work in *Zami*). Anxieties surrounding Lorde’s dreams of a feminine future were similarly cast as a betrayal—a woman choosing to combat sexism in way that contributed to racist stereotypes of men in their ethnic or racial group.

Wong sets us down the right path in suggesting that question of emotional labor in representation is a matter of genre. These charges might be revisited within a conversation about widely accepted psychological theories about biological sex and the development of personality, susceptibility to emotional and mental strain, and culpability for the wellness of others.

¹⁴⁸ Lorde presents Audre as self-aware but nevertheless highly susceptible to the suggestions of other women. Her lover in Stamford, Ginger, for example speaks to her condescendingly, calling her “kiddo” and “slick kitty from the city.” Young Audre understand Ginger’s blindspots (“What was it that Ginger had discovered or invented about me

While surely any story featuring a feminine life is the story of a daughter, the relations to mothers and motherhood in these works shine a particularly bright light on that role as opposed to others—wife, sister, girlfriend, etc. (or in Lorde’s case, reframes other kinds of relationships as mother/daughter in nature). Attending to the lives of daughters as daughters is in and of itself a radical move because the feminine actor in *The Moynihan Report*, in *Momism*, even in sympathetic revisions of psychoanalysis à la Scarf, is a secondary subject. The real argument, even in defense of the female, involves her influence; her merit is defined by the outcomes of her sons. Some find her wanting, others plead for a less punishing formulation, but the circuit of mother to son to society remains intact. The daughter is thus not especially marked by scrutiny or power. She is, by virtue of her neglect, relatively unmarked. And in that inattention lies possibility.

Even as the daughter moves firmly into view in the attention to anorexia in the late 70s, the perspective of the one who knows remains intact. Minuchin and others mean to mix it up in their techniques of full family observation and interaction—and indeed, grant suffering young girls the reprieve of not shouldering the blame for their condition alone—but authority on the daughters’ internal lives does not move. It is perhaps not especially surprising either that the condition that puts daughters at the center of psychological interest is physically manifest in ways impossible to miss and focused on her physical body. Lorde and Kingston, I argue, favor

that I would now have to pretend to fulfill?”) But she also, at least at this stage in her life, feels nevertheless compelled to comply: “Like the time I promptly downed two straight vodkas to fulfill her image of me as a hard-drinking new York Village girl” Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, 135.

In Mexico, Lorde more explicitly invokes the image of a mother as Audre falls for the accomplished and worldly forty-eight year-old Eudora. The discrepancy in years and experience is explicitly stated: “Eudora knew many things about loving women that I had not yet learned.”¹⁶⁹ It is not simply an age difference however that makes the relationship special; it is the coming of age that is profoundly a part of their exchange. As Eudora sends her away, abruptly ending their affair, the young Audre reflects, “In that moment, as in the first night when I held her, I felt myself pass beyond childhood.”*Ibid.*, 175.

authority over scrutiny, the view out from rather than on the body of daughter. We are invited to see the world of well-being and family dynamics through a daughter's eyes—an opportunity we can only fully appreciate in the context of texts so very invested in vision.

Lorde's many metaphorical uses of sight hinge on the twin concepts of being visible and being able to see. Or rather, in the denial of both. Little Audre is legally blind. The physical reality of the limited vision does not preclude it from holding symbolic sway. The summer is agony for a child whose weak vision leaves her hypersensitive to bright light, one who "viewed Julys through an agonizing corolla of dazzling whiteness."¹⁴⁹ Lorde provides in detail the pain she experiences one particular summer when they are denied service at a lunch counter in D.C.: "The waitress was white, and the counter was white, and the ice cream I never ate in Washington D.C. was white, and the white heat and the white pavement and the white stone monuments of my first Washington summer made me sick to my stomach for the whole rest of that trip."¹⁵⁰ A stinging blur of white is here both the byproduct of her myopia and a startlingly accurate if impressionistic view of pervasive whiteness that means her harm. In this sense, Lorde demonstrates the obstructions to one's sight as harboring the potential for insight.

And yet there is a distinction between vision that is obscured and that which is willfully short-sighted. Lorde succinctly describes such a stunted capacity in the person of her straight

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 69.

¹⁵⁰ Formal qualities of this passage do much to amplify Lorde's perspective. That Washington should be named twice and alluded to a third time through the mention of monuments when we have recently been given her location already is a telling critique on the central artery of the United States. We are to be reminded that this is the seat of power representing each of us. Her use of polysyndeton has an equally chilling effect. Each white thing is punctuated by an "and," a term that serves through its repetition to suggest that the list of white things is potentially endless while also granting weight to each named white thing: the heat *and* the pavement *and* the monuments. *Ibid.*, 71.

white roommate: “She [Rhea] did not dare see the similarities and so she could not see the differences.” Rhea never seems to catch on that Audre is a lesbian. Here, Lorde is pinpointing the source of her cluelessness despite much evidence in Rhea’s blinding unconscious fear of putting herself in Audre’s place well enough to truly see her world.¹⁵¹ Kingston, likewise, describes her young narrator as having shut down the vision centers of her brain in the face of frightening difference. Describing one of the “mad” women, she proclaims, “her face was a white blur because she was indoors so much and because I tried not to look at her directly.”¹⁵² It is an interesting juxtaposition of environmental effects and imperfect perception. The woman is made white both by her tendencies to shut herself in from the white world outside and by a young Chinese-American girl’s failure to grapple with her existence.¹⁵³ The self-censuring move, a common feature of the work, is one way Kingston demonstrates culpability in the disappearance of others.

¹⁵¹ Such an un-seeing gaze is something Lorde finds herself on the receiving end of as a matter of habit. In Mexico City, surrounded by brown-skinned people, Audre becomes attuned to her place within the sightlines of those around her. “I had never felt visible before, nor even known I lacked it” (156). In the context of an identity that is conversely over-watched and under-seen, Lorde offers up the sight of nearly blind child become invisible woman. What would such a person contribute unique to the theories that seek to pathologize her skin and sexuality?

Pathologies attributed to same sex coupling have been a matter of public and academic interest for quite some time. Regina Kunzel has documented the ways in which the gay rights activism of the 1970s aimed at the removal of homosexual attraction from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, relied on a representation of the well-adjusted gay that effectively bolstered normative views of mental health, even as it released some of the gay community from one aspect of stigmatization, a point I will return to in the conclusion of this chapter. Regina Kunzel, *Queer History, Mad History, and the Politics of Health*, vol. 69 (2017).

The pressures of mother blaming and hegemonic heteronormativity further collide in the work of Jennifer Terry, who argues that the “popular resurgence of mother-blaming was fueled by a misogynist and homophobic backlash over a perceived erosion of gender distinctions. Jennifer Terry, ““Momism” and the Making of Treasonous Homosexuals,” in *“Bad” Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. M. Ladd-Taylor and L. Umansky (NYU Press, 1998).

¹⁵² Kingston, *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 187.

¹⁵³ This character, made pale from within and without, serves as another example of Anne A. Cheng’s description of “self-allergy” in Kingston.

It is a challenge, too much of a challenge, to make one's self visible and to make one's self able to see clearly.¹⁵⁴ Kingston's narrator does not suffer the partial blindness of young Audre but she nevertheless closes her eyes, to the things she fears and the influences she has difficulty coping with, as demonstrated in a scene in which, even as an adult she shuts her eyes tightly, feigning sleep, when her mother enters her bedroom and watches her.¹⁵⁵ Her description, "eyes shut, I pictured my mother" demonstrates an affinity with the mother-blaming tropes of her childhood and even perhaps the internalized "disgust of American faces" cast toward Chinese women.¹⁵⁶ But we are also witnessing the origins of a woman eager to remain within her own mind. She closes her eyes, choosing an imaginary version of her mother instead of the one she would see were she to open them.

In scenes such as this, these stories give credence to mother-blaming narrative formations lingering in their time and, in the same breath, alter the means of observation. Biomythography shares, among other strengths, the humility to speak to its own blindness but insist on its own perspective. We are provided the view from an underauthorized daughter, but—just as Spillers feared—the language of analysis, the capacity to take the position of the one who sees is not fully available for her. I wish to suggest that these tropes of blindness are more tightly bound to emotional authority than is immediately evident. The ability to see and the authority to speak are mutually constitutive.

¹⁵⁴ For those who cannot see or be seen, there are the other senses. Lorde takes particular pains to describe the haptic aspects of her encounters. Tracing embodiment in Black literature is well-worn territory, and not wholly unproblematic. What a retreat to sense other than vision uniquely contributes in this framework is, I argue, a reflection upon the practices of demarcating emotional well-being or mental fortitude. As the work of Deborah Weinstein (discussed in the following section) demonstrates, visual information has been granted pride of place in the development of the Psy sciences, even as they center themselves in auditory exchanges.

¹⁵⁵ Kingston, *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 99-100.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 171.

The under scrutinized daughter is in one sense liberated by the inattention paid to her by popular and clinical psychology and yet also cast adrift by it. Spillers' essay title sums the dilemma up nicely. In enumerating "All the Things You Could Be By Now if Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother," Spillers is drawing attention to the scandalous acceptance of Freud's culturally particular subjects (who were not only white and of means, but at times literally his own relatives) as universal psyches, applicable to anyone. The daughter of newly migrated laundromat workers in California and a budding black lesbian in the village could hardly be further from Anna Freud. These daughters scan the horizon for a vantage point from which to illuminate their complex emotional lives. There is little to be found. And so their lives are presented as both outward and profoundly inward, closing their eyes to see, transgressing the memoir's allegiance to truth telling in order to gain perspective.

Tricksters, Warriors, & Ghosts

Zami and *The Woman Warrior* are written from the perspective of daughters. As an underauthorized perspective, the daughter figure makes for an interesting "knowing one" on familial dynamics. Yet they lack the visual language—blinded by whiteness, moved to keep their eyes closed to stark realities—to make pretense to serve as the objective onlooker. This vision is made even more complex by a fracturing of subjectivity that extends out into the fictive. In their complexity and interdependence, the circuitry of their lives bears a resemblance to contemporaneous views of familial therapeutics.¹⁵⁷ Yet the daughter makes a poor subject within

¹⁵⁷ Weinstein provides this summary of family therapy and its aims: "During the 1950s and 1960s, a group of clinicians in the United States developed a psychotherapeutic approach to treating mental illness that located the source of pathology and the potential for cure in the cyclical patterns of family interactions rather than in the

standard methods of family psychology as the identity she forges with the trickster, the warrior, and the ghost prove hard to pull apart.

In their interwoven relationships these stories reflect contemporaneous approaches to study of the family unit. The previous section highlighted the ways in which Momism served the higher purpose of understanding the nation, or at the very least the male would-be leaders of that nation. Family therapy turned its attention to small groups rather than individual care givers, but with similar aims. As Deborah Weinstein explains in *The Pathological Family: Postwar America and the Rise of Family Therapy*, “The social scientists studying culture and personality were interested in the relationship between the group and the individual, and they saw the family as key to that relationship.”¹⁵⁸ Even as broad purposes suggest eventual reductivism, the new dynamism inherent in clinical emphasis on interrelations held the capacity to expand the players working through an emotional dilemma. For example, “Family therapists also typically highlighted the importance of being aware that change in one person, or one part of the system, would induce change elsewhere in the system, so a therapist should be prepared for repercussions.”¹⁵⁹ Even some of the more radical aspects of Lorde’s and Kingston’s works are well at home within this approach that acknowledges interdependence.¹⁶⁰

biological or psychological characteristics of an individual.” Deborah Weinstein, *The Pathological Family : Postwar America and the Rise of Family Therapy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 2.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 88. See also Weinstein’s evaluation of Murray Bowen who, as acting chief of the Laboratory of Adult Psychiatry, investigated schizophrenia as an extreme state of normal human behavior, an approach to pathology as excess rather than disease that promised a broader relevance to all human life than treatment or cure for the inflicted (114).

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 41.

¹⁶⁰ One should not confuse enthusiasm for the study of families with a positive interpretation of the effects of familial dynamics. On the subject of mother-child relationships, for example, a strong connection was often identified as the very essence of the problem. “In his psychotherapy progress note from a patient seen at the Menninger Clinic on January 13, 1954,” Weinstein writes, “Bowen used the phrase ‘intense symbiotic relationship’

Kingston speaks to such connected causal chains in describing the formulation of the final story in her biomyth: “the beginning is hers [her mother’s], the ending, mine.”¹⁶¹ Her full story is only possible to tell through multiple narrators, especially through tales passed along to her through her mother. The attention to interfamilial dynamics recalls some of the founding principles of family therapy in the latter half of the twentieth century. As Weinstein observes, early theorists of psychiatric investment in first families and then, more broadly, culture, situated themselves in a larger turn toward cybernetics across numerous fields—a commitment (or frenzy) well summarized by her allusive chapter title: “Systems Everywhere.”¹⁶²

And yet, the third ear Spillers cautions against maintains not only its distance, but its authority: “Some therapists intervening in a family system in the 1960s claimed to have more in common with an engineer modifying an experimental system or a scientist observing a biological system than with a psychoanalyst focused on individual psychodynamic issues.”¹⁶³ Indeed, Weinstein demonstrates family therapy’s commitment to audiovisual documentation that portrays a method seeking connection within family but not with or through family systems. Familial tales, however inextricable from one another, however insistent on a plurality of sources

to describe the patient’s relationship with her mother, and he lamented the difficulty of therapeutic success in this case as long as the mother was on the scene.”Ibid., 115.

¹⁶¹ Kingston, *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 206.

¹⁶² Weinstein borrows this phrase from Ludwig van Bertalanffy, whose “introduction to General System Theory includes a section titled ‘Systems Everywhere’ in which he discusses the diffusion of systems thinking through different scientific fields, popular thought, and mass media.” Weinstein, *The Pathological Family : Postwar America and the Rise of Family Therapy*, 194.

¹⁶³ *ibid.*, 41.

of meaning, are nevertheless given over to pathogenic scrutiny. Their interpretation ultimately lies beyond the familial unit and within the eye of a supposed scientific objectivity.¹⁶⁴

To some extent, it would scarcely be fair to expect anything else of clinical endeavors that saw it as their mission is to weed out pathogens, to bring about cure, be it at the individual or societal level. If biomythography is to offer something new to the theories of how the “mad,” depressed, or troubled of their time period might have otherwise been conceived, the trouble with the familial unit is not that it is beyond the individual, but in the assumption that true and helpful meaning will always take on a rational form through the eye of an authoritative third party. Kingston and Lorde envision an emotional life drawing from the family but most perceptible through myth, expanding the unit out beyond the family to include those that have already gone, even those that never-were.

In this way, Lorde and Kingston take the trope of the interdependent familial specimen and rebuild it within the confines of culturally specific mythic tropes. Mary Zeiss Stange summarizes the means by which some of the women of *The Woman Warrior* remain well: “The key lies in embracing the reality of manifold possibility, multiple identity. The impossible stories of dream and myth are truer on a deeper level than the all-too-possible stories of a world which seems designed to drive a woman crazy.”¹⁶⁵ Contrary to much advice that would see a woman steel up her identity against the coming storm of emotional turmoil, Kingston sees her youthful self and truly her mother throughout her life as bending to avoid breaking. This is not the call to

¹⁶⁴ Based in Walter B. Cannon’s theories of homeostasis and consisting of many plotted diagrams of interfamilial communications, the ties between family therapy and cybernetics have more to say about emotion as an object of research and as a partner to developing narrative theories (specifically that of structuralism). Such connections are pursued in the chapter to come.

¹⁶⁵ Stange, “Treading the Narrative Way between Myth and Madness: Maxine Hong Kingston and Contemporary Women’s Autobiography,” 27.

strive toward a compromising spirit, but to assume identities which contradict even as they coexist.

For a writer and a woman faced with such a daunting way forward, the invocation of archetypes is a useful strategy. The trickster is particularly well suited to a figure who seeks to avoid labels thrust upon her.¹⁶⁶ Kara Provost explains that “In *Zami* as well as in a number of earlier and later poems, Lorde repeatedly returns to the power of the trickster’s heterogenous identity and ability to communicate, connect, and survive despite (and because of) difference.”¹⁶⁷ For Audre that figure is Afrekete. Afrekete’s very existence is a trick. Is she a lover or a manifestation of self? Lorde describes a brief and magical affair with her toward the close of her journey,¹⁶⁸ but also reclaims her as a figure of myth in the book’s epilogue, giving thanks to the “women who helped give[her] substance,” a list of women mentioned and unmentioned in the previous work and building to “thunder, sky, sun, the great mother of us all; and Afrekete, her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become.”¹⁶⁹ Through such ambiguous endings, Lorde’s concluding pages can be read in different ways and in no one way definitively. Afrekete both was and was not a person who Audre encountered. Lorde is celebrating a summer love or (and) revealing a moment of individual

¹⁶⁶ There are several moments in *Zami* in which Lorde comments upon efforts to box Audre in, particularly those who identified with her in some ways but not all (white lesbians, black straight women, black men) “my experience with people who tried to label me was that they usually did it to either dismiss me or use me” (108). She makes a similar point again in *Sister Outsider*: “I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live.” A. Lorde and C. Clarke, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 2007), 120.

¹⁶⁷ Provost and Lorde, “Becoming Afrekete: The Trickster in the Work of Audre Lorde,” 47.

¹⁶⁸ “Afrekete, Afrekete ride me to the crossroads where we shall sleep, coated in the woman’s power. The sound of our bodies meeting is the prayer of all strangers and sisters, that the discarded evils, abandoned at all crossroads, will not follow us upon our journeys” Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, 252.

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 255.

mental clarity and well-being represented by a mythical presence. It is, I would argue, a disservice to assume that mental clarity is the reality and Afrekete the metaphor by which it is conveyed. Rather, Audre's state of triumph and elation are bound to a figure pulled from myth and ancestry, and without whom they cannot be conceived or presented.

Provost, like other Lorde scholars before and after her, proposes that Afrekete is a feminized form of Eshu, a traditional Nigerian trickster figure who Lorde references elsewhere. Anne Louise Keating turns our attention to the narrative potential of this magical figure: "Although scholars have identified Afrekete with Lorde, they have not explored the full implications of this doubling. Because they focus their attention on Lorde's use of the Black goddess to establish her ties to a matriarchal past and a visionary future, they have not yet recognized the revolutionary call to action found in her revision of the patriarchal myth."¹⁷⁰ Lorde's feminization of a typically male mythic hero serves as a heuristic to a feminine future, but it works equally upon the present boundaries of story-making. The trickster functions in a fashion not dissimilar to the claims I have made for biomythography as a whole. Like the memoir, Afrekete makes central the story of a woman of color, but as a trickster linguist, her story is not to be wholly believed on its surface. There is a difference between hiding and disguising. The former is born of fear and indicative of guilt; the latter can serve any number of purposes from play to mal-intent. Its motives are hard to ascertain, but the function of its strategic role in the narrative is clear enough.

Afrekete is a distant and distancing figure. As much as her time with Audre is centered on intimacy, the role of the trickster is to upset identity, to take on too many and therefore no one

¹⁷⁰Keating, "Making 'Our Shattered Faces Whole': The Black Goddess and Audre Lorde's Revision of Patriarchal Myth," 29.

definitive role. One such position she holds is as a fellow warrior. Lorde recalls the following conversation with Afrekete: “Once we talked about how Black women had been committed without choice to waging our campaigns in the enemies’ strongholds, too much and too often, and how our psychic landscapes had been plundered and wearied by those repeated battles and campaigns.”¹⁷¹ In this conversation mental health is the ground upon which a political battle takes place. Even as the text continues with the trickster warrior’s summations that such warfare “makes you tough though, babe,” there is narrative of black female strength I am keen to resist here and which I think we can read Lorde as not fully endorsing either. As Phyllis Chesler writes, “Native-, African, Hispanic-, and Asian-American women have good reason to—and do—mistrust the mental health care system. They know they are often seen as inferior when they are at their psychological and moral best, and as commendably self-sufficient when they are about to expire of grief.”¹⁷² In other words, it is too opportunistic to laud strength found in exhaustion; if a story of black strength makes necessary initial pain in order to identify value to an outside audience, that story is not a liberatory one to perpetuate. If Afrekete is a doubling figure for the protagonist, she has the freedom to embody a trope of woman of color strength too problematic in its potential invitation to suffering for the character of Audre herself to take on. Moving in and out of the mythical, however, allows us to view such an ideal as instructive but also, importantly, fictive. Afrekete is “tough.” Audre is a great many things, including tough, including empathetic, including permeable.

¹⁷¹ Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, 250.

¹⁷² P. Chesler, *Women and Madness* (Doubleday, 1972), 12.

The warriors of *The Woman Warrior* similarly complicate the figure of a resilient woman and, like the trickster, serve to double identity in ways that lead potential enemies astray.¹⁷³ Just as Lorde's Trickster casts herself as a warrior, so too Kingston's most prominently featured warrior—Fa Mu Lan—is herself also a trickster, disguising herself as a man to fight on behalf of her family. She is, in the mind of the little girl who absorbed her story and became her, fantastic beyond belief. Raised by immortals deep in the wilderness, Fa Mu Lan verses herself in contradictions as part of her training: “I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes. Pearls are bone marrow; pearls come from oysters. The dragon lives in the sky, ocean, marshes, and mountains; and the mountains are also its cranium. Its voice thunders and jingles like copper pans. It breathes fire and water; and sometimes the dragon is one, sometimes many.”¹⁷⁴ Much as Afrekete serves to transcend the limitations of Audre/Afrekete's identity, the Woman Warrior is greater than sense would make of her. Her presence within the story offers a vision of the narrator's mind as drawing from more than her life's “true” experience. The narrator's identity and feeling develop in conversation with fictions, informed by the promise of the warrior, but also able to utilize the fantastic to work through the mundane.

As such, the breaks between the story of a young Chinese American girl in California and Fa Mu Lan are purposefully subtle. In the midst of the White Tigers chapter we are provided an extra space and a drop-cap M to usher in a sentence that announces a change of subject without outrightly stating it. The narrator/warrior woman's forays into young adulthood, her familial and

¹⁷³ Kingston describes, for instance, the practice of fooling ghosts when a baby is born by misnaming the baby, referring to it as an animal, or calling it ugly.

¹⁷⁴ Kingston, *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 29.

legendary successes are accounted for before she moves to proclaim, “My American life has been such a disappointment.” She tells of many recriminations she has suffered at the hands of relatives she has disappointed, but the context suggests also that she finds her life disappointing in comparison with her life as the woman warrior. As Melchoir explains, “Her [Kingston’s] use of the pronoun ‘I’ dramatizes a self that is not self-contained. It merges with the ‘I’ of the protagonists in “No-Name Woman” and “White Tigers.”¹⁷⁵ Rare are the occasions when the narrator will admit that a distinction between them exists.

She does so at chapter’s end only to emphasize their similarities. “The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for revenge are ‘report a crime’ and ‘report to the five families.’ The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words— ‘chink’ words and ‘gook’ words too that they do not fit on my skin.”¹⁷⁶ In the moments in which girl and warrior bleed into one another, Kingston invokes the trickster, creating a character like Zami/Audre/Afrekete who is central but hard to pin down. Perhaps the elision simply felt true to authors who composed it, however carefully they constructed their past selves as out of focus. Kingston writes in her concluding chapter, “I continue to sort out what’s just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living.”¹⁷⁷ Yet as I approach these texts in the context of attention to family units as the locus of personal and interpersonal psychological dysfunction,

¹⁷⁵ Melchior, “A Marginal ‘I’: The Autobiographical Self Deconstructed in Maxine Hong Kingston’s “the Woman Warrior”,” 286.

¹⁷⁶ Kingston, *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 53.

¹⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 205.

there is much to gain from the writing of women of color who would see themselves as robustly represented and yet ill defined.

Engagement with fictive universes serves to shield the narrators in its resistance to the microscope.¹⁷⁸ At the same time, opening up about stories one tells one's self is to surrender access to not only the facts of one's biography, but their innermost fantasies and self-evaluation. Both narrators are part memoirist, part warrior, part trickster. Both dream of magic and warfare but have only words with which to fight. The presence of mythically strong women is on its surface self-aggrandizing, but it also draws forth an unflattering comparison. Through Afrekete and Fa Mu Lan, Lorde and Kingston attest to their relative weakness. Making a life story filled with heroines too good to be true accentuates the vulnerable and frail aspects of the narrators' characters, not as unavoidable setbacks of a style, but as deliberate narrative constructions. Biomyths elect a form of fragility. Unlike the vulnerability of the family dynamic undergoing analysis, this fragility lies in the irreconcilability of their stories and the unattainable ideals they set themselves to.

By choosing well-known figures to relate to, they furthermore bleed the edges of their unique identities. *Zami* and *The Woman Warrior* are about more than personal journeys inward in part because of the fluidity between lives,¹⁷⁹ in part because of the complicated pictures of

¹⁷⁸ More specifically, Weinstein compares the optic nature of family therapy observation to the role of film. Describing research subjects under observation for an extended period she writes, "In focusing on family action over an extended period rather than at a particular time, the 3-East researchers framed their project in an optic register that echoed the temporal dimension of cinema, rather than the static image of the microscope or the photograph." Memoir understood as the narrative (that is to say, temporal) unfolding of familial dynamics offers also a study in the cycles of behavior over time. These biomyths, however, play with time, slipping in and out of scenes centuries apart and in and out of lives which may or may not have happened. Cast as non-linear and untrustworthy the temporal framework continues to factor heavily but loses its tie to causality. Weinstein, *The Pathological Family : Postwar America and the Rise of Family Therapy*, 118.

¹⁷⁹ Most critics of biomythography note the root of "bio" rather than "autobio" and often speak of the importance of

motherhood and daughtering they put forth, but also because transcribing one's experience through generic tropes is a means of democratization. Incorporating existing, if culturally specific, mythic figures moves the story of one individual into something more cross-applicable and formulaic. Mu Lan holds significance for many Chinese and Chinese American girls. Afrekete is, after all, "who we all should become."¹⁸⁰ In this way, Biomyth avoids due criticism for the age of memoir.

Critics of self-help and self-improvement initiatives that gained steam over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century often point out the problematics of conflating personal growth with political upheaval. Wendy Kaminer writes in 1992 that in the culture of televised testimony and 12 step programs, "Personal development passes for politics and what might once have been called whining is now exalted as a process of exerting selfhood."¹⁸¹ I suspect no one would confuse a well-crafted work of memoir, fictionalized or no, with whining one's way into their fifteen minutes. Yet the charge of self-absorption is relevant to consider in the context of the time period and all that memoir has in common with the call to find one's self as a charge of the highest priority. I am willing to concede some similarities. What autobiography is free of self-indulgence? And yet, I suggest that these works distinguish themselves in a vast array of self-told stories by virtue of their fantastical recalculations and the subsequent communitarianism inherent in subscribing life stories to existing mythical formulations.

the emphasis outward: "Lorde's very description of the text as 'biomythography' suggests not only myth and her own self-authored tale but also the collective biographies of 'each woman who shared any piece of the dreams/myths/histories that give this book shape' [Lorde, *Zami* v]."Giselle Liza Anatol, "Border Crossings in Audre Lorde's *Zami*: Triangular Linkages of Identity and Desire," *MaComère: Journal of the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars* 4 (2001).

¹⁸⁰ Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*.

¹⁸¹ W. Kaminer, *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional: The Recovery Movement and Other Self-Help Fashions* (Addison-Wesley, 1992).

To make plural the singular subject is to in some sense evade the pathologizing eye. Even the more expansively minded family therapists sought out the individual—a self-contained psyche—in the context of its affiliations with others, not as a plural subjectivity unto itself. If Kingston's and Lorde's warriors and tricksters work to undermine the image of the ascertainable, analyzable woman, the ghosts that haunt them rather literally dematerialize those who would attempt to do so. It is my hope that a close read of the specters of these works will speak to the overarching question affixed to the use of mythic tropes: What is so very powerful about remaining elusive (and allusive)?

For Kingston, ghosts manipulate reality and serve a variety of narrative and metaphorical functions. They are utilitarian but indispensable, a means by which to organize a life story and also to look in upon it from an appropriately hazy place. For Lorde whose work has little in the way of ghosts as such but remains haunted, the deceased are an anchor, a fixed point her life is ever tethered to and to which she makes frequent returns. I read these ghosts as metaphors for those who look in on one's emotional development. Kingston's are often pesky, sometimes even malicious; these ghosts want for much. While softer and friendlier, the ghosts of Audre's past also serve as limitations—people she must answer to always as their presence in memory makes them a part of her.

Unlike the warriors and tricksters who utilize linguistic indeterminance to make the lives of our narrators more expansive, ghosts primarily constrain. In *The Woman Warrior* some ghosts, like the sitting ghost Brave Orchid battles as a child, take their fixity rather literally, pressing down on the girl's chest so that she may not move. This ghost provides a metaphor for a young woman in a school of midwifery, an ambitious young girl who would not stay put. But the story is Brave Orchid's and thus recounted without a hint that it ought to be taken as figurative.

Brave Orchid really defeated a ghost who, if it was for her a metaphor, was manifest as a solid painful pressure upon her chest through the vagaries of memory or imagination.

Ghosts are also the name for white people in the United States and at times a pejorative aimed at the children when they are too much Americanized. Even so, ghosts are less constructed of skin tone or even status as living or dead, as by their role as inhibitory boundaries of our characters. A young Brave Orchid even offers the heretical hypothesis that ghosts are not the dead, but a species unto themselves.¹⁸² The ghosts are specters of story, binding chaotic narratives to a particular kind of tale—a fantastic but familiar story of haunting and overcoming, a boundary space between the living and unliving (or at least those who are not alive *for our* narrators).

This is evident in the way Kingston bookends her greater flights of fancy with ghosts. The story of the warrior Fa Mu Lan releases the burdens of reality that constrain the narrator's vision of herself and even, as previously discussed, the means by which she perceives. As liberating and distracting as such indulgences may be, an autobiography cannot be boundless. The story of the woman warrior is twice bracketed by ghosts. At the chapter level, it follows No Name Woman (the aunt ghost) and precedes Shaman (the chapter in which her mother defeats the sitting ghost and many other ghosts come to be named.)¹⁸³ It is also placed within the immediate confines of ghosts that bind one to place and to self. The No Name Woman is not imagined as a ghost until the concluding paragraphs of her chapter in which her potential

¹⁸² Kingston, *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 66.

¹⁸³ Among the ghosts of the new world we find: Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Fire Ghosts, Meter Reader Ghosts, Tree Trimming Ghosts, Five-and-Dime Ghosts, White Ghosts, Black Ghosts, Newsboy Ghosts, Gypsy Ghosts, Well Ghosts, Grocery Ghosts, Milk Ghosts, Mail Ghosts, Garbage Ghosts, Jesus Ghosts, Social Worker Ghosts, Burglar Ghosts, Hobo Ghosts, Wino Ghosts. And so on. *Ibid.*, 97-98.

hostility and thus Kingston's call to fidelity in family history are invoked. No Names' ghost stands in judgment of the chapter that precedes her entrance, reminding author, narrator, and reader to keep it straight.

Abruptly in the midst of the first person ecstatic life of Fa Mu Lan, Kingston retreats to the story of her American girlhood, and there sits another ghost:

A medium with red hair told me that a girl who died in a far country follows me wherever I go. This spirit can help me if I acknowledge her, she said. Between the head line and heart line in my right palm, she said, I have the mystic cross. I could become a medium myself. I don't want to be a medium. I don't want to be a crank taking 'offerings' in a wicker plate from the frightened audience, who, one after another, ask the spirits how to raise rent money, how to cure their coughs and skin diseases, how to find a job. And martial arts are for unsure little boys kicking away under fluorescent lights.¹⁸⁴

Ghosts are not the light and fanciful creatures we might have guessed. Ghosts bind one to a life of obedience to the cultures they hail from. This passage's unexpected complaint against marital arts ties the possibility of becoming the community medium to other expectations of how American Chinese are expected to find their place. The narrator resents being bound to ghosts, well-meaning or otherwise. And expectations for properly Asian ways of being are ghosts too.

The spirit of Gennie in *Zami* is, on the contrary, a benign and liberating force. She serves in the story as mostly a memory, though recollections seem to come to Audre as a ghost might, appearing rather than occurring as the result of conscious reflection. Gennie's most explicitly ethereal appearance takes place in a moment of intimacy and in the form of release:

We [Muriel and Audre] lay entwined and exhausted afterward, laughing and talking excitedly. The camaraderie and warmth between us breached places within me that had been closed off and permanently sealed, I thought, when Genevieve died. When Muriel and I talked, as we did, about Naomi and Genevieve, each dead at fifteen,

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 52.

the spirit of those two dead girls seemed to rise up from the earth, bless us, and then depart.¹⁸⁵

Where Kingston's ghosts mean to bind her narrator to an old world and an over-determined life, Lorde's Gennie wants only to let her go.

Gennie's ghost serves to thus metaphorically represent a moving forward, but her formal presence within the work is as an anchor. In an entirely italicized passage—a form Lorde reserves for vignettes of profound experience—young Audre is struck by the fact of Gennie's death in a new way. A few months have passed since her suicide and upon seeing some jewelry in a window, Audre thinks to recommend it to her friend. Just then the memory of Gennie becomes too heavy a weight: “*And right then and there in the middle of Broadway and 151st Street on a Saturday afternoon at the beginning of the summer of my sixteenth year, I decided that I would never love anybody else again for the rest of my life.*”¹⁸⁶ In some ways, the story of *Zami* is more a story of mourning and recovery than anything else. Gennie's death serves here as the source for a strategy of emotional withholding. But love comes anyway and Gennie's spirit is there to bless it. Finally, the biomyth closes on a discussion of Gennie that is equally a demonstration of Audre's changing emotions. When Lorde declares that she lost her friend to a world shut off from caring, she echoes her own earlier promise to shut the door on love of others, and how ultimately incapable she was of keeping it closed: “I have never been able to blind myself to that cruelty, which according to one popular definition of mental health, makes me

¹⁸⁵ Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, 194.

¹⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 140-41. This italicized declaration to never love again continues much in the same vein, but with the added invocation of Audre's mother: “Gennie had been the first person in my life I was conscious of loving. And she had died. Loving hurt too much. My mother had turned into a demon intent on destroying me. You loved people and you came to depend on their being there. But people died or changed or went away and it hurt too much.”

mentally unhealthy.”¹⁸⁷ Ghosts or memories of those passed have very different intentions for these narrators, but formally serve similar ends of structuring the means by which personal experience comes to be legible. It is meaningful then that the signposts of story building should, as the connotations of physical manifestations of ghosts or spirits might suggest, be themselves *elusive* forms.

The Woman Warrior begins and ends with ghosts of indeterminacy. The first is the victimized but also unfriendly ghost of no-name-woman, whose story, as I have shown, is never reconciled to one narrative possibility. The last are the ghosts she cannot quite translate. Newer Chinese-American immigrants call the narrator and her fellow second-generation siblings and cousins some kind of ghost, either Ho Chi Kuie, or Hao Chi Kuei:

I’ve been looking in books. So far I have the following translations for ho and/or chi: “centipede,” “grub,” bastard carp,” “chirping insect,” “jujube tree,” “pied wagtail,” “grain sieve,” “casket sacrifice,” water lily, “good frying,” “non-eater,” “dustpan-and-broom” (but that’s a synonym for “wife”). Or perhaps I’ve Romanized the spelling wrong and it is Hao Chi Kuei, which could mean they are calling us “Good Foundation Ghosts.” The immigrants could be saying that we were born on Gold Mountain and have advantages. Sometimes they scorn us for having had it so easy, and sometimes they’re delighted.¹⁸⁸

The narrator concludes her story by struggling to identify the kind of ghost she is within her own history. Is she a ghost of harm or promise? Can she be both? This is what I ultimately wish to claim of stories crowded with Ghosts, Warriors, Tricksters, and Human Women.

It is a mistake to assume the machinations of the trickster outwit the indeterminance of the ghost. It is a mistake to trust that the strength of the warrior is also the strength of the woman.

¹⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 252. The previously discussed metaphor of vision is here again at work in describing blindness to the suffering of others. This is a common trope and yet somewhat intriguing in the context of pathology and of a woman herself deemed invisible.

¹⁸⁸ Kingston, *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 204-05.

They are each important only as they exist simultaneously. While other critics have commented upon the particularity of biomyth as both biography and autobiography, which is to say its unique investment in the lives of those beyond the first person, I mean to suggest that this plurality extends to its mythic creatures in ways that not only multiply the number of moving targets for a scrutinizing eye, but also lay bare the critical role of weakness and ultimate irreconcilability in any story of psychic fortitude.

Bonnie Melchoir locates the way metaphors replace chronology as the binding structure of the narrative:

Repeated yet varied patterns replace "cause." Roles are simultaneous, making us aware of the recursiveness of revision in writing and of how this defines the self. From a psychoanalytic perspective, such an organization argues that identity formation is "circular and regressive," that "a quest for women warriors and shamen must also include a recognition of weakness and madness."¹⁸⁹

I argue that the madness necessary to double one's self with ghosts and the like returns us to the central problem with which this chapter began.

These narrators build their histories out from the suicides of their friends and ancestors. They are furthermore self-conscious about the impulse to find the opportunity for self-narration in others' despair. But it is not enough to wring hands. The tension of well and sick, vulnerable and impervious must be carried on throughout the rest of the narrative. Without the constant invocation of a powerful and useful weakness on the part of those who survived, Kingston and

¹⁸⁹ Melchior, "A Marginal 'I': The Autobiographical Self Deconstructed in Maxine Hong Kingston's 'the Woman Warrior'," 286-87. Quotations from Elise Miller, "Kingston's the Woman Warrior: The Object of Autobiographical Relations,," in *Compromise Formations: Current Directions in Psychoanalytic Criticism*, ed. Vera J. Camden (Kent: Kent State UP, 1989), 149.

Lorde risk telling a personal story that serves to stigmatize others. I turn, therefore, in conclusion, to Mad Studies.

While I cannot claim pride in being neurologically or psychologically atypical for authors or characters of biomyth, I can locate in recent Mad work, a resistance to narratives of health that adds a layer of understanding to Kingston's and Lorde's practices of eliding and including all in their personal stories. As Regina Kunzel explains, "The familiar story in LGBT history, reframed and defamiliarized through disability and mad studies, inspires us to ponder the histories, subjects, politics, and angles of vision we might have lost in the effort to distance ourselves so vociferously from people positioned as 'patients,' and in the name of claiming health."¹⁹⁰ Kunzel is referring to the efforts to depathologize homosexuality through a strategic separation of "normal" healthy gay persons and those with genuine mental illness. Insisting upon psychic strength and impenetrability, a crime often committed against women of color writing, would commit a like violence to the ghosts that haunt these protagonists and to the emotional complexity of individual lives such ghosts serve to represent. The narrator (of either tale) is a warrior trickster only as she is bound to vulnerable human life, life which operates on the edge of a liminal space between dying and surviving and from person to person.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Regina. Kunzel, " Queer History, Mad History, and the Politics of Health.," *American Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2017): 319. Kunzel is writing at the intersection of queer studies and mad studies. She refers here to the impressive victories of the queer community—academic and public—to demand revisions to the DSM.

¹⁹¹ Anne Cheng and Stella Bolaki find similar cause to doubt that the narrator of *Woman Warrior* is triumphant or that it would be productive for her to have been written as "winning" in some sense her cultural and psychological battles. Following Tomo Hattori's critiques of feminist psychoanalytic readings of the memoir, Bolaki cautions, "descriptions of the narrative trajectory in *The Woman Warrior* such as Amy Ling's, according to which 'Kingston transforms her victim state of cut fraenum into a victor's state of full-throated song' (Between Worlds 130) or Linda Morante's title "From Silence to Song: The Triumph of Maxine Hong Kingston" fail to raise questions of translation; more specifically, they fail to address in what language the triumphant song is rendered and in what ways this language mediates the seemingly neutral process of coming to voice." [sic] S. Bolaki, *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction* (Rodopi, 2011), 170-71.

What does this do for our understanding of depression and madness? For the norms imposed by momism and racial pathologization? For one, we might do as *Brave Orchid* does and transpose these mythical formations onto the western narratives provided for us, reading the pages of *Ladies Home Journal*, *Cosmopolitan*, *A Generation of Vipers*, the Moynihan Report, and the practices of family therapy, as so many ghost stories. These forms seek to tether emotional experience to traditions of understanding—misogyny, racism, domestic norms, nationalist rhetoric, the presumptive value of cybernetic thinking, assumptions surrounding objective observation—traditions so pervasive they escape detection. They needn't wisp or moan, they are perceptible as merely an echo, seen only in the corner of the eye, precisely because they are everywhere.

Spillers' "knowing one" is, by these criteria, most certainly a ghost. He is well-meaning but problematically all-seeing and untouchable. Medical authority on the emotional lives of American women in the latter half of the twentieth century has been everywhere apparent and nowhere to be seen. At the start of this chapter I promised an alternative. I find it in the third eye, redirected to daughters and then further dispersed across a cast of fictive creatures. The knowing one is many places. Were she to find herself simply relocated, out from analysis and into the self, she would risk not only circular self-assessment and obsession, but a less than revolutionary take on authority directed at the mental and emotional states of women. Humility in the face of

Cheng notes that the enthusiasm for the memoir's closing line, "It translated well" is often taken too much at face value. For one, there is little evidence of smooth translation in the text and no inherent cause to believe that translation is uncomplicated or even desirable.

I am keen to remain attentive to the potential misappropriation of an Eastern-influenced text (but also keen to keep in mind that Kingston is American) to resolve conflicts within a Westernized vision of psychological well-being. I believe the criticism that has done the work of troubling a narrative of second generation victory provides a useful framework for thinking about how the replacement for Western pathologizing eye can not simply be the eye of another with pretense to see into and through both cultures.

women's feeling, even or especially if that woman is one's self, does much more work than power that has simply moved.

I am eager to insist upon the notion that the biomyth does not reclaim psychoanalytic or diagnostic power for the individual who composes it, but through the telling and even fabricating of stories that are not one's own. As the seventies and eighties would give way to an increasingly medicalized version of emotional health—one in which story had its place, but cause was something that lie under and distinct from the twists and turns of narrative recollection, the many authored selves of biomyth would be narrowed down to stories of strength and magic by strong and magical women of color. Without wishing to over-universalize, I would like to reject such faint praise and insist instead that the genre of biomyth holds potential to speak to the very nature of self-formation and to the very structures of grief and of despair.

In fact, I wish to suggest that it is the structure of the biomyth that corrects the binary of well and sick that threatens not only the complexities of emotional life, but in particular the racialized body. Anne Cheng notes, "American idealization of health, cure, and mourning (i.e. 'getting over' something or 'moving on') is itself symptomatic of the culture's attachment to coercive normality."¹⁹² For women of color in the mid-late century, lending one's self to the scrutinizing eye could only further legitimize the casting of one's self as a source of dis-ease. I suspect it is the inherent element of *bildungsroman* in memoirs attentive to childhood and young adulthood, an element which promotes the notion of overcoming, that moved Kingston and Lorde to disrupt temporal causality and claims to authority in the shaping of their works. Giving credence to the story of form over the plot of these biomyths upsets the urge to interpret them as

¹⁹² Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, Race and American Culture (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 95.

hopeful. Yet as much as tricksters, warriors, and ghosts obfuscate the inner lives of the narrators and serve to critique the desire to fully apprehend a culture or the interior life of another human person, they are likewise alter egos, promising a dispersed subjectivity as much or more than any particular supernatural skill. These young women do not desire to be other, but to be many.

CHAPTER THREE
DEEP BLUE
EMOTIONAL FAILURE IN THE INFORMATION AGE

I am completely operational, and all of my circuits are functioning perfectly.

-HAL 9000

2001: A Space Odyssey

I have elsewhere bracketed the period this dissertation covers by the slowly diminishing hold of a national psychoanalytic project on one end and the arrival of a definitively medicalized conception of emotional life on the other: roughly 1968 and the mid-1990s. I have argued that these limits mark the ebb of one grand narrative and the rise of another, and in so doing, leave between them a space of relative narrative freedom, a time in which stories of emotional definition and prescription were less clearly defined. In this I have tried my hand at epistemological boundary-making. I might have have set the limits of this period with images of machines playing chess: one a dream, the other its manifestation.

I have elected to begin and end this chapter with chess-playing computers because they so adequately represent the double-edged threat and promise of intelligent machines central to

the concerns of this chapter: What place do emotions have in a theory of mind as computer and computer as brain? The quest for the chess playing machine reaches far back into the past. Even as an elaborate hoax, the Mechanical Turk ¹ served as a source of inspiration for figures as distinct as Walter Benjamin, Edgar Allen Poe, and Claude Shannon.² While we needn't go back to the 18th century to establish the backstory, as was the case for Momism in the previous chapter and the early murmurs of the therapy boom in the chapter before, literature of the seventies, eighties, and nineties responds to the present states of thought and feeling, but draw heavily from a relatively recent past.

The cognitive turn, a well-documented phase of intellectual development in the mid to late twentieth century, plays a substantive role in foregrounding the aims of this chapter.³ In his opus, *The Information*, James Gleick documents the enthusiasm around strides in computation in the mid-century and the stunning interdisciplinary buy-in orchestrated by the institutional commitments of Warren McCulloch and the broad philosophical claims of Norbert Weiner,

¹ The Mechanical Turk, known also as simply The Turk, was constructed in the late 18th century. Its creator claimed to have built a machine that could play chess as well as any human. There was in fact a chess master of small stature hidden below the table.

² Benjamin uses the Mechanical Turk as an analogy for fraudulent claims to objectivity amongst historical materialists in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Nate Silver, in his chapter on "the Revenge of The Machines," notes Poe's fascination with the Turk that resulted in his story, "Von Kempelen and His Discovery" Shannon cites the human-powered "machine" in his brief history of the idea of chess playing machines as preface to his working through what capabilities an actual chess playing computer would require in his paper, "Programming a Computer for Playing Chess." W. Benjamin, *On the Concept of History* (Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016 (original 1940); repr., 2016). N. Silver, *The Signal and the Noise: Why So Many Predictions Fail-but Some Don't* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2012). Claude E. Shannon, "Programming a Computer for Playing Chess," *Philosophical Magazine*, March 1950.

³ While there are many sources on the cognitive revolution/turn, my collective sense of the period has been primarily drawn from H.E. Gardner, *The Mind's New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution* (Basic Books, 1987; repr., 2008); Cohen-Cole, *The Open Mind: Cold War Politics and the Sciences of Human Nature*; J. Gleick, *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011).

among other factors.⁴ The Macy conferences of the 1940s brought a disparate crowd of academics into conversation about the nature of information systems, known for a time by Wiener's term "cybernetics." Before Arthur Clarke conceives of a HAL in *2001* or Feng-hsiung Hsu and his team begin to assemble Deep Blue, the chess playing computer of the nineteen-nineties, come a great many conversations not only about how to make a machine that can play chess (though this subject was discussed) but how a brain may be like a computer and a computer like a brain and what wonder might lie in store down that particular path of inquiry.

As Gleick writes, "This [The Macy Conferences and the publications that stemmed from them] was the beginning of the movement called the cognitive revolution in psychology and it laid the foundation for the discipline called cognitive science, combining psychology, computer science, and philosophy. Looking back, some philosophers have called this moment the informational turn. [. . .] As [psychologist George] Miller himself liked to say, the mind came in on the back of the machine."⁵ After a period of exile in the form of behaviorism, big questions about the mind were back. And it was computation that gave psychologists permission to think big again—with one hand ever on a respected and newly fashionable area of quantifiable science that would save them from accusations of a return to arm-chair introspection.

Yet the affordances for emotion that such a mind made set a distinct set of limits around human nature broadly conceived. "According to received histories," writes Paul Edwards in *The*

⁴ Both Gleick and Cohen-Cole credit McCulloch for much of the wide field of influence cognitive science held during the mid-century. McCulloch organized the Macy Conferences and championed interdisciplinary inquiry as the new way forward. Gleick details also how Norbert Wiener's approach to cybernetics was, explicitly and immodestly, a philosophical paradigm-shift. Wiener was not simply talking computer circuits, but rather wanted to reimagine the world through the concept of the feedback loop, in which everything is information and all is interconnected.

⁵ I intend to discuss the move from behaviorism to cognitive science in some depth in my introduction. This footnote will refer back to and summarize that.

Closed World, “in their early days all three of these fields [cybernetics, cognitive psychology, and Artificial Intelligence] were speculative and theoretical, without much practical import. Their significance lay mainly in their perspective on human nature: they pictured minds as nested sets of information processors capable of being duplicated, in principle, in the machine.”⁶ By such logic what a machine and a mind could afford would come to mutually-inform, making way for both interesting questions about the mechanics of human thought and crushing a wealth of human experience under the weight of an imperfect metaphor.

The cognitive revolution never quite goes away. Ideas about how the human brain works and how those functions might be replicated have changed dramatically, particularly in the last twenty years.⁷ But the desire to build a machine in likeness of the mind has remained steady or, in truth, picked up the speed as giants like Google, Amazon, and Facebook all turn their attention toward the creation of artificial intelligence. From the broad view of AI as project, the cognitive revolution would seem to challenge the argument that notions of mind and emotion are distinctive between 1968 and 1995.

The chess-playing machines, however, provide a closer look at the lifecycle of ideas within the broader movement of AI, computer science, and cognitive psychology. The theoretical

⁶ P.N. Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (MIT Press (MA), 1997), 147.

⁷ Even as the race toward artificial intelligence has remained steady, the definition of the brain model has changed and changed machine development with it. As Catherine Malabou lays out in her 2004 *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, previous emphasis on localization (arguing that for example your amygdala does one thing and your occipital lobe another) has given way to the understanding that brains function across areas and the connections themselves don’t simply facilitate thinking, but are thinking. Furthermore, emphasis in Malabou’s work as well as the work of Paul Armstrong, Oliver Sacks, Stanislas DeHaene, Norman Doidge, and many more emphasize the ways in which neuroplasticity forestalls an attempt to stay definitely once and for all how a brain works that might make a straightforward approach to AI more attainable. Recent exploration into AI play with the concept of misfiring, noise, and what Wilson refers to as the child learning model—which is to say, growing slowly in intelligence over long periods of time. C. Malabou and M. Jeannerod, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (Fordham University Press, 2009).

nature of early AI that Edwards mentions lent itself easily to flights of imagination—even if members of the Hixon Symposia themselves remained very straight faced and ever-attentive to questions of feasibility. It is unsurprising that by 1968 Miller and Kubrik have cooked up the fictional artificial intelligence of the HAL 9000. The start of the period I mark as a gap is a wish, a dark wish, but a specific wish nonetheless for a thinking machine. Deep Blue is its response. It takes the period this dissertation covers for the kinks to be worked out and a thinking machine, a chess-playing machine, that even vaguely resembles HAL in its abilities to be operational. In this sense, 1968 is a turn toward a particular vision of what cognitivists found to be best about the mind and 1997 is its consummation, meaning, of course, that new aims for the brain/machine metaphor need to be set so that a new aim might be pursued.

Science fiction responded to, and in some cases preceded and influenced, the problem of emotion for a mind conceived of as a machine.⁸ Yet, like biomythography and cynical humor, it is in the fictional subgenre that I find the most stunning and unique alternatives for the staging of emotional narratives. For the most part, sci-fi imaginations swirled around the possibility that human feeling would become the new site of human exceptionalism in a coming era of cognitively superior machines.⁹ The accounts of the triumphant human spirit are many and will be sparingly recounted in pages to come. In these stories, the primacy of cognition (where computers have us beat) is exchanged for a primacy of feeling. Ultimately, I find that flipping the binary does little more than reinforce the dichotomy. While they may celebrate feeling, magical emotional forces that overcome or overtake our would-be robot assassins of the 70s, 80s, and 90s

⁸ Likewise, the critical work on empathy and artificial intelligence is robust and of importance to this chapter

⁹ The other major science fiction thread on machines and feeling is the question of whether a machine can feel. This subgenre, typified by Philip K. Dick's, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) and its very different, but still on-topic film adaptation, *Blade Runner*, by Ridley Scott (1982).

do little to muddy the division between the cognitive and affective realms. I believe that feminist science fiction, which might also be conceived of under the new heading of “visionary fiction,” of this period, though only tangentially invested in computation, does much more to reset the terms of these debates.¹⁰

This chapter is primarily concerned with four works of fiction, Ursula Le Guin’s *The Lathe of Heaven* and Octavia Butler’s three-part series *Xenogenesis*, consisting of the novels *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago*.¹¹ These works of feminist science fiction are not primarily about artificial intelligence. They do have some investment in the future of machines, but what I really look to them for is a recasting of emotion that troubles the way we think about emotion in stories that cast it as the opposing force of the machine. Part of this work involves going back to the fundamental assumptions that undergird a view of emotion as cognition’s opposite.

¹⁰ The genre heading “Visionary Fiction” is proposed by the author of the introduction to the anthology *Octavia’s Brood*. For the purposes of framing this volume of stories written in the key of Butler, Walidah Imarisha finds the neologism a necessity: “‘Visionary Fiction’ is a term we developed to distinguish science fiction that has relevance toward building new, freer worlds from the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power.” Not only do I believe that definition applies to the Butler’s work as I engage with it here, but I think it could justly be extended to Le Guin as well. I have, however, opted to refer to these works as “sci-fi” or at times as “feminist sci-fi” in this chapter. I do this, first, because both authors, but Butler in particular, struggled to be counted within the genre they very happily claimed as their own: “sci-fi.” I am reluctant to remove them from a categorization they fought to be a part of and cautious that in creating a new genre for genre-expanding work, we miss out on an opportunity to play with what “sci-fi” means and includes. Secondly, my interests in these works have far more to do with the ways Le Guin’s and Butler’s works served to challenge ideas that were popular in their own time and before. The notion that their work is visionary may well be true, but is less the point in this case. Sheree R. Thomas et al., *Octavia’s Brood : Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015), Book, 9.

¹¹ Contemporary audiences will be more familiar with the series under its current title, *Lilith’s Brood*. I have elected to keep with the original series title because I am interested in the way the works commented upon developments within and preceding the period in which they were published. I am also interested in the title change itself. The original series paired the prefix “xeno,” meaning foreign, with “genesis” meaning beginning or origin, but also signifying both biblical beginnings and sharing a root with “genetics.” “Lilith’s Brood” privileges notions of kinship and the place of the heroine Lilith (who is in truth only a major character in the first novel), perhaps as a means to draw a line of continuity between these novels and Butler’s other works, like *Kindred*, that are more explicitly about African American heritage and more consistently feature a female protagonist. The more scientific sounding series title and its negative connotations—conjuring notions of xenophobia and eugenics (both important to the series)—fade in the works’ new marketing, which began with a reprint in 2000.

In the coming section, “The Signal and the Noise” I will revisit the history of emotion as a research byproduct—a bump on the road to a desirable norm or stasis in the developing understanding of man as well as machine. Here I argue that emotions have a history of being interpreted as noise, excess information about human functioning. I will consider how Le Guin and Butler, in contrast, construct the emotional as the signal.

In the second section “God’s Share” I demonstrate how fictions that imagine emotion as the signal offer up a unique set of consequences for an emotion-led future. Here, I compare the differences between traditional science fiction responses to a humanity crowded out by machine intelligence to the complex picture Le Guin and Butler paint of civilizations ruled by unconscious desires. In contrast to burgeoning fears of a cold emotionless future, Butler and Le Guin suggest we can just as easily give too much over to feeling.

This extends beyond the unconscious and into conscious positive affects in my third section, “A Benevolent Man.” The only thing more dangerous than the will of the unconscious are the deliberate attempts at progress exemplified—in history as in these fictive works—by the projects of colonialism and eugenics. Butler and Le Guin are not of the same mind on these matters; it takes some doing to disentangle Butler’s commitments in particular. Yet, I believe that these profoundly complicated stories about not-at-all-plausible human futures provide an extraordinary lens through which to view affect in the context of cognitive science and its offspring, artificial intelligence.

In the final section, I return from Butler’s living jungles and Le Guin’s mangled Portland, to look once more at computers playing chess. I argue that these works of feminist science fiction—literature critical of the Anthropocene before that word held its contemporary cache—cannot ultimately find in the human any one impulse or system (nervous, cognitive, affective)

able to shoulder the weight of deciding for the world or for one another. I have subtitled this chapter “Emotional Failure” because I believe the inevitability of failure is what these novels offer that is of greatest use to a consideration of emotion in this time period. It is in the failure to emote that machines fail, in the failure to account for emotion that the study of minds falter, and in the weight we place on some magical affective capacity that the concept of emotion itself fails to advance our understanding of our own lived experience.

The work of this chapter is bracketed by two events of computers playing chess with humans and the implications these games held for thinking about the parallels between machine and human intelligence. Yet these are simply milestones, delimiting a much larger conversation about the duality of cognition and emotion in the context of the cognitive revolution. I argue that narratives of the late twentieth century have taken up the question of whither emotion in the information age in ways that, more often than not, reify the binary of feeling and thinking. To that end, I will present genre work with little regard for but plentiful applicability to the problem of affect and artificial intelligence. This chapter thus takes a wide view on contemporaneous approaches to emotion and cognition, but begins and ends with the deceptively simple discussion of rooks and pawns.

Chess Playing Machines, Part One

In Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey* we witness a slow and quiet scene in which the spaceship’s computer HAL (**H**euristically Programmed **A**lgorithmic Computer) 9000 wins a game of chess against astronaut Frank Poole. Frank (played by Gary Lockwood) exhibits very mild nervous behavior: biting his finger, making a kind of lip sucking sound before he makes a decision. HAL (voiced by Douglas Rain) is polite and almost condescendingly mindful of Frank’s feelings, a tone that is either deliberately or as a matter of

miscomprehension of human language, undercut by HAL's habit of responding far too quickly. "Rook to King," is Frank's last guessing move before he is nearly interrupted by HAL's apology: "I'm sorry Frank. I think you missed it." HAL then explains how the next few moves would play out resulting in Frank's defeat and Frank resigns the game.¹²

In 1997 we witness another victory of machine over man in the form of checkmate. In a televised and much anticipated rematch series (Kasparov had defeated "Deep Thought" the previous year), IBM's supercomputer Deep Blue pushed world chess champion Garry Kasparov to resign their sixth and series-deciding match in nineteen moves. It was the first time a computer had defeated a world-champion human chess player.¹³ Deep Blue was built for this task. Its capacity as a model of artificial intelligence nowhere neared the imagined abilities of the HAL 9000. Yet, for some, this machine portended the sinister and dangerous future *2001* predicted: mankind surpassed.¹⁴

The choice of chess as a measure for the progress of calculating machines is far from arbitrary. Elizabeth Wilson explains that within the world of artificial intelligence chess served as shorthand for one of the main conceptions of knowledge acquisition applied to machine development. In the chess model of AI, a computer is programmed with a discrete body of adult intellectual capacities.¹⁵ For machine intelligence to truly impress, the one task it could be

¹² Kubrick, Stanley. *2001: A Space Odyssey*, 1968. Based on the novel by Arthur C. Clarke.

¹³ This was the first time a computer had won a full series. The previous year Deep Thought defeated Kasparov in a match but not the series.

¹⁴ A *Guardian* article from May of 1997 is, for example, titled "Deep Blue Win a Giant Step for Computerkind" mimicking the phrase made famous by Neil Armstrong to suggest that a new era of extraordinary feats was dawning. Leonard Barden, "Deep Blue Win a Giant Step for Computerkind," *The Guardian*, May 12 1997.

¹⁵ Wilson explains that the other main approach to AI is modelled on the metaphor of a child. This imagines a likely

programmed to understand and perform would need to represent the pinnacle of human intelligence. Chess was considered ideal.¹⁶ Any computer could solve mathematical probabilities. The path to artificial intelligence called for a computer that could run these calculations to arrive at an independent course of action, respond to changing environmental stimulation in the form of an opponent's choices, and develop a flexible strategy many moves into the future. Early developers of AI turned their attention to these ambitious challenges, foregoing much consideration of the extraordinary assumptions such a model makes about chess itself.

Wilson outlines faith in the game as the best measure of intelligence by quoting Stefano Franchi and Güven Güzeldere in *Mechanical Bodies, Computational Minds*:

Chess is a perfect example—or rather chess was construed as a perfect example—of a complex, completely formalizable, and yet totally world-less domain. Good evidence of the fruitlessness of AI's approach is that many of its methods and theoretical approaches could be tested in the construction of chess-playing programs. This is also why understanding AI's construal of chess represents the *voie royale* to an understanding of AI's approach to thought, reason, and action in general.¹⁷

The decision among AI developers to reduce chess to “worldlessness” is entirely fascinating. On

more complicated stage of artificial intelligence in which a computer learns incrementally over time. E.A. Wilson, *Affect and Artificial Intelligence* (University of Washington Press, 2011).

¹⁶ Claude Shannon outlined the advantages to selecting chess in an article published in 1950: “The chess machine is an ideal one to start with, since: (1) the problem is sharply defined both in allowed operations (the moves) and in the ultimate goal (checkmate); (2) it is neither so simple as to be trivial nor too difficult for satisfactory solution; (3) chess is generally considered to require “thinking” for skillful play; a solution of this problem will force us either to admit the possibility of a mechanized thinking or to further restrict our concept of “thinking”; (4) the discrete structure of chess fits well into the digital nature of modern computers.” Shannon’s approach is characteristically programmatic, though one can’t help but notice that he suggests that if a computer can’t think its way into chess, then our definition of “thinking” is probably wrong. It seems he means reconfiguring “thinking” that a machine is capable of, but he implicates the whole concept nevertheless. Shannon, “Programming a Computer for Playing Chess.”

¹⁷ S. Franchi and G. Güzeldere, *Mechanical Bodies, Computational Minds: Artificial Intelligence from Automata to Cyborgs* (MIT Press, 2005). qtd in Wilson, *Affect and Artificial Intelligence*, 3-4.

some level, reduction is the name of the game in computer science; to be programmable, any action needs to be understood in its absolute most basic form.¹⁸ Yet, as I hope to argue here, the notion that chess could be claimed to take place in a vacuum has profound implications for our concept of emotion or—as Wilson labels it, ‘affect’—that are said to be nonessential aspects of a game of chess: information the machine not only does not need, but is better off without. To disentangle the man vs. machine plot HAL epitomizes and give chess, the men, and the machines who play it back to the world, I propose we turn our attention to the most human, and as it turns out machine-like, of actions: failure.

HAL 9000 fails famously. It detects a problem mission control cannot confirm. When its reliability is questioned and a plan hatched to shut it down, it takes action, murdering Frank Poole and all of the hibernating crew. It seems to ‘lose its mind’. When the spaceship *Discovery*’s one surviving crew member finally shuts HAL down, we hear the computer degenerate circuit by circuit into a state of machine infancy. An alternate theory is that HAL does not fail; rather, it operates in a manner consistent with its programming (to protect the mission above all else), marking the failure as human at least at its advent. Philosopher Daniel Dennet considers the dueling interpretations in his essay on whether HAL is morally culpable for the murders it commits. From one perspective, HAL goes mad, perhaps on account of its secret knowledge of alien lifeforms. In another, it is cold and unfeeling and doesn’t so much murder the crew as carry out what it calculates to be the course of action least injurious to the mission. In a

¹⁸ This is what Shannon means by “the discrete structure of chess fits well into the digital nature of modern computers.” It is a fairly popular saying that there are more possible chess moves (or really games, as probabilities increase throughout) than atoms in the universe. Yet each decision is digital—yes or no, on or off—to each possible move as it “occurs” to the player/machine and so reducible in a real sense.

third, HAL is intentional and thereby villainous.¹⁹ Its duplicity in the film is taken as an indication that it remains too intelligent to be ‘mad’ and too plotting to be simply running variables. In these theories, HAL’s consciousness (and subsequently its guilt) hinge on its expression of emotion.

To see how, let’s return to the chess game and the pinpoint timing of the line, “I’m sorry, Frank. I think you missed it.” In the fashion of western manners Kubrick and his viewers would have been accustomed to, it rings false to be at once regretful and eager to claim victory. HAL wastes no time, however, suggesting it anticipated the move Frank has only just that second made. HAL issues a flat apology and a dubious use of the phrase “I think.” “I think you missed it,” HAL remarks before listing in short order the moves to come.²⁰ It does not think. It knows. It does not regret; it seems to pantomime a regret it understands it ought to express in a moment of victory.

Yet, there is more than one way to read HAL’s awkward attempts at human niceties. One is that HAL is programmed to speak in such a way but cannot actually comprehend the notion of a fragile ego or of a tactful competition. Conversely, it means to perform the apology in a way that simultaneously demonstrates its knowledge of polite phrasing while also reasserting its intellectual superiority—a “sorry” that reads to an audience as something approximating sarcasm, an obviously phony apology that also serves as a brag. It is elsewhere in the film quick and insistent on the point of its infallibility. The sardonic “sorry” I propose might thereby be taken as an expression of pride, presenting a third option between interpreting HAL as an

¹⁹ Daniel C. Dennett, "When Hal Kills, Who's to Blame? Computer Ethics," in *Hal's Legacy: 2001's Computer as Dream and Reality*, ed. D.G. Stork (MIT Press, 1998).

²⁰ Stanley Kubrik, "2001: A Space Odyssey," (1968).

operating system that is fully affective (the genuinely apologetic but awkward machine) or an utterly disaffected one (the machine that only mimics regret for ease of conversation with humans). Perhaps HAL has feelings, but only the wrong ones.²¹

In her notes on the Kasparov match, Wilson also discusses a view of chess through the public persona of Bobby Fisher who “is widely quoted as claiming that the object of chess is to crush the opponent’s mind.”²² Fisher is of course a stunning example of the fundamental crisis point at which mental health meets moral responsibility, which Dennett also describes in his assessment of HAL. Is Fisher a bad person with bad views, or an ill one?²³ Where on the spectrum of negative affects to clinical disorders do probable personality disorders lie? For the purposes of this chapter, that question turns more on what a being created to be a success at chess (and, for HAL, a great many other high-order thinking tasks) is being prepared to feel. Chess is sophisticated. In ways that are more linked to class-distinction, anti-Semitism, and assumptions of masculine intellectual superiority than chess-lovers like to concede, it is purported to be a “Gentlemen’s Game.” For the merely good, the Frank Pooles of the world, it is

²¹ A bit of filmic sleuthing-cum-conspiracy theory has ignited the interest of bloggers on sites such as syfy.com and chess.com. They present the possibility HAL is a cheat. In listing the moves to come that HAL rattles off to Frank, it mis-states or insufficiently represents, depending on who you ask, one possible move. The game might have continued a bit longer had the error not been made. It is potentially a mistake in the script (which bloggers are dubious of because Kubrick was both an avid chess-enthusiast and a stickler for detail); an indication that HAL’s systems have begun to breakdown (which is to say a computational mistake), or HAL is testing Frank’s faith in its thinking. If Frank were to concede without giving it much thought—which he does—then HAL might be assured of its ability to seize control of the ship in the future. Matthew Jackson, “Little Known Fact: Hal 9000 Cheats at Chess in 2001: A Space Odyssey,” <https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/little-known-sci-fi-fact-hal-9000-cheats-at-chess-in-2001-a-space-odyssey>. Bill Wall, “2001: A Chess Space Odyssey,” <https://www.chess.com/article/view/2001-a-chess-space-odyssey>.

²² Wilson, *Affect and Artificial Intelligence*, 136.

²³ Made famous as a chess prodigy, Bobby Fisher has come to be known in more recent years for his controversial views, which include Holocaust denial and a public declaration of the moral justifiability of the terror attacks of September eleventh, just a few hours after they occurred. Rene Chun provides many direct quotes from Fisher, too terrible to repeat, in her look at his downfall. Rene Chun, “Bobby Fischer’s Pathetic Endgame: Paranoia, Hubris, and Hatred—the Unraveling of the Greatest Chess Player Ever,” *The Atlantic*, December 2012.

a bittersweet social interaction and an engaging intellectual challenge. For the great, however, it is a game of annihilation. It is a measuring stick as other competitive games like scrabble or poker never could be due to the reputation chess experts and leagues of computer scientists have granted chess as the par excellence judge of the perfectly tuned mind. Perhaps no other activity keeps the word “genius” so fresh on its lips, ready for anyone who excels at the game to automatically deserve the title. If chess itself is synonymous with genius then perhaps to be a genius of it is to be too much, to be—as HAL, those who feared the worst of Deep Blue, and Bobby Fisher himself suggest—a monster. If HAL has developed something akin to feeling, it should perhaps come as no surprise that a machine bred for superiority grows to be a dangerous supremacist. For now, the thing to observe about HAL 9000 is how readily the fictional manifestation of rational intelligence sinks into a deeply murky pool of emotion, taking, one could argue, the game of chess with it. It is worth factoring emotion in as we return to real life.

Like many commentators at the time, Daniel Dennet supposes that Deep Blue’s lack of affective circuitry is the key to its superior intelligence:

At one point, while Kasparov was mounting a ferocious attack on Deep Blue’s king, it was nobody but Deep Blue that figured out that it had the time and security it needed to knock off a pesky pawn of Kasparov’s that was out of the action, but almost invisibly vulnerable. Hsu (Deep Blue’s chief engineer), like the human grand masters watching the game, would never have dared to consider such a calm mopping-up operation under such pressure.²⁴

This observation comes not in a conversation about the superiority of the rational mind, but in a discussion of Deep Blue as an independent actor. Dennett argues that it is only truly Deep Blue’s purported absence of emotion that grants it autonomy. Its ability to run calculations at a speed far greater than any human mind is not, for Dennet, what makes it intelligent. It is its ability to

²⁴ Dennett, "When Hal Kills, Who's to Blame? Computer Ethics," 352.

remain calm in a situation in which no human could that makes its actions distinctive and thereby autonomous.

The subtle insistence that a cold cognition was unquestionably superior to a form of thinking that was more intuitive or embodied is symptomatic of the affect the computer/mind metaphor had on post-war American culture. "Since World War Two," Edwards writes, "computer metaphors have been central in the reconstruction of certain conceptual boundaries, both within and outside scientific discourses, such as those between humans and machines, intelligence and intuition, rationality and emotion."²⁵ Edwards analyzes the brain or mind as computer metaphor through the Lakoff and Johnson model of metaphors so pervasive we forget they are figurative at all.²⁶ Denet's read on this particular chess match would seem to betray that level of bias.

And yet, like HAL, we have reason to question not only if rationality was the key to Deep Blue's success, but whether it was in fact a rational actor. Years later, statistician Nate Silver suggested otherwise and works of popular journalism took interest:

Kasparov and other chess masters blamed the defeat on a single move made by the IBM machine. Either at the end of the first game or the beginning of the second, depending on who's telling the story, the computer made a sacrifice that seemed to hint at its long-term strategy.

Kasparov and many others thought the move was too sophisticated for a computer, suggesting there had been some sort of human intervention during the game. "It was an incredibly refined move, of defending while ahead to cut out any hint of countermoves," grandmaster Yasser Seirawan told *Wired* in 2001, "and it sent Garry into a tizzy."

Fifteen years later, one of Big Blue's designers says the move was the result of a bug in

²⁵ Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America*, 158-59.

²⁶ Lakoff and Johnson famously argued that certain conceptual metaphors are so deep (time is money, love is war) that they not only go unnoticed, but serve as fundamental to our perception of the world. They further argue that many of these metaphors have their basis in bodily extension. G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

Deep Blue's software.²⁷

Silver obtained this information from Murray Campbell, one third of Deep Blue's designing team who claimed in an interview that "the machine was unable to select a move and simply picked one at random."²⁸ In this telling, the thing Kasparov found himself unable to comprehend and subsequently cope with was not a superior intelligence, but to use Silver's own terminology, "noise." I am eager to insist that a glitch and an emotion are not one in the same (though the presence of an emotion in a machine not programmed to have them frequently presents itself as the most exciting of glitches in the science fiction universe). If Campbell is correct that Deep Blue won because it altered the expectations of its play in a manner that couldn't be puzzled out, however, then what we witness is at least an interruption to the narrative of cognitive purity. The cold, unfeeling machine of 1996 did not win; the busted one of 1997 did. It did so because it altered the emotional field, without needing to be able to itself feel.

But we do not require Campbell's revelation to view Deep Blue as something less than intelligence made pure (or something more, as an entity that errs). Wilson (writing before Silver and his interview with Campbell) catalogs the numerous ways Deep Blue's victory was interpreted as the inevitable dominance of cognition over affect: "It was widely agreed that Deep Blue's unemotional intelligence was central to its success: [...] 'Grand master Yasser Seirwan put it most succinctly: "the machine has no fear."'"²⁹ Wilson finds this sentiment to be only half true. The machine may be without feelings as we understand them, but the conclusion that it is

²⁷ Klint Finley, "Did a Computer Bug Help Deep Blue Beat Kasparov?," *Wired*, September 28 2012.

²⁸ Silver, *The Signal and the Noise: Why So Many Predictions Fail-but Some Don't*, 288.

²⁹ Wilson, *Affect and Artificial Intelligence*, 10. The internal quotation comes from Charles Krauthammer's 1996 *Time* Article "Deep Blue Funk."

the absence of feeling that makes great chess happen, assumes too much. Wilson details the stipulations of Kasparov's contract (a human opponent was required to sit across from him at all times) and the many testimonies of a targetless affect that emanated from Kasparov throughout the series.³⁰ "Many people argued that the computation efforts of playing the machine were too much for Kasparov—that he was cognitively overwhelmed," Wilson argues, "It is also the case that he was emotionally underwhelmed—starved of the affective circuitry that he needs to play chess brilliantly."³¹

It is not quite the same thing to say that emotionless cognition is supreme as it is to argue that the affectively starved human is inferior.³² Wilson believes viewing the match in this way makes an important point about chess itself. While chess is often regarded as a "narrowly cognitive capacity" in which, "the physical, emotional, or aesthetic skills involved in chess falling to one side," understood—as it has been for more than a millennia—as a game between two human opponents, the Kasparov / Deep Blue match does not occlude the relevance of affect, but rather demonstrates a presence of feeling and exchange that was ever a part of the game. Everyone knew chess was emotional and environmental but believed those aspects to be secondary, possibly even irrelevant or corruptive, as compared to its purely cognitive demands.

³⁰ Nearly every account of the matches paints a portrait of Kasparov as increasingly puffy, sweaty, and demonstrative.

³¹ Wilson, *Affect and Artificial Intelligence*, 16.

³² To be fair, plenty of people attribute Kasparov's failure as emotional, but the failure is that he has emotions, not that Deep Blue fails to complete a circuit that is part of the exchange of playing chess. Wilson offers a variety of visual materials covering and recounting the match as evidence, for example, the DVD jacket for the film *Game Over: Kasparov and the Machine*, uses the catchy tagline "No Feeling. No Fear. No Contest." The documentary itself suggests that one of Kasparov's big mistakes was in bringing his mother to the game. Ibid., 13. Vikram Jayanti, "Game Over: Kasparov and the Machine," (2003).

The Kasparov of 1997 seemed to be sweating out a message that feeling and embodiment were intimately and definitively at the heart of the game.

The emotional failure this chapter concerns itself with most is of this kind—less a breakdown or a burst, more an mis-characterization of emotion’s agency and space. This chapter and the works of feminist science fiction that guide it—from Ursula Le Guin and Octavia Butler—consider the role failure itself plays in recasting the tired binary of thinking and feeling. The epigraph with which this chapter begins—“I am completely operational, and all of my circuits are functioning perfectly”—is, for me, an expression of irony. As a machine intelligence modelled on the human mind, the HAL 9000 cannot be both fully operational and in possession of perfectly wired circuits. One precludes the other. The perfect circuitry is a dream (or nightmare) of efficiency that perhaps never and nowhere exists. The truly operational runs on flaws. Human intelligence, the mark and method of artificial intelligence, is by and large understood in contemporary times as the cumulative force of many millions of mis-firings (a point I return to in the conclusion of this chapter). We resolve our own internal entropy problem by being more noise than signal, so to speak. Failure, in this sense, is indispensable to success, not simply in the clichéd way we speak of learning from one’s mistakes, but as success might have come for Kasparov in a truly ‘perfect’ chess match: as a jumble of positive and negative affects that take on meaning only in the act of exchange.

The Signal and The Noise

A central conceit of this chapter is that narratives of all kinds are made up of signals and noise: information that is key and information that is simply there—be it useful but additive or

even a nuisance. In this section I will demonstrate a few particularly potent examples of the way emotion has been relegated to the role of noise over the course of the twentieth century and put those narratives into contact with four works of fiction whose plots are driven by the emotional, whose worlds are—in a very real way—run on feeling.

Octavia Butler's trilogy, known collectively in the 1980s as *Xenogenesis* and remarketed in recent years as *Lilith's Brood*, follows a single lineage over the course of hundreds of years in three books, distinctly narrated but all formed by the same premise. In an undisclosed future, human kind has brought itself to the brink of extinction through warfare and environmental degradation. One survivor of the human species, a black woman named Lilith Iyapo, is awakened aboard an alien spaceship where she is trained to serve as the ambassador between species, waking humans kept in stasis and training them to accept their alien captors/saviors and prepare for life in the recolonization of earth. The aliens, the Oankali, are long-living gene manipulators who embody change. They travel from galaxy to galaxy breeding their earlier forms out of existence. They are made of three sexes: male, female, and ooloi. While all possess innate defensive and healing abilities well beyond any human, the ooloi are especially adept at the manipulation of genes. The first novel, *Dawn*, is told by a third person narrator with omniscience into the minds of a few characters, but who is kept especially close to Lilith's perspective. The novel concludes with Lilith's impregnation by her ooloi companion Nikanj and her realization that she has been left behind. She is deemed in mortal danger by the humans she has led who regard her as a species traitor.

The second novel, *Adulthood Rites*, takes place many years later. Lilith is settled on earth in an Oankali settlement called Lo. Children that are part Oankali, part human are called constructs and until now, they have all been bred to be female. We reconnect with Lilith at the

birth of her son, the first male, human/Oankali construct. He is human looking and because all humans have been sterilized except to mate through and with an ooloi, the price for a human-seeming child is dear. The boy, Akin, is kidnapped and eventually spends some years in a village of resisters—humans who have refused to mate with the Oankali and so live out their unnaturally long lives (they were genetically altered before they were set free) without the capacity to procreate. Akin is eventually reclaimed and sent to the ship where he befriends a member of the Oankali race who is set apart from their most recent genetic evolution—an earlier version of the Oankali, described as “caterpillar-like,” called the Akjai.³³ There, Akin decides the humans should be restored in their reproductive capacities and allowed to create their own civilization. His plan is accepted, even as the Oankali agree that humans have a genetic flaw—a tendency toward hierarchy—that will lead them ever to their own self destruction. Those who wish to go are nevertheless given a colony on Mars in which to start anew.

The third work, *Imago*, also jumps many years into the future and is likewise predominantly concerned with the first of a new kind.³⁴ Here Lilith’s construct child, Jodahs begins his period of metamorphosis and discovers he is becoming the first ooloi construct, an

³³ O.E. Butler, *Lilith’s Brood*, 2007 ed. (Grand Central Publishing, 1989), 452. Original publication of *Adulthood Rites*, 1988.

³⁴ The word “imago” means “The final or adult stage in the development of an insect, during which it is sexually mature.” It can also be used to describe the age of sexual maturation in any animal species. As this text represents the final stage of a alien/human metamorphosis, and this third novel has particularly a lot to do with the necessity the Oankali-human constructs generally and ooloi in particular have for sexual intercourse, the title is a fitting one. Interestingly, “imago” has a meaning in psychoanalysis as well: “A subjective image of someone (esp. a parent) which a person has unconsciously formed and which continues to influence his or her attitudes and behavior.” It is compelling that a work so dedicated to the concept of change would make a reference to the long-staying power of a parental relationship. Lilith was after all, considered by many to be to blame for the human surrender to the Oankali. While her direct presence in the series fades considerably over time, the title of this third novel suggests that she not only persists in her long-lived tenure as matriarch, but that her central dilemma as the connecting link between human and Oankali casts a long, internalized shadow over the choices of her new and different children. Oxford English Dictionary, “*Imago*, N.” (Oxford University Press).

accident or mistake of Nikanj's rearing of him.³⁵ Taken as an unplanned and dangerous diversion from the plan by his fellow Oankali, Jodahs and his immediate family go into exile. He eventually pairs with a human brother and sister. His construct would-be sister metamorphosizes also into an ooloi and the central characters take part in convincing a resister settlement that has managed to breed through incest and subsequently manifest generations of mal-formed and deeply ill offspring, to be healed and paired with the Oankali.

The fourth novel I examine here is Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*. George Orr suffers from effective dreaming. His most vivid dreams on occasion come true, not as premonitions, but as iterations to the very fabric of reality. He and whoever is present with him at the time of dreaming are frequently described as the center of a storm; only they can remember the world both the way it was before the dream and after. The past has been changed to make way for the new reality. For example, when Orr is instructed to dream of an end to world war, he awakens a few years out of an alien attack on a moon station that united all nations of the globe. This is an example of not only the retroactive power of the dreams but of their imprecision. Arrested for taking unauthorized prescription medication to stay awake, Orr is sent to Dr. Haber, a sleep psychologist, to cure his oneirophobia. Haber is, however, quick to discover Orr's gift and uses his invention, the Augmentor, to induce an effective dream state and have Orr change the world to Haber's liking. Because Orr interprets these commands in dream logic, the results are never simple—killing off large percentages of the population with a plague to resolve issues of overcrowding, bringing on an alien invasion, turning the entire planet's population grey

³⁵ Prior to the change, Jodahs believes himself to be destined to become male and is often regarded and depicted as masculine even after he is revealed to be ooloi. Some critics have argued this casting disrupts critiques of Butler's work as heteronormative in its conceptions of gender and reproduction. Francis Bonner argues that Jodah's masculine persona colors his relationship with Tomas as queer in nature. Frances Bonner, "Difference and Desire, Slavery and Seduction: Octavia Butler's 'Xenogenesis' " *Foundation* (1990).

as an answer to racial discrimination. Like *Xenogenesis*, *The Lathe of Heaven* is not especially about AI and yet the machines that matter in these novels contribute to a vision of emotion as signal.³⁶

“Chkahichdahk” is the unpronounceable name of the Oankali ship that the *Xenogenesis* series begins on and which the character Akin returns to in *Adulthood Rites*. The ship is not a ship at all but a living creature, beyond—we are many times reminded—the capacities of human language or technology to comprehend. The walls and structures of Chkahichdahk appear, open, close, and provide things like food and a place to rest, in response to an Oankali’s touch (or Lilith’s as she is modified to have limited abilities to interface with the ship). Once on earth, the settlement of Lo works in very much the same way, though it is not so mature as Chkahichdahk and requires more direct planning and effort on the part of the mixed Oankali human settlers. Their farm, for example, is kept a distance from town because the immature Lo organism would destroy any growth that wasn’t a part of itself it encountered, until it “learns.” Importantly, Lo and Chkahichdahk are also communication devices, carrying messages, often of distress as almost pure emotion, from an Oankali on its perimeter to the central habitation. Butler’s technofuturism thus forwards a form of advanced artificial intelligence that is decidedly organicist. This brief introduction to the “machines” of *Xenogenesis* serves to illustrate how Butler so thoroughly grounds (it is rather literally the ground) her science fiction in a world of feeling and embodiment. The distinctly advanced alien species of the future do not have an

³⁶ A selection from Le Guin’s afterword to her novel *The Word for World is Forest* casts *The Lathe of Heaven* in a particularly interesting light. Writing it, she states, was “like dictating for a boss with ulcers. What I wanted to write about was the forest and the dream; that is, I wanted to describe a certain ecology from within [. . .] But the boss wanted to talk about the destruction of ecological balance and the rejection of emotional balance.” *The Lathe of Heaven* is an earlier book than *The Word for World is Forest* and so this is not the germination of Haber’s identity, but it might well be perceived as his tendency to hang around in Le Guin’s imagination. Haber imposed his will on dreams in ways that tend toward a critique on ecological destruction and emotional imbalance. U.K.L. Guin, *The Word for World Is Forest* (Tom Doherty Associates, 2010).

especially conscious technological capacity to build things in the way alien invaders typically do in such stories. In fact, they are less technological, in a human sense of the word, than humans:

Upon arriving at Lo for the first time, Tino, the resister turned companion of Lilith exclaims:

“It’s primitive! You live like savages! I mean. . . .” He lowered his voice. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say that. It’s just that . . . I don’t know any polite way to ask this: Why don’t you at least build real houses and get rid of these shacks! You should see what we have! And . . .Hell, you have spaceships. How can you live this way!’”

Lilith spoke softly to him. “How many of those real houses of yours were empty when you left, Tino?”³⁷

Tino’s defensive response to this question takes him to a tirade about “making” things, and more importantly the pride that accompanies it: “You can be damn sure that everything they did make was good and it worked and they put their hearts into it.”³⁸ Through Tino, Butler presents the human race as reluctant to trade the pride of construction for the ease and sufficiency of symbiotic relationships with other organisms. Tino’s use of the term “savages” calls forth a form of xenophobia and assumptions about the appearance of progress that Butler consistently critiques. Within the imagined future of *Xenogenesis*, however, it is the machine and the making of the machine that have faded from relevance. Traditional concepts of computation that credit a human programmer (even as they venerate the machine) have no place here. The memory of such power over creation is a cry of desperation, a counter-productive nostalgia.

In contrast to Lo and Chkahichdahk, *The Lathe of Heaven* offers a machine more akin to what we are used to, both narratively and technologically. The Augmentor is a big-bodied metal contraption: dials, levers, buttons—all the trappings of a mad scientist’s infernal machine. Like

³⁷ Butler, *Lilith's Brood*, 280.

³⁸ *ibid.*

Tino's desired manufactured town, the machine seeks to make more impressive the things that humans naturally do or require. Dr. Haber is likewise asking a question about progress. If dreams are important and revealing, why not make them more vivid and accessible? Why not meddle with them? This representation serves as a critique of science to be sure; Haber personifies the hubris of improving upon a naturally occurring human experience. The journey Haber takes from wanting to better understand a powerful part of the human psyche to wanting to control it takes little time or encouragement.

Even more than (or as an accompaniment to) the drive toward scientific and technological advancement, The Augmentor stands in for a notion of progress predicated on ego-inflation. Its very name suggests as much. The connection between Haber's grand vision of himself and his beloved machine is unsubtle; in a monologue Haber delivers to Orr on the workings and fascinations of the machine, he labels its purpose in masturbatory terms: "that's why I developed the Augmentor, to provide the brain a means of *self*-stimulation."³⁹ The Augmentor is the sort of proud human accomplishment Butler's Tino longs for. Neither Butler nor Le Guin have much patience for such things. The Augmentor is not only a rather silly, rattling, mammoth contraption, it also proves to be no match for the human dream.⁴⁰

In this way Le Guin's story might be considered as falling within the tradition of traditional man vs machine narratives. The Augmentor stops short of being artificially intelligent. Haber is at once grandiose in his claims about its abilities and careful, lest he be considered unethical, to suggest that it is merely there to give the mind a minor nudge. These visions of

³⁹ U.K. Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven: A Novel*, 2008 ed. (Scribner, 1971), 31.emphasis in original

⁴⁰ As I will discuss further, Orr is eventually able to reach a place of equilibrium that makes him impervious to the machine.

machines—from Butler’s organicism to Le Guin’s dream booster—do little to fuel conscious desires for technological advancement. They interact with humans (and aliens) at an unconscious, affective level. Chess boards, conceived of as a test of pure cognition, could hardly be farther from Lo and the Augmentor. But, as Wilson demonstrates, they say a great deal about the way AI developed without a consideration for the role of emotion in cognition.

Wilson invokes Kasparov and Deep Blue to reveal the weak link of overly compartmentalized approaches to A.I.. Through the course of *Affect and Artificial Intelligence*, she contrasts the open intrigue in and expression of effects of curiosity, joy, and embracing of homosocial approaches to collaboration that characterized the life and work of Alan Turing with the “avoidance, contempt, and tomfoolery” that marked any “engagement with affect” in the work of cognitive scientist Walter Pitts.⁴¹ Far from the closeted, twitchy, spectrum figure pitied in a recent popular representation, Turing was known as a boisterous person among friends, but also one who took the role of psychological complexity, of emotional life, to heart in his aspirations toward an artificial intelligence.⁴²

Walter Pitts, the young polymath who worked closely with Warren McCulloch and Jerry Lettvin and who was a central contributor to the Macy’s conferences, led a life and produced a body of scholarship centered around a rejection of interior introspection. Wilson describes how in a 1943 paper, Pitts and McCulloch propose neurons as digital (either on or off), but working alongside analog forces in the human nervous system. On the subject of psychology, however,

⁴¹ Wilson, *Affect and Artificial Intelligence*, 111.

⁴² This reference to “popular representations” means to challenge the well-received 2014 film, *The Imitation Game*, in which Benedict Cumberbatch plays Turing as closeted and seemingly balancing his genius with crippling social ineptitude bordering on autism. Accounts of Turing’s life do not support this portrayal, and indeed the film features a host of other historical inaccuracies.

their models take no account of a potential analog affectivity. Rather, “what the 1943 paper performs is the stripping back of psychological space to the barest cognitive essentials.”⁴³

Wilson calls our attention to the ways in which these epistemological choices both reflect and inform the personal lives of both McCulloch and Pitts (McCulloch’s career is marked by personal and professional contempt for psychoanalysis. Pitts suffered a debilitating depression rendered abstract and was especially derailed by the disintegration of collegial relationships). Emotion, in short, is a force neither man will contend with interpersonally or mathematically. Whatever toll the stiff upper lip of the credible cognitivist took on Pitts and McCulloch, Wilson is quite certain it set Artificial Intelligence astray. What Turing understood and what was lost on the chess board, or rather, chess screen, was that for the artificial to achieve true intelligence, it would require emotion, not merely as convincing parlor trick, but as a central component of its cognitive processes.

As is the case with the world of chess, it would be a mistake to suggest that the developers of AI or their foundational field of cognitive science were ignorant of the presence or importance of emotion. In his history of the discipline of cognitive science, Howard Gardner writes, “Though mainstream cognitive scientists do not necessarily bear any animus against the affective realm, against the context that surrounds any action or thought, or against historical or cultural analyses, in practice they attempt to factor out these elements to the maximum extent possible.”⁴⁴ His characterization does well to summarize a founding characteristic of emotion

⁴³ Wilson, *Affect and Artificial Intelligence*, 119.

⁴⁴ Gardner, *The Mind’s New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution*, 41. This evaluation of priorities within cognitive science and its central “computer metaphor” is present in Paul Edwards’ history as well: “The computer metaphor [. . .] implies [. . .] that emotion is either irrelevant to the understanding of human thought, or that emotion might somehow be represented as a symbolic process.” Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America*, 162.

research: the study of a force that if it could be understood and measured, could then be disregarded to better ascertain the “objective” nature of the object of study.

Walter B. Cannon, the American physiologist who discovered adrenaline and coined the concept “flight or fight,” was not looking to understand feeling unto itself, but to eliminate it. Some of his most groundbreaking work on the physiological effects of emotion stem from the desire to normalize his experiments. Plagued by an inconsistency of measurement in anxious test subjects, Cannon experimented with creating fear and anxiety in cats, dogs, guinea pigs, and rabbits to the conclusion that even “very mild emotional disturbances are attended by abolition of peristalsis” (contraction and release in digestive organs).⁴⁵ If he could measure the extent to which blood pressure or heartbeat, for example, increased in contact with a medical examiner, he could subtract those values to arrive at a “true” reading. Here too, much is said of emotion by the very act of attempting to free the study of the body from the clutter of emotional content.

Emotion was approached, at least initially, by Cannon as something to eliminate to arrive at a clearer view of a default physiological state. But even in fields that took emotion as their central subject of study, we find the researchers that engage with it wary of its unwieldy and abstract nature. As its name suggests, behaviorism—the branch of psychology that dominated the field throughout the mid-century—put the entirety of its emphasis on observable behavior: only that which could be seen or heard and recorded was truly knowable and so those aspects of the mind with which we have less insight were by virtue of being beyond the scope of a particular approach to scientific study, beside the point. The work of psychology was to deal in the tangible and immediate modes of experimentation and observation. This didn’t mean eschewing emotion,

⁴⁵ W.B. Cannon, *Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear and Rage: An Account of Recent Researches into the Function of Emotional Excitement* (D. Appleton, 1920).

but it put considerably less emphasis on understanding the origins or nature of emotions—focusing instead on their functions—than approaches to psychology before or since. The histories of behaviorism or of Cannon’s eliminatory research illustrate how seeing emotion as a superfluous or undesirable byproduct of the mind, whether the mind being studied or the mind conducting the study, is not an act of ignorance or denial, but one of primacy.⁴⁶ It comes as no surprise then that these priorities carried over into cybernetics and the quest for artificial intelligence.

Norbert Weiner’s broadly conceived theory of networks, dubbed cybernetics, did not explicitly preclude the affective realm, but as the philosophy that “information is information” gained steam over the course of the mid-century, it became clear to some how tied to a search for the ever-elusive ‘meaning’ emotion was.⁴⁷ And meaning was decidedly a problem for another time. Gleick neatly summarizes computer pioneer Claude Shannon’s pronouncement to this effect: “Never mind meaning,” he said at a Macy’s meeting in 1950. Information without meaning, what one critical participant pejoratively dubbed “beep beeps,” was a central aim of the

⁴⁶ Yet it was not simply the primacy of the machine over the human, but of the machine-like within the human. As Gleick writes, “Much of the success of his book [Cybernetics], abstruse and ungainly as it was, lay in Weiner’s always returning his focus to the human, not the machine.” The future depended on our capacity to understand not only to build circuits of cause and effect but to recognize how we already lived within them and were comprised of them. The Kasparov loss was both a blow to distinct human ability (because the machine beat the man) and a testament to the means by which the human mind might triumph by way of machine development (because man built the machine). We could be at once despondent at our impending obsolescence and self-congratulatory at the cleverness of replacing one’s own mind with a superior (and of course of interest to proponents of singularity, immortal) model. Gleick, *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood*, 240.

⁴⁷ Weiner imagined cybernetics as a philosophy, not a road-map for machine-making. His theory of information was all-inclusive: “Information is information, not matter or energy. No materialism which does not admit this can survive at the present day” Quoted in *ibid.*, 241.

participants of this gathering.⁴⁸ In the midst of it all, however, Margaret Mead asked an excellent question:

She did not want the group to forget that meaning can exist quite apart from phonemes and dictionary definitions. “If you talk about another kind of information,” she said, “if you are trying to communicate the fact that somebody is angry, what order of distortion might be introduced to take the anger out of the message that otherwise will carry exactly the same words?”

Mead is here making the case that emotion is indeed information, but information which a great deal of the day’s discussion on the capacity to transmit language had no accounting for. As the speaker and psycho-acoustic specialist J.C.R. Licklider struggled to locate a path toward denotative meaning in a calculation of information carried as phonemes per second, Mead was wondering what this could amount to if it was connotative meaning that was desired. If anger (happiness, silliness, or ennui, etc.) were a less than explicitly stated part of the original message, they were headed to the cutting room floor. It is at this point that Shannon announces all meaning as beside the point. Meaning at all, much less connotative or affective meaning, was not so readily quantified and so left alone.

The following year, Shannon brought his famous rat maze to the conference, a learning machine that ‘remembers’ patterns as yeses and no’s (the way out of one box is yes south and no north, yes west, no east, and so on). It is an impressive step—the robot rat is able to recall and complete the maze without bumps on a second go so long as the maze remains untouched. With this new toy to ponder, language—the ever-evolving maze—and the capacity it has to convey not just information but an orientation toward it, fade from the concerns of the locating and replicating of signals. Von Foerster, the critic who dubbed the subject of the 1950 meeting as

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 248.

“beep beeps” would put the distinction in precisely these terms: “I wanted to call the whole of what they called information theory *signal theory*, because information was not yet there.”⁴⁹ More precisely, the information Mead and Von Foerster sought was scarcely described by a system predicated on “on” or “off.” Information was ongoing; it was analog.

But information had gone digital and because the brain, home to neurons which fire or do not, was a fitting analogy, its functioning would serve as basis for machine design which would, in turn, recast a concept of the brain as bound by the machine’s same limitations. “When a neuron snaps between two possible states—‘the state of the nerve cell with no message in it and the state of the cell with a message in it’—the chemistry of this transition may have intermediate shadings, but for theoretical purposes the shadings may be ignored”⁵⁰ stated Von Neumann and so, as it was for Cannon, the signal was determined and, by default, the noise. The concept that emotion, or even contextual meaning, was superfluous data was thus not born at the rise of the information age, but early adopters of the cognitive turn found the relegation of feeling and meaning to the category of nonessential useful to their purposes and codified it for another generation of theories of the mind.

The fundamental structure of this narrative—signal (discreet cognitive data) and noise (feeling and context)—would be preserved in much science fiction of the coming decades, even (as I will demonstrate in the forthcoming section) in narratives that championed emotion. Science fiction work may have lamented the limited communicability of the affective realm, but they did not imagine it otherwise. Though lauded for its imaginative take on a future cyberspace (and credited with coining the term) William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* serves as a good example

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

of the future imagined as a dystopia crowded with information in which emotion is less absent than unimportant.

The action of the novel is eventually revealed to be the will of a super artificial intelligence, recruiting human hackers to complete its own construction. Drug addiction, bodily depletion, women (not simply relationships with them, but their very existence) are incidental, or at best, distractions and coping mechanisms for men on the brink of obsolescence. On some level, the dark and joyless world Gibson has created functions as a critique of information obsession—the desire to build smarter machines without regard for the consequences. This is most evident in the ambiguous conclusion suggesting the main character’s consciousness is to be uploaded. But it reads less as critique than fascination because of the incredible flatness of the work as a whole and because the “signal” of its contents falls well within the bounds of hard sci-fi, a distinction that delineates a work’s commitment to actual or plausible technology, but which might also do well to describe works that maintain the philosophical underpinnings of that technological development as well. It is, in short, firmly in keeping with a cold view of cognitivism.

The feminist science fiction I focus on here does nothing of the sort. Both works fall under the rubric of deeply implausible, a distinction which I believe permits them to radically reimagine what counts as pertinent information. On some level, the simple metaphor of signal and noise can be applied to any narrative. A work of fiction as well as a history of behaviorism, cognitivism, or computational development downplays certain aspects of a story in order to prioritize others. For Le Guin and Butler, however, grandiose claims to Intelligence—artificial or otherwise—become uniquely the noise.

For example, if *Neuromancer* is a soulless and self-important series of prognostications centered on the survival of the fragile masculine ego, Le Guin's scene in the office of one such future-leaning egoist counters as comic relief. Heather Lelache, the lawyer our protagonist George Orr has hired to try to get him out of mandatory therapy has come (under false pretenses of a routine inspection) to observe one of Doctor Haber's induced dream sessions with Orr. Haber wishes to present his grand machine, The Augmentor, in as much detail as a "nonspecialist" can handle. For her part, Ms. Lelache has a hand-held tape recorder. She begins: "Will you describe the therapy you're employing please, teep, and explain the role this device plays in it? Don't tell me how it teep works, that's in our report, but what it does. Teep for instance, how does its use differ from Elektroson or the trancap?" The teeping noise is an ethical function of the tape recorder, meant to remind the speaker that they are being recorded. As a function of the novel, it cuts through Lelache's speech in a way that serves to build the sense of frustration we see in the third person close narration of Haber's inner state as well as heighten the suspense as to whether she will uncover Haber's manipulation of Orr's dreams. She does discover the truth. Of course she does. Like the tape recorder that announces itself, Lelache's ability to ask probing questions and her skills of observation are outrightly apparent to all but Haber. Caught in a particularly pointed query Haber, "launched into an answer easily, glad to hear his own voice instead of her snapping and bangle-clattering and teeping; it was curious how he only heard the annoying little sound when she was talking."⁵⁰

This scene is a rather literal meditation on noise. The "snapping and bangle-clattering" Haber refers to is the sound of Lelache's jewelry, fashion associated to her femininity and perhaps

⁵⁰ Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven: A Novel*, 56.

her racial difference (she is the text's only woman and only African American). The only character who changes with the novel's multiple realities is Heather Lelache. Only she is vulnerable to context. Each time Orr radically changes the world, we meet a new Heather Lelache, some happier, some more subdued—always the object of Orr's love. Her mutability serves as a comment upon her social status as an African American woman. She is subject to interpretation in ways she cannot control. Like Butler, however, Le Guin values change. Heather's adaptable character compares positively to Haber's immutable quest for advancement.

The fixed figure of Doctor Haber is resolutely focused on his machine and his ambitions, in ways not even a shift in reality aimed at his very character can much alter.⁵¹ The humble tape recorder represents the interruption to unquestioned progress the machine and its operator insist upon. Lelache's recording isn't an emotional disruption, but it does serve as a note to the reader to look out for noise, to be dubious of any signal too singularly focused to be cognizant of the material it manages to tune out.

But *The Lathe of Heaven* makes a signal out of material popularly perceived as noise in more direct ways as well; the book is, after all, about dreams. At the level of plot, Le Guin makes the case that one's conscious thoughts are profoundly less relevant than their unconscious desires. Le Guin returns often to debate the forces of conscious and unconscious thought between Haber and Orr. Haber is the proponent of freeing the unconscious:

“Don't worry about control! Freedom is what you're working toward,” Haber said gustily. “Freedom! Your unconscious mind is not a sink of horror and depravity. That's a Victorian notion, and a terrifically destructive one. It crippled most of the best minds of the nineteenth century, and hamstrung psychology all through the first half of the twentieth. Don't be afraid of your unconscious mind! It's not a black pit of nightmares.

⁵¹ Heather and George Orr conspire to effectively dream up a better Doctor Haber, to no avail. This instance will be reviewed in greater depth in pages to come.

Nothing of the kind! It is a well-spring of health, imagination, creativity. What we call; ‘evil’ is produced by civilization, its constraints and repressions, deforming the spontaneous, free self-expression of the personality. The aim of psychotherapy is precisely this, to remove those groundless fears and nightmares, to bring up what’s unconscious into the light of rational consciousness, examine it objectively, and find that there is nothing to fear.”

“But there is,” Orr said softly.⁵²

I have quoted this excited monologue in full because it is the trajectory of Haber’s thinking that interests me most. He begins with the concept of freedom and then quite redundantly dismisses the role of nightmares. By the close of his speech, however, he has packaged the purportedly free unconscious as something to be “objectively studied.” Haber makes clear that what he desires is not an unconscious free to wander, but an unconscious trapped like a lab rat, a force to be understood and put to work in the name of progress. Haber is equal parts “scientist,” with a strong desire to examine and understand, and salesman. His enthusiasm here testifies to the latter as does his introduction to the Augmentor, which he also lovingly refers to as the “Dream Machine.”⁵³ We are invited to both ends of the double entendre: it is a machine that induces dreams and the sort of thing dreams are made of. And so this work of science fiction is driven on highly affective states, unconscious feelings manifested in reality. Signals made of noise. Meaning, if you will, without credible information.

The trilogy of novels that comprise Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* offer an entirely different imaginary world and yet similarly privilege instinct and unconscious thought.⁵⁴ The

⁵² Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven: A Novel*, 88.

⁵³ *ibid.*, 17. Haber’s pride in the machine shines through: ““That’s the Dream Machine,” he said with a grin.” ““Or, prosaically, the Augmentor,”” he adds, as if there were anything prosaic about such a title. He proceeds to describe its function before jumping, apropos of nothing, back to an earlier anecdote about a depressed patient in order to declare her cured. The lack of space Le Guin places between Haber’s testimonies of the machine’s abilities and his own demonstrate just how tangled together pride in the machine and the ego of the man have become.

⁵⁴ Le Guin’s book of dreams is interested almost entirely in the unconscious—though as we proceed the unconscious drives of Doctor Haber will take on greater importance. Butler is far more invested in thoughts and feelings taking

emphasis on networks and communication fundamental to the formations of cognitive science are largely elided in Le Guin's novel. The dream state alters reality without a record of the means by which it does so. Butler, in contrast, is far more attentive to the path a signal travels. Yet the signal is less a piece of information than a feeling or an intuition. A vision of communication this foreign may well require actual aliens. In contrast to science fiction that imagines forward from a present state of science or technology, Butler begins with something altogether foreign in the guise of an alien race in order to jolt us into a new conceptualization of communication and knowledge/feeling.

By and large the perspective of the first novel, *Dawn*, stems from the human character of Lilith. The second novel remains close to the construct child Akin, who is part Oankali, part human but human in appearance. In the third work, *Imago*, Butler assumes we have acclimated sufficiently to leave behind the crutch of familiarity provided for us in the first two works. Not only is the protagonist a construct ooloi—a third sex of Oankali, the most distinct looking, and the most distinct from humanity in its abilities—but this work alone is narrated in the first person.

The text opens on Jodahs in the early stages of its metamorphosis. One of the first things it notices is its extraordinary sense of smell: “The Humans smelled most obviously of sweat and adrenaline, food and sex. I sat down on the floor and let myself work out the complex combinations of scents. My new awareness wouldn't allow me to do anything else.”⁵⁵ The Oankali gift for sensory awareness is not unto itself an argument for a book premised in the

place below the surface of a conscious person—the unconscious. The similarity I draw upon is mostly as they relate to (taking place under, before, or without) conscious, cognitive functions.

⁵⁵ Butler, *Lilith's Brood*, 525.

emotional realm. For example, the smell provides for Jodahs useful information such as locale—
“By the time I was finished, I thought I would be able to track those two Humans through
anything.”⁵⁶ But it is, more often than not, the affective data that the Oankali and constructs of
these works collect that serves to move them and the story forward: “The two Humans looked at
one another. They still smelled frightened, but now both were making an effort to look brave.
Their faces were almost expressionless.”⁵⁷ Smell is a potent tool in the plot and characterization,
but far from the only sense of mention.

In another scene, Jodahs utilizes its superior hearing to understand how to communicate
with Humans he intends to join with. “‘There’s more food. You’re welcome to it.’ I repeated the
words in Spanish, Portuguese [. . .] The two Humans did not answer me. They did not move but
their heartbeats speeded up. [...] When had their heartbeats increased? I focused my memories
for a moment. My speaking at all had startled them, but my Spanish had excited them more.”
Here Jodahs uses sensory bodily information to divine another’s feeling and from that feeling, a
course of action. Its thinking is intimately linked to diverse sources of information, often
privileging its access to the bodily functions of those around it and the emotions those states
suggest.⁵⁸ Far more than smell or hearing or sight, however, all three of Butler’s novels in this
series are driven by haptic information.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 526. As I will discuss in greater depth in the section to come, the Oankali use their superior senses to not only ascertain and adapt to emotional impulses but, with some frequency, to override the self-proclaimed thoughts of humans in favor of a read on their affective states..

⁵⁸ On some level, separating sense from sense misses the point. Over the course of the three novels, Butler encourages her readers to identify with the oanklai and Oankali constructs through a sympathetic narrative of their experiences, but also through the subtle encouragement of experiencing the world as they do. Thus her texts are quietly laced with synesthesia: “Laughed bitterly” (241) “feeding from the impossibly bright light of the sun” (440). The metaphors serve as a bridge to the strange sensory worlds of the Oankali. As Jodahs begins its metamorphosis

“I touched her thigh, and her body flared with sexual feeling. This surprised and frightened her and she caught my free hand and held it in her own, ‘You haven’t told me anything’ she said. ‘In a way, I’ve told you everything,’ I said, ‘and all without words.’”⁵⁹ Here is an over-the-top-seduction not unusual for Butler’s writing. The difference between Jodahs’ statement that all the necessary communication is sensory, non-verbal, and sensual, and your standard romance-novel fare, however, is the extent to which it means this statement literally. After a night of liminally consensual sex between Jodahs and the woman described above, Jesusa, and her brother Tomás, Jodahs describes the extent and purpose of this physical thrall in a brief aside: “We had all awakened together—which meant they had awakened when I did. I didn’t want to take a chance on Jesusa rationalizing and running again, or worse, deciding to try and kill me again.”⁶⁰ There is a case to be made that the force Butler privileges is not emotion so much as a more primal sexual drive. This is a fair conclusion. It also the case, however, that a genuine love is the end goal of all this touch-bound manipulation, which told through the voice of Jodahs is cast more as an entirely unavoidable way of being than an act of coercion. In Jodahs’ own words, the rational is the enemy of both his aims and ultimately the survival of his captive Humans (who would perish of their incest-born diseases should it fail to heal them). If it isn’t explicitly an emotion-driven future, it is at the very least one in which the cognitive rationalism privileged in our own time and culture ceases to be in charge.

What commentary do these works in which feeling drives the plots, binds the characters, and runs the world, offer to conceptualizations of the future that privilege the machine? As a

for example, its feelings of loneliness literally take on mass and characteristics: “Than night I gave Aaor, Lo, and myself large, foul-smelling sores.” *Ibid.*, 588.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 634-35.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 643.

subgenre of science fiction, they surely represent something different than the popular man vs. machine plot. For Le Guin and Butler, the machine has little power. It is at best, an augmentor of the human unconscious or an organic ally. In the section to come, I will look to the ways mainstream science fiction sought to keep humanity special by imbuing them with special affective capacities under the threat of the machine. I argue that Butler and Le Guin are writing not only in the time in which a machine-based threat dominates the genre, but in response to it, presenting, in contrast to the majority of science fiction, emotion as an equal partner in destruction.

The cognitive turn served as a source of horror for science fiction writers, in truth, well before it got fully underway. Artificial intelligence has stoked our fears of obsolescence and fast-on-its-heels, the impending tyranny of a superior species since Fritz Lange, since Mary Shelley, since humans dreamt up life on other planets and the machines, beyond our imagining, that they may have constructed.⁶¹ I begin the following section by following Roland Barthes through the afterlife of Albert Einstein in an attempt to capture the unique quality of this affective response to the threat of the machine and of the other. I believe that in his work of cultural criticism on the mystique surrounding Einstein's brain, Barthes is able to name, with some precision, the

⁶¹ I refer here to the film *Metropolis* (1927) and the novel *Frankenstein* (1818). It is worth taking a moment to address the what is alike and different about robots and aliens in science fiction. Aliens are often taken to stand-in for difference, and as such parallels in literary criticism of science fiction draw frequent connection between stories of aliens and racial problems in history or the present. Butler's work is widely cited in such work. Artificial Intelligence is more often perceived as a genre of cautionary tales about technological advancement and hubris. Because of these distinct lineages, we more often find ourselves encouraged to make peace with aliens (as we ought to make peace with the Other on Earth): *E.T.* (1982); *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) (which in truth, is about both robots and aliens, human technological hubris in the form of the bomb and the need to get along with a powerful and perfectly nice alien), *Enemy Mine* (1985), and so on. On occasion robots serve a similar purpose: *Short Circuit* (1986), and frequently in more recent films like *Wall-E* (2008) and *A.I.* (2001). In both forms, however, the threat of a human successor is imminent. It is my intention here to make a deliberate jump from a consideration of artificial intelligence into one involving the unconscious and the alien, because I believe fears and ideas about aliens have the capacity to speak back to a discourse on machine-related-anxiety.

widespread cultural phenomenon of being at once in awe of a powerful machine and resenting, fearing, and seeking a means to disparage it. Emotion, I argue, is the source of our backlash in mainstream science fiction. But Le Guin and Butler have other plans.

God's Share

Photographs of Einstein, Barthes notes, present him aside a blackboard filled to the brim with dense and, to most, indecipherable, equations. Cartoons of the scientist get more to the point: bushy, electric hair guides the eye up to the simple equation that stands in for all of his work, $E=MC^2$ floating in the ether that frames his, in most depictions, oversized head.⁶² This reduction of a lifetime of work to a deceptively simple formula echoes what Barthes finds to be true of the flesh and blood body of Einstein as well.

When Einstein died he left his brain to science. Its inheritors were, to hear Barthes tell it, practically giddy to tinker with it.⁶³ Such fervor might well have been expected given the language that characterized this particular brain's presence in life. Einstein was a "genius so lacking in magic that one speaks about his thought as of a functional labor analogous to the mechanical making of sausages, the grinding of corn or the crushing of ore;" it served to "produce thought, continuously, as a mill makes flour."⁶⁴ It is no wonder people would want to look inside such a machine.

⁶² R. Barthes and A. Lavers, *Mythologies*, 1993 ed. (Vintage, 1957), 69.

⁶³ *ibid.*, 68.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 68-69.

The myths of the equation and the man who came up with it provide a comforting symmetry. Barthes argues that the myth of Einstein is not simply that he was a modern genius, but that his particular brand of intellectual achievement, summarized in the quippiest possible expression of molar physics and the synecdochical function of his physical brain, congeal into the means by which "the world blissfully regained the image of knowledge reduced to formula."⁶⁵ "Paradoxically," Barthes writes, "the more the genius of the man was materialized under the guise of his brain, the more the product of his inventiveness came to acquire a magical dimension."⁶⁶ Reductionist physicalism yields abstract wonder.

As a student of narrative forms, Barthes is keen to unlock the ways in which this myth of Einstein's brain falls in line with the other over-arching tales that predominate Western culture. What is perhaps new, in its cultural capital if not its inception, is the faith in the machine. Here, decidedly not Einstein, but Einstein's brain, functions as an instrument greater than the sum of its parts. It yields something beyond the person behind it by virtue of its own systematicity. Yet even in awe of this new machine, "God's share must be preserved."⁶⁷ The myth making is complete, according to Barthes, because Einstein dies. The machine stops working. And, what is more, it quits in the midst of a problem it was never able to solve (the unreconciled theories of molar and molecular physics). This new modern marvel is thus cast as every bit as comforting and familiar as it is frightful and exciting: "mythically [reconciling] the infinite power of man over nature with the 'fatality' of the sacrosanct, which man cannot yet do without."⁶⁸ In this way

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 69.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 70.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

the story of Einstein is less generative of a new trope than it is simply an especially good example of a very familiar tale. It was, after all, amidst such tension—the pull of competing desires to be saved both by and from all things quantifiable—that the computational cognitive sciences were born.

For many the 1948 Hixon Symposium served as a watershed moment in the emergence of modern cognitive science. This meeting not only opened with John Von Neumann's fairly revolutionary comparisons of the brain and the electronic computer, but for cognitivists looking to escape what would for some time be the very real dominance of behaviorism, the symposia's broader attention to the "way in which the nervous system controlled behavior," represented a way forward.⁶⁹ Yet even in a moment of extreme enthusiasm for all things computational, "God's share must be preserved." The myth-making Barthes traces in the story of Einstein is apparent in the address of the second speaker, neurophysiologist Warren McCulloch.

Speaking blithely on the comparisons between his talk and Von Neumann's, McCulloch grants speed to the computer, while noting its inability to match the brain for efficiency. "Neurons are cheap and plentiful," he states, "they operate with comparatively little energy [. . .] Von Neumann would be happy to have their like for the same cost in his robots. His vacuum tubes can work a thousand times as fast as neurons[. . .]but it would take Niagara Falls to supply the current and Niagara River to carry away the heat."⁷⁰ What could be counted as a simple example of anthropocentrism, biological pride, or even just a factual account of computation's

⁶⁹ Gardner, *The Mind's New Science : A History of the Cognitive Revolution*, 10.

⁷⁰ Warren S. McCulloch, " "Why the Mind Is in the Head", " in *Cerebral Mechanisms in Behavior; the Hixon Symposium* ed. Lloyd A. Jeffress and California Institute of Technology. Hixon Fund (New York: Wiley, 1951), 52.

entropy problem, is complicated by the ways in which McCulloch actively seeks out the logic of the digital to conceptualize the feedback functions of the human nervous system.

Thus metaphors likening the computer to the brain aim to reduce and dissect human behavior and mental potential in the same breath as they serve to flatter the biological. The emergent computer is at once man's competitor and his measuring stick. The neurological "connections" McCulloch seeks to circumscribe are "certainly determined as in a man-made computing machine."⁷¹ The computer is, in other words our best bet at understanding our own core functions and yet McCulloch concludes poetically and defiantly: "The joy of creating ideals, new and eternal, in and of a world, old and temporal, robots have it not. For this my mother bore me."⁷² Familiar as such a mix of technological enthusiasm and humanist nostalgia may be, it is this very friction that serves as backdrop and founding principle in the advancement of the computational cognitive sciences, artificial intelligence, and in the artistic response to threat of the machines around us and within us in the form of science fiction.

What McCulloch's speech also makes clear is that this resilient outside quality is quite amorphous. He was in fact, given to invocations of God. When the society built by the Macy's conference began to dissolve, he resisted the romanticization of its past harmony or righteousness with the statement "'Our consensus has never been unanimous,' he said, 'Even if it had been so, I see no reason why God should have agreed with us.'"⁷³ It may well have been in exasperation with McCulloch's latent spiritualism or perhaps a general impatience with a culture

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² *ibid.*

⁷³ McCulloch quoted in Gleick, *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood*, 263.

whose fears prevented them from fully embracing his aspirations that Shannon quipped, ““The idea of a machine thinking is by no means repugnant to all of us. In fact, I find the converse idea, that the human brain may itself be a machine which could be duplicated functionally with inanimate objects, quite attractive.’ More useful anyway than ‘hypothecating intangible and unreachable ‘vital forces,’ ‘souls’ and the like.’”⁷⁴ Shannon saw “gods share” as a pesky distraction from the work at hand.

Yet the problem with God’s share may not be that it gets in the way of scientific endeavor, but that it does not. Science fiction turned often to the intangible as a means to settle the score between man and machine: god; love; emotion; some ineffable, out-there magic that gives the truly human a glint in their eye and an intuition for solutions to problems they don’t actually understand. The warmth of human exceptionalism defeated the cold, unfeeling machine by means largely skipped over or unexplained. I argue that the weaponization of emotion to defeat the emotionless machine only further exacerbates a false dichotomy between feeling and thinking. After we take a quick look at how the genre of sci-fi relies on these mysterious spiritual or emotive human qualities, we will return to our main texts to see how Le Guin and Butler offer a more radical upending of the cognitive divide by designing a central system of emotion prone to failure.

First: Feelings save the day. I will take the second Terminator film, 1991’s *Judgment Day* as an example, with the understanding that it might stand in for any number of robot stories.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Claude Shannon, quoted in *ibid.*, 256.

⁷⁵ Perhaps as testament to the fictive impulse to anthropomorphize or as the urge to set human apart by way of emotion I explore in these pages, it is in fact harder to find a story in which a machine is not uprooted by love than those that are—whether that love is an opposing force or an impulse the machine itself develops. The droids of *Star Wars* are in one case a walking anxiety disorder and in the other a series of “bleep bleeps” that connote little more than affective information (1977-1983). The genuinely evil machines or the first *Robocop* are destroyed by the latent

The first *Terminator* (1984) was a mankind vs. machine story rooted in nostalgia for an earlier age of technology. The cyborg (played by Arnold Schwarzenegger) makes the point that new, more terrifying technologies are on the way by being merely inconvenienced by bullets and Mack trucks, but it is ultimately crushed to death in a manufacturing assembly line. It is an attempt at poetic justice—ashes to ashes, from whence it came—but it is also a coup for the aging machines and the aging populations that built them. There is virility still in the old ways.

The second film dials that message up further still, resurrecting Schwarzenegger, now playing the part of the old industrial model (T-800) against a thin and smart looking liquid metal that—like the burgeoning cyber communications of the early nineties—walks through walls (T-1000). The aging masculine ideal in machine form that Schwarzenegger embodies would scarcely be a match for the sleek new model, but for the love the T-800 develops for the boy he is programmed to protect. It is the Terminator's love—unaccounted for by enemies in the future and unquestionably not derived of its own programming—that gives it that hint of humanity required to be victorious. In this instance, the narrative concerns machine vs machine, but it is the aspect of man in the machine that wins.

Is this an example of emotion as signal? I hesitate to say so because central as the quality of emotion is, it is nevertheless understood as a kind of useful interference. While the movie runs on explosions and motorcycles, adrenaline possibly experienced by audiences is not a feature of

emotions of the semi-deceased human within the cyborg (1987). Granted consciousness, the sentimental number five falls in love with Ally Sheedy more or less immediately in *Short Circuit* (1986) (notably it is a military robot and so love undoes its darker design purposes). While the trope is prevalent within the period this dissertation covers, it would be a mistake to locate its origins there. The monster of *Frankenstein* (1818), is fundamentally a cyborg—one whose very existence is plagued by the paradox of strong feeling in a vessel that inspires fear; for Shelley, it was not just out of synch with the world, but itself.

the T-800. Schwarzenegger's cyborg is non-feeling aside from the magically-derived kinship that gives it that extra edge.⁷⁶

Even in the more literary annals of science fiction, the force of human feeling often takes the shape of a Deus Ex Machina—both in its narrative theory and Latinate sense—it is a convenient plot device and, rather literally, some aspect of god in the machine. Take, for example, James Tiptree's excellent novella, *The Girl Who Was Plugged In* (1973). An unattractive “pumped out hulk” of a woman, P. Burk, is given the opportunity of a lifetime: to be plugged into a machine that allows her to operate as the brain of a sexy, young girl (Delphi) whose job can be best described as an Instagram Influencer many years before the notion of such a thing existed. The superficiality of it all thrills the “carcass” of feminine aspiration that lives in a machine underground.⁷⁷ The technology that connects P. Burk to Delphi is a pinnacle achievement of the male gaze.⁷⁸ It is plainly and unequivocally evil. It functions both to reduce and abuse women and as a carpet bagging operation (the spritely and literally brainless Delphi's main task is to be seen using sponsored products). It is stopped by two sets of love: P. Burke's love for the CEO's rebel son Paul, and Delphi's love for that same man (expressed in unexplainable utterances in her sleep when her ‘brain’ is offline). This emotion transcends their differences and their physical limitations (one without a brain, the other without a body), but is hardly of much use to either party as they both end up dead. Yet it is force of feeling that breaks the machine and, it is implied, always will. It may take martyrs of marginalized human

⁷⁶ On a meta-level, the example is notable also because this film, much more so than the first *Terminator*, is mostly regarded as a breakthrough in computer-generated special effects (they win after all!).

⁷⁷ Burk is granted little dignity by herself, her corporate employers, or her narrator.

⁷⁸ It is worth noting that “James Tiptree” was the pen name of female sci-fi writer Alice Sheldon.

subjectivity with it, but, as it did for the Terminator, love will stop the machine, if only for a moment.

As much as I appreciate Tiptree's dark take on how technology might seize hold of cultural obsessions with beauty, perfection, and consumerism, this kind of moralizing tale of a masculine-led, metal box world that is exploded by an outrightly feminine capacity for affect does little to upend the division between the cold hard cognitive and the world of emotion. Emotion is ushered in to save us from a cold and indifferent intelligence in a manner that maintains their separation. A true reckoning with emotion as a force would see it not as the unstoppable hero of the human condition, but as something far more complicated.

For emotion to matter to a story it would need to be well-rounded; it would need to be the force that changed, the character, so to speak, that developed. In short, it would need to fail every bit as readily as a rationalist, cognitive dystopia. For Le Guin and Butler, a future dictated by feeling is not a safe retreat from cold cognition. Themes of rape, eugenics, and colonialism in *The Lathe of Heaven* and *Xenogenesis* paint a far more complex picture. As I established in the previous section, *The Lathe of Heaven* and the *Xenogenesis* series are emotion-led stories. The plots are driven by decidedly affective, intuitive, and even unconscious events. Here, emotion is exposed as an organizing principle unto itself, not a band-aid for a hyper-cognitivist future. In these feminist science fictions of the seventies and eighties, the affective future is a complex system, complete with flaws. In the years following the cognitive turn, in the presence of ever-developing artificial intelligence, stories of how unique and harmless human feeling will ultimately result in organic triumph preponderate. In that same period, Butler gives us something else entirely.

Perhaps the most striking example of this is the much-debated role of rape in Butler's work. For Butler, the word "rape" is reserved for a straight-forward physical violation or expression of rage and dominance. Highly coercive acts her readers may well recognize as rape, on the other hand, are presented within an incredibly tangled web of affects difficult to ascertain, and in some cases, stomach. Consent is an incredibly thorny issue in all three novels of the trilogy. In *Dawn*, we are granted a front row seat for the incredibly gray area of this exchange when Nikanj brings Lilith's human lover, Joseph, into its fold. The following scene presents Lilith as the work's only voice of dissent against being bodily taken over by the Oankali, but just as quickly paints her protestation as irrelevant. It is one of many cases in which Butler asks us to consider what it would be to have unconscious thoughts as our primary form of communication:

Now Lilith was no longer their intermediary. Joseph stood rigid and silent, sweating, but not trembling, his hand upright, fingers clawlike, a noose of sensory tentacles settled in a painless, unbreakable grip around the wrist.

With a sound that could have been the beginning of a scream, Joseph collapsed.
[. . .]

Nikanj threw the jacket aside and lay down beside Joseph. It wrapped one sensory tentacle around Joseph's neck and the other around his waist, drawing Joseph's body close against its own.

"Did you drug him, or did he faint?" she asked—then wondered why she cared.

"I drugged him as soon as I grasped his arm. He had reached his breaking point, though. He might have fainted on his own."⁷⁹

The longer conversation of this scene involves the necessity of imbuing Joseph's body with enhanced strength, a feat Nikanj can accomplish only through the bodily contact that is also a source of pleasure for both parties. Joseph is in danger from other humans and so his enhancement, while not consensual, is presented as necessary by Nikanj. This brief selection

⁷⁹ Butler, *Lilith's Brood*, 159-60.

illustrates central tensions that repeat throughout the course of all three novels. Butler subtly raises the ethical quandary of whether it matters to be sedated when you may well have fainted anyway. This logic is repeated over the course of more directly sexual encounters as well. The ooloi (the third sex species of the Oankali, what Nikanj is) are presented as ultimately irresistible to humans and humans as irresistible to the ooloi. While never framed in such stark terms, the premise, ‘If I hadn’t of raped you, would have eventually consented gladly’ is many times invoked.⁸⁰ More troubling still is the paired presence of a harmless, even pleasurable, capture: Joseph’s wrist, caught in a “painless, unbreakable grip.”⁸¹ In all matters, but in sexual matters most explicitly, the Oankali are at once gentle and authoritarian. Yet, this forgiving portrayal is not Nikanj speaking. It is the narrator.

The narrators of all three books seem to pass no judgment on the Oankali insistence that they are not only permitted but obligated to act in accordance to a human’s deepest desires—

⁸⁰ There is a common narrative formula that repeats to illustrate the point I am making here. An Oankali or construct meets a human, the human struggles, gives in, and then feels confusion over their own changed feelings. Take, for example, Santos—a strong willed, diseased and inbred human that the ooloi construct Jodahs meets towards the conclusion of *Imago*. Another scene I am calling rape occurs: “The man inside awakened as I stumbled down into his tiny cave. [. . .] It was easy for me to reach him and stop his hands from finding whatever he was grasping for. Holding his hands, I lay down alongside him on his short, narrow bed and wedged him against the stone wall. I examined him with several sensory tentacles, studying him, but not controlling him. I stopped his hoarse shouting by looping one sensory arm around his neck, then moving the coil up to cover his mouth [. . .] By the time I had finished, he had stopped struggling and lay quietly in my arms.” A brief conversation proceeds. Jodahs explains to Santos how the Oankali constructs can heal the villagers nearby and offers to heal Santos itself. Eventually Santos, “put his head against my (Jodahs’) chest. ‘I don’t understand,’ he said, ‘I don’t understand. . .my own feelings’ [. . .] And he was content. After a while, he slept. I never drugged him in the way ooloi usually drugged resisters. Once he had passed his first surprise and fear, he had accepted me much more quickly than Jesusa and Tomás had—but I had only been a subadult when I met them. An adult ooloi—a construct ooloi—ought to be able to handle humans better. Or perhaps this man [. . .] was particularly susceptible to the ooloi substance I could not help injecting. In his Human way, he had been very hungry, starving for any touch” (710). I have elected to represent this scene in detail rather than offer a list of potential rape scenes in order to clearly depict the reasoning that repeats throughout these texts. It is a question of time for the Oankali, who live for centuries. Santos eventual, not just compliance, but acceptance and pleasure is a foregone conclusion. The lag between consent forthcoming and consent in the first place strikes the Oankali as more or less inconsequential. At some point, all humans will succumb and so forcing the issue is not presented as much of a violation.

⁸¹ Butler, *Lilith's Brood*, 152. This strange confluence of force and care is present in the example footnoted above as well. Jodahs claims to be “not controlling” a man he has wrapped his tentacles fully around.

which they are able to perceive, we are led to believe, with great accuracy—even when it contradicts a person's decision. The reader is gradually wrestled to the ground with this argument over the course of three books. The mere presence of human resisters and the occasional quip from Lilith or Joseph are the works' only reprieve. With very little exception, the right of the ooloi to act upon perceived unconscious feelings, rather than stated decisions, is accepted as simply the way it is in the new world, populated increasingly by new hybrid people who have no choice but to communicate and act in this way. Upon their next, purely sexual encounter in which all three characters (Lilith, Joseph and Nikanj) take part, Joseph typifies the type of momentary resistance I refer to:

“You said I could choose. I’ve made my choice!”

“You have, yes.” It opened his jacket with its many-fingered true hands and stripped the garment from him. When he would have backed away, it held him. It managed to lie down on the bed with him without seeming to force him down. “You see, your body has made a different choice.”

He struggled violently for several seconds, then stopped.

[. . .]

Lilith sat on the table, waiting, watching. This might be her only chance ever to watch close up as an oolio seduced someone.⁸²

Though more alarming, this second rape scene maintains the themes presented in the first. The pushing down on the bed is left ambiguous; it is vaguely consensual. Lilith and the narrator collude to cast the act as one of “seduction.” The choice of words here is important because, as Frances Bonner explains, these works do make explicit references to rape. “Rape” is the name

⁸² *ibid.*, 189. As this scene unfolds, Nikanj and Joseph have a nearly identical exchange on the very next page: “I told you, this time you can choose,” says Nikanj. To which Joseph replies, “I’ve chosen. You ignored me.” “Your body says one thing, your words said another.” Here, again, Lilith and the narrator are quick to corroborate Nikanj’s preference for nonverbal communication: “Lilith saw Joseph’s body, stiffen, struggle, then relax, and she knew Nikanj had read him correctly [...] Now he was ready to accept what he had wanted from the beginning” (190).

given to attacks that human men make on women.⁸³ By failing to use that word even once to describe the actions of the Oankali, “it remains unclear if Butler is engaging in her characteristic equivocating or does not herself regard Oankali sexual behavior as rape.”⁸⁴ As shocking as these excerpted scenes may be, the Oankali are, overall, presented in a neutral or even positive light. Quick on the heels of the inescapable desire humans feel for ooloi is a profound love, a love the series celebrates. Nearly every one of the humans we might read as a rape victim of the Oankali ends up loving their would-be rapist, ends up living a better life with it than they would without it.⁸⁵

Literary criticism on Butler’s work takes the question of rape up in some compelling ways (though with less frequency than one might expect). On its surface, Butler’s strange representation of rape threatens the moral force of her works. I don’t think we need to leave off that possibility in order to also consider, as other critics have done, that perhaps Butler’s strange representation of consent reflects an ambiguous sexual dynamic at play in the history of slavery (by demonstrating that power relations can render indiscernible the question of consent). David Ketterer summarizes Butler’s fascination with rape: “Butler tells a variety of stories in which the production of superior hybrid progeny is graphically coerced. Butler [. . .] creates scenarios in

⁸³ In *Dawn*, a man the Oankali have awakened attempts to rape Lilith, not counting on the increased strength Nikanj has granted her. Later, Lilith saves a human named Allison from rape by another human man (177). Lilith uses the word “rape” to label these attempted sexual assaults, but never uses that word or any like it in reference to the actions of the Oankali. The presence of “rape” as a concept elsewhere in the book lets us know that we are not dealing with a character so subdued or victimized that she has built up a tolerance for even the most violent of acts. She breaks the second attempted rapist’s arm easily and with some rage. As it stands, the presence of human-to-human rape seems to indicate that Lilith, the narrator, or perhaps Butler herself views what the Oankali do as unique in nature.

⁸⁴ Bonner, “Difference and Desire, Slavery and Seduction: Octavia Butler’s “Xenogenesis” ” 57.

⁸⁵ This would include the characters: Lilith, Joseph, Tino, Tomas, Jesusa, Francisco, João. Some characters like Gabe and Tate are slightly more difficult to pin down. They were once mated with Oankali on the ship and felt the thrall of their ooloi very powerfully, but they become resisters on earth and eventually join the all human Mars colony.

which such coercion is necessary for survival.”⁸⁶ Ketterer uses the novel *Kindred* as a far more clear cut example of this conundrum (a Butler novel in which, “her black female protagonist Dana, who, thanks to time travel, has the opportunity to kill a slave-owner who is her own great great-grandfather before his rape of the slave who is her great-great grandmother, does not do so not because her own existence (dependent on the rape’s taking place) is so important”).⁸⁷ Rooted in the actual history of American slavery (as opposed to in *Xenogenesis*, in which slavery is merely alluded to through themes of captivity), Ketterer is able to read Butler’s seeming acceptance of rape as her attentiveness to an unavoidable truth, that “coerced miscegenation is part of black and white US history.”⁸⁸ Yet, we can surely imagine a future that replays these power struggles with less forgiveness or moral ambiguity. Another way to view rape in Butler’s work is, however, more powerfully evident in this conversation itself, as an incredibly troubling trope serving a literary function in which the book becomes as Bonner put it, “quite an easy read [...] but not an easy digestion.”⁸⁹ It is in this vein of unreconciled trouble that I wish to consider rape in *Xenogenesis* as it pertains to an emotionally-led future.

In some ways work on Butler’s affective commitments are more enlightening on the question of rape than those which engage rape directly. Rebecca Wanzo locates Butler’s Parable

⁸⁶ Ketterer David, "The Case for Rape: John Wyndham and Octavia Butler," *Science Fiction Studies* 38, no. 2 (2011): 374.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 374.

⁸⁹ Bonner, "Difference and Desire, Slavery and Seduction: Octavia Butler's "Xenogenesis" " 51. Jim Miller makes a similar case. In his terms, the thorniness of Butler is a result of blended utopian and dystopian visions: “Her XENOGENESIS trilogy and Parable of the Sower are critical dystopias motivated out of a utopian pessimism in that they force us to confront the dystopian elements of postmodern culture so that we can work through them and begin again.” Jim Miller, "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Dystopian/Utopian Vision," *Science Fiction Studies* 25, no. 2 (1998): 332. It is more troubling still, I propose, as we recognize how Butlers work flirts with the genre of erotica. It is perhaps only with a modern sensibility that we see a dangerous message in depicting the overpowering of another’s will as sexy. In the annals of feminist sci-fi and blended with a series of messages decrying xenophobia and colonialism, however, we cannot so easily chalk it up to pre-enlightened times.

trilogy within the tradition Lauren Berlant has labeled “postsentimental”: “postsentimental texts reflect an investment in the Utopian possibilities of feeling right, or more specifically, of feeling pain, but authors of such texts are also deeply conflicted about the perils of depending on feeling in working towards political progress.”⁹⁰ Wanzo, writing about a separate series and not on the complex relation to consent nevertheless provides a framework for considering a text that is frustratingly emotional and yet dubious of emotion as an easy power.

In much science fiction, the tyranny of machines leaves us with an emotional realm platitudinous in its implications. Love is the balm for a cold and calculating world. Our innermost desires and feelings, while not typically so sexual in nature, nevertheless tend often toward the romantic in sci-fi. Love and bodily intuition or feeling are what we can trust. They are not sources of oppression, but of liberation. Butler presents us with a world in which humanity is not only initiated culturally, but physically altered to privilege deep, unconscious feelings above, even in contest with, reasoned decisions. Butler’s refusal to label the Oankali sexual practices as rape perhaps supports the alien assertion that what the body feels matters more than what the mind decides; yet her texts are punctuated by these quickly abated scenes of violence and struggle. In response to this quandary, Bonner quotes Donna Haraway stating that “hierarchy is not power’s only shape”⁹¹ In the context of the cognitive turn and from within the genre of sci-fi, we might consider power as taking the shape of the machine and love as the liberator. Butler, on the contrary, posits an organic, computer interface-free world in which the typically benign sidekick of love and feeling rules. Power in the form of the explicitly anti-hierarchical Oankali

⁹⁰ Wanzo Rebecca, "Apocalyptic Empathy: A "Parable" of Postmodern Sentimentality," *Obsidian III* 6/7 (2005).

⁹¹ Bonner, "Difference and Desire, Slavery and Seduction: Octavia Butler's "Xenogenesis" " 56.

and nearly unrecognizable in its bodily and affect-drenched suit, turns out to be every bit the oppressor we find in works of cyberpunk and machine-related-fear.

While mercifully free of discomfiting rape apologism, *The Lathe of Heaven* presents a near future that is equally unsettled by feeling. As previously discussed, the novel turns on the unconscious imagination of George Orr. Much of the ‘decision-making’ his unconscious does can be viewed as reactions to his often fairly staid observations rising to the level of desperate feelings of discomfort or even despair by his prodding therapist, Doctor Haber. Take for example, the narration of George on a crowded subway: “The trains were already jam-packed; he stood out of reach of strap or stanchion, supported solely by the equalizing pressure of bodies on all sides, occasionally lifted right off his feet and floating as the force of crowding (c) exceeded the force of gravity (g).”⁹² It is a curious passage. It paints a dreary and frustrating picture but emphasizes detail, even to the point of including an equation, thereby simply stating the facts of his journey, sans commentary, but containing, nonetheless a pallor of dissatisfaction and, perhaps more meaningfully for Orr, passivity.

Perception of overcrowding serves as one of the novel’s test cases for the transmission of affect and mutability of the world. Orr disembarks from the train detailed above in order to visit with Dr. Haber. Haber is less than forthcoming about his intentions for Orr, and Orr leaves feeling like there is less hope than ever that he might stop his effective dreaming. The muted disdain for mass transportation is augmented accordingly on his journey home:

George Orr, pale in the flickering fluorescent glare of the train car in the infrafluvial dark, swayed as he stood holding a swaying steel handle on a strap among a thousand other souls. He felt the heaviness upon him, the weight bearing down endlessly. He thought, I am living in a nightmare from which from time to time I wake in sleep.

⁹² Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven: A Novel*, 46.

The smash and jostle of people getting off at the Union Station stop knocked this sententious notion out of his mind; he concentrated wholly on keeping hold of the handle on the strap. Still feeling giddy, he was afraid that if he lost hold and had to submit entirely to force (c), he might get sick.⁹³

The session with Haber served to make George more reflective and more miserable. Yet, George's brain is bandied about in this subway car. His poetic and high-minded self-pity is interrupted as he is knocked back into his body and his surroundings, trading an existential fear for one grounded in his gut.

It is in this new frame of mind that George begins to recount the events of his visit to Haber from a clearer perspective. He realizes that the Doctor had suggested Orr change back a minor detail (Haber's wallpaper which a previous dream had altered). If Haber knew to request the fix, it meant he knew the dreaming was effective. Since all George wants is for someone to believe him and then help him to end the dreams, this realization alters him completely. "So great a joy filled Orr that, among the forty-two persons who had been jamming into the car as he thought these things, the seven or eight pressed closest to him felt a slight but definite glow of benevolence or relief. The woman who had failed to get his strap handle away from him felt a blessed surcease of the sharp pain in her corn; the man squashed against him on the left thought suddenly of sunlight; the old man sitting crouched directly in front of him forgot, for a little, that he was hungry."⁹⁴ Le Guin has granted Orr powers that have very little to do with the dramatic results of his effective Dreams and much to do with the small ripple effects of his everyday

⁹³ *ibid.*, 38.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 39.

dreams. The power of Orr's dreams that Le Guin suggests he ought to pursue, thereby, are mundane and almost imperceptible—not a supernatural causal event, just mood as contagious.

Haber, mastermind that he is, would never settle for the solution that the problem of overcrowding had anything whatsoever to do with one's perception of it, that the experience itself could be altered by a changed frame of mind. And so the scene is ultimately transformed when Haber coerces Orr into dreaming away a significant portion of the global human population. Now the subways are sparsely populated by people at various stages of mourning, all with plenty of space. On some level this is a critique of grandiose bureaucratic solutions meddling in matters of human experience. It is, however, also emblematic of a future in which Le Guin imagines people making far too much of their feelings.

Toward the conclusion of the novel, Le Guin suggests a reading of this work of science fiction as entirely an allegory for emotional distress.⁹⁵ The world is a mess, or rather, many messes, of grey people and turtle aliens, exploding volcanoes, and the aftermath of plague. As Haber seeks to turn his machine, the Augmentor, into a technology that can make anyone (himself) an effective dreamer, Orr is subtly and undramatically recovered. The machine simply ceases to work on him. He is meant to make changes to the world through his mind at Haber's command, but remains instead content on the couch:

He remained sitting on the comfortable couch looking at the misty, blue-gray cone of St. Helen's out of the window. And, quiet as a thief in the night, a sense of well-being came into him, a certainty that things were all right, and that he was in the middle of things. Self is universe. He would not be allowed to be isolated, to be stranded. He was back where he belonged. He felt an equanimity, a perfect certainty as to where he was and where everything else was. This feeling did not come to him as blissful or mystical, but

⁹⁵ Ian Watson makes a similar case about the events of a novel as metaphor for mind in Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest*. Ian Watson, "The Forest as Metaphor for Mind: *The Word for World Is Forest* and *Vaster Than Empires and More Slow*," *Science Fiction Studies* 2, no. 7 (1975).

simply as normal. It was the way he generally had felt, except in times of crisis, of agony; it was the mood of his childhood and all the best and profoundest hours of boyhood and maturity; it was his natural mode of being. These last years he had lost it, gradually but almost entirely, scarcely realizing that he had lost it. Four years ago this month, four years ago in April, something had happened that had made him lose that balance altogether for a while; and recently the drugs he had taken, the dreams he had dreamed, the constant jumping from one life-memory to another, the worsening of the texture of life the more Haber improved it, all this had sent him clear off course. Now, all at once, he was back where he belonged.⁹⁶

In this section, we are invited to consider the fantastic elements of the book as metaphor. The nightmare that Orr has endured has been one of emotional disquiet, an imbalance and presence of strong feeling—"agony"—that set him off course. Orr is cured by the simple acknowledgement that his unconscious is neither out to get him nor capable of rewriting the world into a place of increased harmony. Le Guin is thus, perfectly in keeping with the novel's explicit ties to Eastern philosophy, critical of human experience dictated by passionate feeling and a will to change.⁹⁷ In ways that echo the observations made earlier in this dissertation in the consideration of cynical humor, Le Guin also stands in judgment of a therapeutic ethos that rushed to change people—dragging them around through their past, dreaming up a better future—rather than permitting a person to return to and remain within their present.

⁹⁶ Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven: A Novel*, 143-44.

⁹⁷ The novel's chapters begin with epigraphs: two from Victor Hugo, one from H. G. Wells, one from Lacadio Hearn's *Out of the East*, two from Lao Tse (presumably from the *Tao Te Ching*), and four from the *Chuang Tse*. The title for the novel comes from the Chuang Tse passage that prefaces Chapter Three: "Those whom heaven helps we call the sons of heaven. They do not learn this by learning. They do not work it by working. They do not reason it by using reason. To let understanding stop at what cannot be understood is a high attainment. Those who cannot do it will be destroyed on the lathe of heaven." A lathe is an apparatus for spinning a piece of wood or other object so that it can be carved or otherwise worked upon all the way around. In the context of the novel it would seem the Le Guin means for George Orr to learn to accept the spin of the world rather than be troubled by it and for those like Haber, who would seek to control the spinning, to be inevitably be spat out a force of motion greater than themselves. Chuang Tse: XXIII, quoted in *ibid.*, 26.

Emotion is thereby not the cure for the cognitive future. As it was for Butler, the unconscious is the medium at work in Le Guin's novel—the signal not merely a disruption to reason. It is only from a perspective that imagines an affect-led life that Le Guin can argue that disaster awaits those who give their attention over so wholly to their inner feelings. The many failures of emotion in these works serve to, somewhat paradoxically, take emotion far more seriously than works that champion human feeling as the last bastion of exceptionalism and the brightest hope for a better tomorrow. The ineffable quality of God's share at work in McCulloch's speech, in Barthes interpretation of the afterlife of Einstein's brain, in Tiptree's feminist sci-fi, or the glint in the eye of the Terminator, all serve a narrative function of *Deus ex Machina* that neither Butler nor Le Guin can abide. They offer instead emotion as bodily and impactful more than abstract, and feeling as a rounded character—possessing not only power but a fair share of flaws. This does more to prepare the literary reader, and I suspect even the scientific investigator, for a path of exploring the mind that considers emotion not as cognition's inverse, but as two culturally delimited descriptions of a singular process. In the final section of this chapter, I will explore the ways in which science fiction of emotional failure pairs well with contemporary theories of the brain and with new directions for artificial intelligence. Before that can happen, Le Guin and Butler are not quite finished with the extent their emotion-led futures serve as critique. The emphasis on feeling heavy and deeply problematic worlds matters also for the presentation of good intentions.

A Benevolent Man

In contrast to sci-fi tales that fight the machine with love, these works of feminist science fiction suggest that affect is every bit as dangerous as any cold, cognitive future. They do so by erecting a murky boundary between rape and love and by demonstrating global chaos and/or personal instability as the result of an over-investment in feeling. The force of the unconscious and the unwieldiness of the unconscious may temper these critiques, casting emotion as too complex or morally compromised only as it slides into negative or uncontrollable affects, were it not that conscious and decidedly positive affects are also deeply scrutinized in these fictions. The *Xenogenesis* series and *The Lathe of Heaven* work also to reveal the emotive nature of a will to progress commonly cast as masculine and reasoned. In so doing, these works of sci-fi magnify the real-world historical part emotion has played in framing eugenics within a narrative of motherly-love and colonialism in paternalistic visions of do-gooding.

Perhaps it should not come as a surprise that the four works spanning from 1971 to 1989 should so prominently feature eugenics. As an explicit practice, eugenics had only truly fallen out of favor in the midcentury, and into the eye of critical study during the 1960s. As Wendy Kline describes it, this early American scholarship often favored widely-cast metaphors as scathing critique over a nuanced exploration of how eugenics operated in the U.S. By tying American eugenics to the Holocaust and Nazism, "rather than asking why so many Americans embraced eugenic and hereditarian ideals in the first half of the twentieth century, many scholars vilified a small number of individual racists as responsible for generating an embarrassing mistake."⁹⁸ While white supremacy, gender domination, and a rather open disavowal of the poor or disabled were the stock and trade of eugenic pioneers in the U.S. and abroad, subsets of

⁹⁸ Wendy Kline, "Eugenics in the United States," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, ed. A. Bashford and P. Levine (Oxford University Press, 2010), 511.

American culture were drawn to the idea's promise of health and well-being for their families or their race. As Klein, following Daylanne K. English, notes, even "some African American writers of the Harlem Renaissance, including W.E.B. Dubois and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, embraced racial uplift through selective breeding."⁹⁹ This knowledge neither redeems eugenics nor condemns Dubois and Dunbar, but it does serve as useful context for understanding the peculiarly positive casting of genetic manipulation in the *Xenogenesis* series.

At the time of Butler's writing, the scholarly take on eugenics was undergoing a shift. After a perhaps obligatory period in which work on eugenic history primarily expressed shock and blame, by the 1990s an increasing number of works sought to understand eugenics as a "social movement" rather than "specific flaws in scientific thinking," newly focusing on the investment everyday Americans had in the promise of eugenics.¹⁰⁰ Butler's bizarre relationship with genomic enterprise is perhaps ahead of this curve, if not wholly or sufficiently critical of the practice. The Oankali are genetic tinkerers in a way the Davenports or even Galtons of the world could only dream of, and yet Butler does not fashion them as scientists; their call to eugenics is physiological and emotional, even quasi-spiritual. By reframing the desire for genetic conditioning and forced sterility as an affective, embodied practice, Butler is asking questions about a widely held and inherent fascination with the capacity to intervene in natural selection

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 516. Based on the work, D.K. English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

¹⁰⁰ Kline, "Eugenics in the United States," 512. Kline's more in depth take on the subject looks to the ways marriage counseling and genetic screening carried eugenic thinking into the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. W. Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (University of California Press, 2001). Shelley Smith documents the shift in terminology more than cause, which some genetic researchers acknowledged: In his Presidential Address to the American Society of Human Genetics, the disciplinary organization associated with the *AJHG* (*American Journal of Human Genetics*, Sheldon Reed (1957) claimed that 'Our present day use of the term "human genetics" instead of "eugenics" may be financially and politically expedient but there is no great philosophical distinction between them.'" Shelley L. Smith., "Twenty-First Century "Eugenics"?: The Enduring Legacy " *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 59, no. 2 (2016).

that had yet to find much evaluation in scholarly histories of the eugenic movement in the United States.

In brief, for the Oankali, evolution is self-directed. They travel the universe seeking out species with desirable genetic information, alter and experiment upon that species, and ultimately mate with it in order to create a new Oankali. The Oankali as we meet them are the result of so many planets, creatures, and centuries that the Oankali don't recall a homeland (though they do have subgroup of their own kind not adapted for or by their latest encounter with humans). Summarized so succinctly, the Oankali means of adaptation sounds violent and horrifying. Yet the human fear of the Oankali is presented, as in many alien-based sci-fi works, as fear of the other, an allegorical xenophobia. Neither the colonization and genetic usurpation carried out by the Oankali nor the human instinct to reject them are presented in an entirely damning or innocent light.

This ambiguity seems to reflect a paradox within Butler's own thinking. Butler openly believed in the primacy of inborn, inherited traits within human character. Literary critic J. Johns has carefully documented Butler's relationship to the works of E.O. Wilson, which, in brief, outline a strong view of nature over nurture as the backbone of evolutionary psychology.¹⁰¹ Prior to the publication of *Dawn*, Butler discussed some of the central ideas as she was working through them in an interview in *The Black Scholar* in 1986. While it can be challenging to decide which views Butler supports as they appear within her fiction, here she is unequivocating: "So hierarchical behavior is definitely inborn and intelligence is something new that we've come up with and like I said, I happen to think that the combination is lethal." In this same interview she

¹⁰¹ J. Johns, "Becoming Medusa: Octavia Butler's "Lilith's Brood" and Sociobiology," *Science-Fiction Studies* 37, no. 3 (2010).

discusses how the genre of sci-fi is “potentially the freest genre in existence,” allowing her to reimagine the world or universe in radical ways.¹⁰² Here we see her identify a problem—what she believes to be the inherent traits of hierarchy and intelligence—and in *Xenogenesis* she imagines a solution—a messy and imperfect solution—but decidedly a means for the human species to change and thrive. Selective breeding and active gene manipulation are not, for Butler, eugenics—a term she uses as bound almost exclusively to ethnic cleansing:

Too often when people start talking about inborn characteristics, they start talking about who shall we eliminate, who has the negative characteristics. And we get to decide what's negative and we get into the eugenics and the real nasty stuff where people use something that could be and is in fact part of behavior science as a reason to put somebody else down to get rid of your enemies, using science for hierarchical purposes.¹⁰³

In some respects, Butler’s use of genetic manipulation and selective breeding to solve the problem of inherent negative human traits was in line with the critical eye toward eugenics that preceded her. Works like Donald Pickens’ *Eugenics and the Progressives* (1968) consists of chapters named for the most influential adopters of the “eugenic creed”—Margaret Sanger, Francis Galton—and the most heinous results of the theory—“Sterilization: The Search for Purity in Mind and Body.” Pickens’ scholarship belongs to the category of selective critique (as opposed to societal) that Kline delineates: Pickens demonstrates the wrong-headedness of purportedly well-intended eugenicists. From this perspective, the project of eugenics collapses because it gets things wrong about what is best for humans. For example, one of the stumbling blocks early twentieth-century eugenics never truly recovers from is the exposure of bias in desired results magnified by world events. The Depression is one such nail in the coffin: “The

¹⁰² *The Black Scholar* 17, No.2 (March/April 1986); *Special Issue: 'The Black Woman Writer and the Diaspora.'*, (1986), 14.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, 17.

prospect of eugenics creating bigger and better businessmen was not rewarding because that very group, following the profit motive, had led America into a major crisis. In sum, Galtonian eugenics was merely the projection and class bias of the upper classes.”¹⁰⁴ By this logic, eugenics is exposed as flawed because it championed human traits that, it turned out, were not altogether useful to have. This is not a critique of eugenics as inherently problematic, but of eugenics misused. If the problem with eugenics is what it wanted and not the very notion of it, this frees a thinker like Butler to imagine a genetic project that better selects.

A major theme of all three novels is the Oankali insistence that humans have no path before them but their own destruction. Butler has said as much herself in other contexts. There are a few things that mark their methods as distinct from the eugenic projects Pickens and others find in the history of the field. The breeding is selective in the sense that humans are sterilized for their own good in such a way that allows them to breed only through the Oankali. There are however, no hierarchies within the human population that sees some as fit to carry constructs while others are not.¹⁰⁵ The level playing field is manufactured largely by the Oankali’s ability to restore any human body to prime health and extend both their lives and periods of fertility (though some humans are too old for a new ooloi by the time we reach *Imago*). Even as the purely human actors in the novels carry over some of the prejudices of their old-world existence—demonstrating sexist, homophobic, and racist tendencies—the argument of biological superiority among the races of earth has been settled once and for all by the arrival of a truly

¹⁰⁴ D.K. Pickens, *Eugenics and the Progressives* (Vanderbilt University Press, 1968).

¹⁰⁵ This lack of racial separation places the Oankali approach to eugenics more in keeping with reform eugenics—a recapitulation of eugenic ideals without the explicit ties to racism and classism that dominated mainline eugenics. A. Spektorowski and L. Ireni-Saban, *Politics of Eugenics: Productionism, Population, and National Welfare* (Taylor & Francis, 2013).

distinct and truly—it is surely the case—superior species. Butler further manages to make this process of improving upon human form as not about purity and stasis by fashioning the Oankali as always in a state of new becoming and by presenting Lilith's offspring as surprising even to the Oankali who designed them.

It is not easy to decide where Butler's representation of a dominant species whose means of survival is predicated on incorporating the DNA of other species, with the expressed goal of a race free of abnormality, illness or pain places her fiction in a conversation about eugenics. As previously mentioned, the critic J. Johns has cast Butler's work in conversation with E.O. Wilson's *Sociobiology* and *Biophilia* rather than explicitly in relation to eugenics. His observations of the similarities are, for me, more convincing than the differences he believes Butler makes from the more negative aspects of this line of thinking.¹⁰⁶ In a similar vein, Claire Curtis evaluates the *Xenogenesis* series to the conclusion that it is utopian but not eugenic. I find it to be eugenic but not, at least not entirely, utopian, which is to say I believe Curtis' claim that Butler is strongly influenced by and supportive of sociobiology and that as a result her work shares in that field's dangerous flirtation with eugenic principles. The critical distance that sets Butler apart is not one she maintains from sociobiology and its implications. She does, however, maintain enough narrative ambiguity that one cannot easily claim that she fully endorses the

¹⁰⁶ Johns makes the distinction on the case of suicide. Humans in *Xenogenesis* demonstrate a death drive, for Johns, in their will to go to Mars even as they understand the likelihood of their extinction. This runs counter to the Oankali and sociobiological drive toward reproduction and survival. My own sense is that Johns makes too much of small differences in an attempt to distance Butler from any perceived failings of a school of thought that he otherwise demonstrates she follows quite closely. For one, it isn't clear to me that the humans who go to Mars fully see it as a march toward inevitable death, and even if they did, this too is a question of time as it is predicted that those colonizing humans may well survive but some generations into the future, they will ultimately fail. Furthermore, the will to reproduction and belief in the purity of that practice is every bit as prominent within the humans as it is in the Oankali. The human resisters are described as desperate to have procreation restored and those in *Imago* even accept a damaged line—one in which recessive diseases have taken hold through incest. Butler's narrator is critical of these deformed humans and ultimately presents them as saved by the Oankali, thereby not endorsing their acceptance of a faster and more certain mortality.

events of her novels.¹⁰⁷ Her work is hopeful and future-oriented, but also, somewhat confoundingly, fatalistic in the sense that even when she sees no other way forward than to fashion our natures into better ones, she doesn't celebrate the option without reservation.

And yet I hear in this acceptance of the Oankali view on the human need to evolve rapidly in a controlled manner the message that eugenics can work if only you get the recipe right. This critique does not however, serve to dismiss Butler's contribution to our collective imagination of the human future.¹⁰⁸ In fact, I believe that by placing the eugenic imperative as itself an embodied drive and suggesting that it is through more difference and change that a heartier human gets built, Butler anticipates work on eugenic history as a broader social movement and suggests ways we might think about how the positive conscious affects stuck to some of history's most damaging projects. Recognizing not only what was damnable but desirable about a theory like eugenics, brings into focus the layers of self-delusion that undergirded such projects and, in turn, the function of benevolence itself.

¹⁰⁷ Robert A. Wilson puts it succinctly: "Although sociobiology has few direct connections to eugenics, it shares eugenics' optimistic enthusiasm for extending biological science into the human domain, often with reckless sensationalism." R. Wilson, "Sociobiology," Eugenics Archive, <http://eugenicsarchive.ca/discover/encyclopedia/535eee477095aa000000025b>. Wilson has no connection to Butler's interpretations and yet it might be difficult to find a phrase that better captures what is off-putting about her quest for a dramatically and rapidly altered human species than "reckless sensationalism." It is not entirely different from Butler's representation of sexual consent and, as such, might serve to cast both less as problems for the texts than as philosophical provocations on Butler's part. She marvels at the possibilities of a new and better human, deliberately conceived of through genetic manipulation and coercive sex in one moment and mourns the loss of traditional human reproduction—to the point of having it conditionally restored—in the next. This moral gray area is part of the reason Butler's texts continue to fascinate.

¹⁰⁸ Butler's racially diverse cast of characters in these novels and others is rightly seen as groundbreaking. In a recent interview Whoopi Goldberg summed up the relevance of science fiction finally coming to include people of African descent. "Until Octavia Butler" and until Gene Roddenberry cast Nichelle Nichols as Lieutenant Uhura, Goldberg argues "there were no black people in the future." Whoopi Goldberg, *David Tennant Does a Podcast with Whoopi Goldberg*, podcast audio, David Tennant Does a Podcast With. . .2019.

While critique that unearths not only the damage of eugenics but its roots in purportedly good intentions is easy to come by, it is only fairly recently that scholars have truly reversed this line of inquiry—asking not only how positive emotions fueled eugenics but how these practices formed a complete loop: scientific study on the basis of benevolence, benevolence as an affect in turn defined by scientific study. Before considering how Butler can help us to see the circular effects, I want to bring Le Guin into view as well. *The Lathe of Heaven* not only also has its own eugenic moments, but is, like *Xenogenesis*, suggestive of colonial histories as well.

I am approaching Le Guin's invocation of eugenics as a distinct concern from Butler's because while the latter's place in the legacies of eugenic thinking is more open to debate, Le Guin comes across as firmly opposed to fiddling—genetic or otherwise. We witness this in the previous section: Le Guin's means of complicating emotion as the savior of humanity was to critique too much investment in feeling. She is dubious of the self-indulgent, which is perhaps an unorthodox way to characterize eugenics, but to believe in a more perfect species is to regard that species as special in the first place. Butler and Le Guin both imagine their stories as implicated in the problem of racial discrimination. For example, Doctor Haber gets Orr to dream that all of human kind has forever been gray. Poof. Racial animus is gone not only from the present but from history. Orr and Haber, aware of both realities, are now the only two people to ever have heard of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Rosa Parks. Butler provides rather the opposite radical cure—breeding humans into a state of eternal difference and change. Where Butler sees this change as necessary if a bit dark in its connotations, Le Guin offers Haber's homogenization as yet another scheme that has sucked character and meaning from the world.

Yet Haber is not a villain but rather an embodiment of "benevolence." In fact, the greater Haber's drive toward benevolence, the more eugenic his project becomes. Turning everyone gray

was fairly innocuous compared to Haber's solution to the threat of cancer. To halt the genetic predisposition to the disease, Haber institutes (via Orr's dreams) a world in which living with cancer is a capital crime:

He [Orr] walked right into a Citizen's Arrest. A tall man, with a long, wrinkled, gray face seized a short man with a round shiny gray face, grabbing him by the front of his tunic. [. . .] 'This is a Citizen's Arrest, passerby please take notice!' the tall man was saying in a piercing, nervous tenor. 'This man, Harvey T. Gonno, is ill with an incurable malignant abdominal cancer but has concealed his whereabouts from the authorities and continues to live with his wife.' [. . .] Orr escaped, pushing head-down through the crowd before Marin administered euthanasia with the hypodermic gun worn by all adult citizens who had earned their Civic Responsibility Certificate.¹⁰⁹

Orr is shook by this new reality, to which Haber replies, "You haven't fully accepted the use of controlled violence for the good of the community; you may never be able to. [. . .] The future will justify it. We need health. We simply have no room for the incurables, the gene-damaged."¹¹⁰ The history of unraveling faith in the eugenic project is one of recognizing the relatively short road one needs to travel to get from sterilization to euthanasia. Le Guin critiques eugenics from two angles: as a clearly immoral practice made even uglier by the ways it is forwarded as progressive and of service to the community, and, beyond moralizing, as ultimately ineffective.

There are three things that survive or resurface regardless of all of Orr's effective dreaming: air pollution, the volcanic rumblings of Mount Hood, and cancer. In truth there are

¹⁰⁹ Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven: A Novel*, 135. The name of this dead-man-walking, Harvey T. Gonno, is evidence also of the way Le Guin laces *The Lathe of Heaven* with a dark sense of humor. On some level, the novel's ultimate decision—that pollution, death, and despair will go on and the best one can do is acquiesce to the natural flow of events is not especially heartening. Her other works—often taking place on far-flung planets—imagined slightly brighter worlds. I believe that like Kurt Vonnegut, whose 1969 *Slaughterhouse Five* seems a likely influence to *The Lathe of Heaven*, Le Guin has taken up humor as a palliative for darker material.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

four forces that prove more immovable than Orr's dreams could make of them. The last is Haber himself. Orr tries to dream Haber into leaving him alone, but the instructions Heather gives him in their attempt at guided effective dreaming are altogether the wrong ones: "'You'll dream that. . .that Dr. Haber is benevolent, that he is not trying to hurt you and will be honest with you.'"¹¹¹ In the aftermath of this dream (clearly effective in other ways), Haber goes right on saving the world through eugenics and a form of polite fascism of his own making. Haber's over-reach forges on unchanged by Heather's instructions because benevolent, honest, and well-intended are ways he was already behaving and because, it is implied, his determination is akin to those natural forces that resurface regardless of fantastical intervention. Cancer, volcanoes, pollution and a white-man's burden mentality perfectly realized in the ambitions of Doctor Haber are aspects of life on earth so deeply rooted as to be impervious to even the most magically powerful dream.

In this way Le Guin's novel pairs well with critiques of progressive eugenic movements.¹¹² As Spektorowksi and Ireni-Saban explore in *Politics of Eugenics: Productionism, population, and national welfare*, the broad ideological commitment of eugenics to an improved species as a purely fascist and on its surface racist and antisemitic enterprise, is only half of the story: "fascist as well as labor and social democratic movements were productivist socialists who used eugenics to create a scientific society relying on society's strongest sectors."¹¹³ Doctor Haber would belong squarely within this second group of "reformist" eugenicists who took

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, 108. Ellipses in original

¹¹² The positive emotions fueling eugenics bring to mind the aims and methods Patrick Moynihan in the previous chapter. It is not in spite, but rather because these actors believed the betterment of others was their mission and their purview that they were able to do such harm.

¹¹³ Spektorowski and Ireni-Saban, *Politics of Eugenics: Productionism, Population, and National Welfare*, 20.

special interest in "the prevention of specific genetic diseases."¹¹⁴ Spektorowksi and Ireni-Saban are able to convincingly locate a "direct connection between mainline and reformist eugenics" by emphasizing the ways both tracts were so thoroughly committed to a project of modernizing the nation-state. Focused on nations with a reputation for seemingly bottomless regard for social welfare, Spektorowksi and Ireni-Saban demonstrate how in Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Israel, "short of racism, however, the eugenic productivist view set on course an exclusionist version of inclusion. As explained, that means 'all' can be included into the collectivity; however, under strict conditions defined by the productive nation."¹¹⁵ Suddenly granted the power to change human genetics at will (if without precision) Doctor Haber, feels at ease in a eugenic project that eschews any kind of racial hatred in favor in the far more palatable cause of generalized progress.

Like the Oankali, Haber practices a self-purportedly more benign—and totally necessary, they all claim—brand of eugenics. Unlike the Oankali, Haber is plainly mocked by his author. The investment all four works make in an exploration of eugenics thereby takes place right at the surface. Le Guin offers a critique of eugenics in any, or perhaps most especially its self-described benevolent, reformist form; Butler forwards a view of sociobiology through characters whose heroic status certainly remains in question and so creates an incredibly complex take on biology as destiny that flirts at the very least with eugenic principles. But what has it to do with emotion?

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, 89.

The sci-fi works examined here put emotion—or rather, deeply held, unconscious and unconscious feelings—at the center of their narratives. I argue that in their engagement with eugenics and colonialism, they similarly cast a harsh light on the presumption of value within conscious, positive affects. Throughout *The Lathe of Heaven*, Doctor Haber is labeled a “benevolent man” and, indeed—though very much at the center of all that goes awry—Haber is not presented as villainous. The Oankali are deliberately difficult to grasp, but as ‘they’ become ‘us’ over the course of the novels, any impulse to see them as simply an invading presence or an evil alien incursion becomes impossible.

In the previous section, I sought to demonstrate how the prominent role of the unconscious in these works upset the common sci-fi belief that deeply felt human drives meant us well and would see us survive the aliens or robots that mean to surpass us. In this section, I have turned my attention to conscious, positive affects to suggest further that while we might expect the dark parts of our brains to betray us, those parts we believe ourselves to control are equally, if not more, capable of harm even than our older instincts of lust or desire manifest in haptic communication or dreams.

As if visions of human survival and prosperity rooted in eugenics did not suffice to demonstrate the potential harm of positive feelings genuinely held, all four works of science fiction also ruminate on the legacies of the related history of colonialism. Not unlike the projects of eugenics which mobilized a language of health and survival, colonialism relied on its own twisted affects of care. Le Guin’s Doctor Haber is easily interpreted in the vein of the altruistic colonizer. He actively pursues a reordering of the world according to a vision of good for all he perceives as righteous. Even as colonial enterprise was founded in the beliefs of superior

technology, science, governance, and intelligence, the foundation of such beliefs can be taken as a matter of emotion.

In her history of modern French imperialism, Alice Conklin writes, “Scholars have too often dismissed the *mission civilisatrice* as window dressing. Or they have been content to label the French as racist, without bothering to explain the insidious and persistent appeal of colonial ideology.”¹¹⁶ If I might rephrase her look into the impact and shifts in ideology that inspired individual actors in colonizing missions, Conklin is claiming that while it is popular to view ideology as that which blinded colonizers to the damage they perpetrated, ideology is perhaps better understood as the very source of their sight, such as it was. For me, not only is ideology central to a consideration of colonialism, but its effectiveness is rooted in its capacity to produce positive emotions within those who would carry the colonial project out. To paraphrase Sara Ahmed, recalled also in the previous chapter, contentment in a colonial context was one and the same as being content with colonialism.¹¹⁷

These positive affects carry over into postcolonial missions of do-gooding as well. Doctor Haber’s ideology is colonial in that it is imperious, but also presumptuous and ultimately self-gratifying. In the future according to his benevolent vision, he imagines himself as liberator, without regard to the thin line between the power to effect positive change and tyranny and the loss of self-determination for the billions of lives he changes or, indeed, ends. His is a more modern spin on the self-congratulatory project of civilization making, one that recalls how “the

¹¹⁶ A.L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford University Press, 1997). While Conklin’s specific investments fall beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth noting that in her invocation of the “mission civilisatrice” she refers to the explicit set of values and aims the French empire set forth and the ways in which they were carried out between 1895 and 1930.

¹¹⁷ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*. 128.

pleasure of identifying with the multicultural nation means that one gets to see oneself as a good or tolerant subject."¹¹⁸ More specifically, Haber is a practitioner of the brand of utilitarianism Sara Ahmed would later interpret as a philosophy particularly well suited for empire.

Haber's particular brand of pragmatism is plain as day, even beyond his above conversation about the necessity of violence against some for the betterment of the majority. The tower Haber has "built" (manifest through Orr's effective dreams) touches everything below:

It overlooked everything—the city, the rivers, the hazy valleys westward, the great dark hills of Forest Park stretching north. Over the pillared portico, incised in white concrete in the straight Roman capitals whose proportions lend nobility to any phrase whatsoever, was the legend: THE GREATEST GOOD FOR THE GREATEST NUMBER.¹¹⁹

This phrase, loosely quoted and largely attributed to Jeremy Bentham, is perhaps the most commonplace short-hand for utilitarian thought. Ahmed examines both the explicit ways utilitarians brought their philosophy into the service of defending colonialism and why a philosophy that acknowledged sacrifice and suffering as an undesirable but necessary part of moral uplift would permit colonialism to continue as a vision, well after the blinders were off. "Utilitarianism," she writes, "offered a way of 'weighing up,' of considering the relative costs and benefits of empire. James Mill's *History of British India*, for example, "constitutes the misery of native culture as justification of colonial rule."¹²⁰ It was not merely a calculus of, for instance, paying the small price of autonomy to gain supposedly a hospital or a school (or, that is, a more suitably westernized source and definition of health care and education) but an

¹¹⁸ S. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 133-34.

¹¹⁹ Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven: A Novel*, 136. Emphasis in original. The "hazy valleys" recall the smog that simply will not be moved, previously discussed.

¹²⁰ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*. 125.

emotional trading-in as well. “In making happiness our end, we can impose our end,” she writes, which is to say the ends—an abstract feeling with uninterrogated norms—justify the means, whatever they may be and so “Colonial rule is justified as a duty to make others live according to the happiness end.”¹²¹

Reading Haber into the history he so plainly belonged to allows us to further acknowledge the suspicion Le Guin harbors for utilitarian philosophy, the concept of benevolence and its sister, philanthropy, and the exhausting and potentially dangerous obsession with happiness as an ideal—experienced in the trials of George Orr and comedically represented as futile and vainglorious in the character of Doctor Haber.

Happiness is a state seldom expressed as such in Butler’s series. It is less absent than outdone. We witness the characters often in a state of ecstasy—sometimes sexual, sometimes emotional, but always sensual. By *Imago*, the need for love has become bodily desperation. The character of Aoar, a construct undergoing metamorphoses into a third-sexed ooloi, absent the usual companionship of a human pair, “‘probably would dissolve. Die.’”¹²² Love is a literal biological necessity that binds an ooloi’s body together—granting it both identity and density. Love won’t simply make it happy; it will permit it to survive. The need for love that first the Oankali, and then as they fuse together, the oanklai-human constructs experience lacks the strong bind to ideology we witness in Le Guin (an abstract ‘love’ for the people that justifies anything done in its name); it can scarcely be both a cultural construction and a biological imperative.

¹²¹ *ibid.*

¹²² Butler, *Lilith's Brood*, 685.

The threat of Aoar's disintegration comes toward the close of the final book in a series that serves as one long trajectory of the future of the human species. Mingled with the Oankali, we evolve finally into a state of true mutual need. We might safely read Butler's works as an argument for love, even as they are set in a context of colonial love, even as those who love maintain the colonial tropes of condescension (the ooloi heal the humans they make love to and continue the discourse of saving them from themselves to the last). As the species intermingle over the course of the books, Butler sees the Oankali locate newer, more remote humans, cut-off from their benefactors who want so much to help them. And so while a state of genuine interdependence is reached, the rhetoric of colonizing a people 'for their own good' remains intact.

There is no mistaking that the Oankali are colonizers. Their story is of the seizure and carefully planned recolonization of earth by a people altered—one might say civilized. While the claim that humans would have destroyed themselves if left alone is credulously accepted in the text, it harkens nonetheless back to claims of a doomed Africa in the era of imperial expansion. In the light of its colonial echoes, we might interpret Butler's thick mix of loves—love as bodily need, love as forceful even hostile capture, love as change, love as reconciliation—as less a hope for the future than a stark representation of the complexities of the past. In this past, the lines—of history, sociality, but also bloodlines—running from colonizer to colonized cannot be pulled apart. It is neither good nor bad. It is true.

Conscious love, be it pitying and paternalistic or genuine and ecstatic (it is often both), like unconscious desire, is too messy to be the simple cure for the cognitive future. Beyond mess, however, the conscious positive affects that undergird manipulation and control in both Le Guin's and Butler's texts function as productive interlocutors for the ongoing debate over

emotion and artificial intelligence. These worlds are, admittedly, far apart and yet I believe as ruminations on a doomed future and the forces that might save us—narratives of a cognitive machine are well served by the complex engagement with emotion *The Lathe of Heaven* and the *Xenogenesis* series forward.

Chess Playing Machines, Part Two

In this chapter I have argued that chess playing computers typified an approach to machine intelligence based in the presumed primacy of affectless cognition. I claimed that the quest for artificial intelligence was not alone in relegating emotion to the status of noise—as that very same tendency is apparent throughout the history of emotion research. Contrastly, Ursula K. Le Guin and Octavia Butler craft their fictions firmly in the realm of emotion as signal, and in the process, challenge the popular science fiction trope of feeling as heroic force by imagining deeply problematic futures born of unconscious affects. In this final section, I have endeavored to further that claim by showing how positive, conscious emotions are not inherently productive of peace and harmony either. I believe these science fictions thoroughly debunk the notion of emotion as an inchoate force for good or the special quality of the human and that they do so by inviting their readers to watch feeling fail.

I return, in conclusion, to the machines playing chess and what has been imagined about and for them since. Chess is no longer the gold standard for an intelligent machine, largely because humans stopped being able to beat computers quite some time ago, but also because AI has moved away from problems of calculating large amounts of probabilities and into questions that have less to do with the great sums of information they can contain and far more to do with

the information they are able to extract from a human interface—what our faces say we do and do not like, how comfortable we feel with a machine as a servant, what our patterns of technological use suggest about our shopping habits. Once it seemed we feared the cold cognitive future so much that we sought for God’s Share and believed we had located it in the form of emotion. Now that the affectively-interested if not fully artificially intelligent, computational future is upon us, it seems relatively clear that the technological approximation of human feeling wants no better for us than the cold hard machine. The question of artificial intelligence has, in the years since Deep Blue, ventured into a mix of neuroscientific and philosophical ground that I believe benefit from the insights made available by Le Guin and Butler. The first of these would be the development of a more integrated approach to emotional and cognitive functioning.

Wilson summarizes the turn that alters the trajectory of cognitive science post revolution:

If a single book could mark the shift in the mood of a research field, Antonio Damasio’s *Descartes’ Error* was just such a book. Using neurological data, Damasio argued that high-level cognitive capacities were more entwined with emotion than many had previously assumed. He disputed the notion that the faculties of reason and emotion are radically opposed, claiming instead that good reasoning is reliant on the capacity to experience and regulate feelings.¹²³

Damasio’s work is perhaps the most widely cited work of neuroscience in the contemporary humanities and social science canon. For critics looking to champion the relevance of affect, it reads like the surrender of the opposing camp. Damasio uses particular case studies—most memorably the case of Phineas Gage—to demonstrate how, absent of emotional valence, the human brain fails to make good cognitive decisions. We need our feelings, he claims, in order to

¹²³ Wilson, *Affect and Artificial Intelligence*, vii.preface Damasio’s text, published in 1994,

decide. This new harmony between cognition and emotion, brain and body (because, Damasio is careful to emphasize, it is the brain in the body and the body in the world that interprets cognitive-affective information), would have profound effects on approaches to artificial intelligence and computation.

Computer scientist, Rosalind Picard, in particular, took notice. In her 1997 work, *Affective Computing* she turned to Damasio as well as his predecessors Johnson-Laird and Shafir, in a discussion of how human cognition works best in concert with emotion, concluding that, “The implications are significant also for computer science and industry: computers, if they are to be truly effective at decision making, will have to have emotions or emotionlike mechanisms working in concert with their rule based systems.”¹²⁴ Picard’s exhortations of the need for affective AI are pragmatic in tone. Following Damasio, she argues that a feeling machine is a more efficient thinking machine. There are others still, whose drive toward an emotional artificial intelligence fall more along the lines of a “God’s Share” brand of fear.

The founder and CEO of Hanson Robotics, David Hanson has less modest expectations: “Our robots will serve as AI platforms for research, education, medical and healthcare, sales and service, and entertainment applications, and will evolve to become benevolent, super-intelligent living machines who advance civilization and achieve ever-greater good for all.”¹²⁵ This bold mission is fueled by fears of an eventual hostile takeover of humanity. Hanson has spoken often and emphatically about the threat. “Machines are becoming devastatingly capable of things like killing [. . .] Those machines have no place for empathy. And there’s billions of dollars being

¹²⁴ R.W. Picard, *Affective Computing* (MIT Press, 2000), 12.

¹²⁵ “About”, <https://www.hansonrobotics.com/about/>.

spent on that.”¹²⁶ It is hard to argue with Hanson’s aims in the context of robotic and AI development. His incredibly life-like robots that mimic the facial expressions of the people they are speaking to and are able to recall faces and carry on convincing conversations seem a bit frivolous or even eerie until one stops to ponder the drone.

Even as Hanson has clearly stated a belief in and desire for genuine AI consciousness, his company put their primary focus on the positive emotions experienced by humans interacting with the robots, not within the robots themselves: “There are strong arguments and evidence that interaction with humanoid robots provides a powerful framework for conveying and building love, compassion and other positive emotions.”¹²⁷ I find it easy to concur with Hanson and even Picard in the space they occupy within AI; yet, to argue that some AI is more palatable does not truly answer the question of whether any of it is desirable at all. Furthermore, it would seem that whether driven by fear or pragmatism, the quest for an affective artificial intelligence fails to answer fully the questions of whether emotion would genuinely be a safeguard within a constructed consciousness.

My own interpretation of these post-Damasio developments is that Damasio turned on the green light, contributing the credibility of neuroscience to the establishment of yet more life-like machines. Roboticists and computer scientists interested in affect were then free to apply the notion of cognitive-emotional interdependence to a whole host of aspirations that include shattering the uncanny valley, and seeking to decode the human face.¹²⁸ But despite Hanson’s

¹²⁶ David Hanson, "Robots That "Show" Emotion," in *TED Talks* (TedTalks 2009, 2009).

¹²⁷ ""About"".

¹²⁸ Hanson’s robots are somewhat controversial because of the widespread belief in AI, graphics, video games, comic books etc. in the “uncanny valley”: the theory that humans crave representations like themselves up to a certain point. Anything too lifelike is frightening or discomfiting. Hanson believes it to be false. Picard is one

frequent philosophical musings, it is not entirely clear what any of this machine development actually does for our interrogation of human emotion and intelligence. Mainstream sci-fi would have us believe that an affective artificial intelligence would better insure our future. If only our machines could fall in love with us! But Le Guin and Butler's demonstrations on the limits of feelings complicate our faith in love and good intentions.

Machine development, at least as it is presently conceived, is inescapably digital. But emotions are not yes or no questions. The famous query implied by the sci-fi writing of Philip K. Dick, 'Does a machine have the capacity for empathy?' for example, makes no account of empathy's own complicated relationship to moral justifiability. Members of terrorist organizations demonstrate high-levels of in-group empathy.¹²⁹ One could argue that such expressions fail to represent empathy in its purest form, yet the presumptions that a quest for purity will yield positive results holds historically little weight—as I hope my look into eugenics has demonstrated. We needn't wait to be colonized by our machine-overlords to witness the inherent imperialism of assumed shared ethical and emotional values, meant to cut across cultures, but born almost entirely in Silicon Valley.

There is a great deal of infighting in the world of AI. Developers like Hanson and Picard represent the most palatable argument for it: an AI not bred as machine warfare but for

pioneer in the development of software to read microaggressions. While this technology is most often noted for its controversial use in security, Picard's main clients who want to watch would-be customers watch their advertisements via webcam.

¹²⁹ "Although good experimental evidence shows that the amount of empathy one possesses (i.e., trait empathy) or expresses (i.e., state empathy) can drive altruism, there is also reason to believe that empathy may not be as unambiguously pro-social in inter-group contexts. Specifically, whereas empathy for an outgroup likely motivates pro-sociality towards its members, in-group empathy may have the opposite effect: if people feel the suffering of in-group members particularly acutely, this may motivate them to act *against* members of an out-group that they see as responsible." Emile Bruneau, "Understanding the Terrorist Mind," *Cerebrum : the Dana forum on brain science* 2016 (2016).

interpersonal empathic connection. In the light of Le Guin and Butler, however, it seems like a critical question is not being asked. Whether the vision of human intelligence is one of pure cognition or one of pure emotion or some more neurologically credible and efficient blend of the two, the presumption that remains firmly intact is that human intelligence is a thing worth copying. I would argue that Le Guin and Butler engage with this anthropocentric assumption at a distance. Which is to say that in privileging stories untraditional in their definitions of human intelligence and forwarding emotion as at the heart of the matter in a way that maintains its complexity, they challenge the aspects of human living marked as special by the quest for AI—both traditionally as a cognitivist enterprise and in more recent years, re-envisioned as affective.

The combined forces of affect theory and affective computation claim to have radically altered the field of artificial intelligence. We need no longer fear the cold cognitive future; a warm and empathetic robot is in the making. It will flip the cognitive emotional binary in a manner that reveals what is best about us. The real world histories of conscious positive emotions as a force of oppression and destruction combined with a credible fear of our unconscious drives suggest that there is no innocent way of conceiving of the workings of the human mind, be it cognitive, affective, or combinatory. Fears will, and perhaps should remain, for those who don't wish to see the human mind's propensity for ethical failure repeated in machines that are physically or cognitively imbued with super-human power. It would seem, from this standpoint, that what we give to machines are strengths beyond our own as well as our every mechanism that we have to fail the planet and each other (whether we call it emotion, intelligence or a more enlightened combination of the two).

Perhaps there is some comfort in the fact that replicating human emotion within an artificial intelligence is far off and even potentially impossible. Yet the questions that circulate

around AI reverberate back into the culture that obsesses so over its potential.¹³⁰ It is my hope that familiarity with feminist literature from the time before affective AI held sway encourages us to look upon emotion with due suspicion. To value artificial intelligence as a project is to agree on a few points that remain to be seen. The first is that a standard for intelligence exists. The new body-mind socialized brain model feels as right to contemporary neuroscientists, cognitivists, and programmers as the chess models of the past did to Shannon and Pitts.

The second assumption, the one I believe Le Guin and Butler most convincingly challenge, is that human intelligence is special or superior. “The anthropocentrism obvious both in the assumption that the most important and interesting kind of intelligence is human intelligence and that the most interesting aspects of human intelligence are those which are uniquely human is undermined,” ecofeminist philosopher Victoria Davon argues, by the way AI development has struggled so immensely with the supposedly low order cognitive skills like picking up a cup or recognizing an object.¹³¹ If the challenge of duplication is any measure of an act’s complexity, many of the skills humans share with other species would register as the most astounding of accomplishments. The clear anthropocentrism of a project to create in one’s own image, Davion continues, is inherently “not only anthropocentric, but it is androcentric and racist as well.”¹³² This follows particularly from the chess-chasers of the chapter’s introduction, functioning within a traditionally white masculinist definition of intelligence.

¹³⁰ If you can name an enormously powerful global corporation, you have a good chance of naming an institution with an aggressive mission to produce artificial intelligence: Google, Facebook, Amazon.

¹³¹ Victoria Davion, "Anthropocentrism, Artificial Intelligence, and Moral Network Theory: An Ecofeminist Perspective," *Environmental Values* 11, no. 2 (2002): 167.

¹³² *ibid.*, 168.

Practitioners of artificial intelligence and cognitive psychology may well have managed the affordances of the mind with the best of intentions. This did not stop them, however, from taking advantage of the privilege granted to them by the ideology they sought to extend. Paul Edwards characterizes the hierarchy in the terms of “hard” (superior) and “soft (inferior):

The “hard” master of computers is a subject whose major cognitive structures are preconceived plans, specific goals, formalisms, and abstractions, who has little use for spontaneity, trial-and-error, unplanned discovery, vaguely defined ends, or informality. This is also American culture’s prevalent image of scientists, generically portrayed as disciplined thinkers who employ long chains of logical and mathematical reasoning to arrive at their subtle, powerful understanding of nature’s ways. Men, too, are supposedly tough-minded, rational, unswayed by emotion—good with maps and mathematics—while women supposedly outdo them in intuitive skills such as nursing and child-care. Computers, scientists, and men are “hard” subjects; children, nurses, and women are “soft” ones.

In practice, of course, this image is false.

[. . .]

Regardless of its truth, however the hard/soft split plays a major ideological role.¹³³

The question of anthropocentrism in AI (or any endeavor done in the human image) necessitates further investigation into what is meant by human, or, in this case, what is prized enough within the human mind to be worthy of replication. That the de facto mind would bear the cultural assumption of the white, the Western, and the masculine comes as no surprise.

I would not accuse modern day affective AI of carrying forth those same sins, and yet it remains the case that AI development simply must develop a hierarchical set of human traits deemed worthy of replication. It is all the rage nowadays to suggest the cognition over emotion script get flipped. What I hope this chapter has made clear is that reversing that hierarchy is no guarantee.

¹³³ Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America*, 167-68.

Since Deep Blue erred, upsetting the affective scenario of a supposedly cognitive match, the question has too easily been—emotion or cognition? Even those who seek out Damasio’s incorporated schema have in many cases taken it up to champion feeling. The contest seems to have gone on long after that particular match was conceded. Le Guin’s Doctor Haber might have interjected—a reminder that the image in a mirror of our own construction is likely more flattering than just. Further still, had anyone thought to ask Octavia Butler for her thoughts on Deep Blue, I feel quite confident she would have recognized the trouble from the very start. Believing as she did that humanity inherently craves hierarchy and that hierarchy would always betray us to extinction, I suspect she would be quick to point out that as a model of human achievement and intelligence, the trouble with chess is that it must be won. Indeed, that our minds and hearts were ever a game at all.

CODA

It has been my objective to demonstrate how fictional genres played within the more loose fitting constraints in the history of emotions between 1968 and 1995—critiquing powerful narratives of emotional expectation from before their time as well as the early harbingers of an era of medicalized feeling to come, but also suggesting the potential to be had in a more labile definition of mind, body, and emotion. I have not ‘covered’ the period between 1968 and 1995, though it may seem as if I meant to. I have explored quite so many trends in the psy sciences and their popular representation and such a range of fictional genres, rather, to demonstrate what I believe an affordance perspective brings to the history and future of thinking through the emotional self.

“Affordance theory is of course a weak theory in the philosophical sense of the word ‘weak,’” Cave begins, “the breadth, the inclusiveness, of its explanatory power is purchased at the expense of depth.”¹ In keeping with the strengths and limitations of an affordance perspective, my exploration into individual genres was intended as close, but the scope of the dissertation in full was quite expansive. My sincere hope is that the preceding chapters have sufficiently demonstrated fictional and nonfictional affordances of diverse forms acting to expand the premise of emotional life—sometimes in concert and other times through the equally productive

¹ Cave, *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism*, 61.

act of dissonance.² In placing the social structures and the aesthetic works in the common box of ‘that which affords,’ I find myself in agreement with Cave that, “What is at stake here is nothing less than the instrumentality of literature, its uses as an instrument of thought.”³ I would of course only accept the notion of thought in a conceptualization that robustly considered emotion as part of the thinking process. What is more, it is my immodest hope that by locating fictions that afford a greater wealth of emotional potential, we might also expand our own capacity to forge the “viable organic connections” between us.⁴ I propose, in these final pages, that the seemingly impassable distance that imperils such connections can be mitigated in part through an acknowledgment of the compatibility of formal affordance as a method of literary analysis and the idea of play and its function in defining and managing emotional life.

To describe the affordance of any given object, narrative, or term is to delineate the possibilities for and limits to play. Cave provided the example of a chair—intended, most commonly, for sitting, possible to throw, smash, or repurpose as a table, or work of art. This describes both what a chair affords and what it might mean to play within those affordances. I have endeavored herein to demonstrate how through the repurposing of genre, a selection of fictive works from the seventies, eighties, and early nineties, fashioned new uses for and definitions of emotional wellbeing and experience out of dominant cultural and clinical tropes of feeling.

The cynical laugh activated the more ethical impulses within postmodern techniques. It made light of practices that tended toward sentimentality or the offering of unsolicited advice on

² Particularly in my approach to dissonance and consonance as equally productive forms of play, my approach to affordances is indebted to theories of play as developed by Paul Armstrong in *How Literature Plays With the Brain*.

³ Ibid., 55.

⁴ Baldwin, *Remember This House* (1979) Quoted in *I Am Not Your Negro*.

private lives. But it also suggested that resisting the commodification of private feeling for public consumption wasn't a new moral truth; it was an ill-timed and off-putting guffaw—distinct from both the balm and self-seriousness of therapy culture and those critics who would dismiss the therapeutic project as self-indulgence.

The perspective on emotional wellbeing as seen through the eyes of warrior, trickster, ghost, daughters was likewise ill-fitted to the psychodynamic narratives of familial and personal care that circulated before and during the construction of Maxine Hong Kingston's and Audre Lorde's biomythographies. The second-generation daughter expanded the potential of memoir—telling her own story through a fractured subjectivity and as a challenge to notions of feminine vulnerability to depression, as a means to upend narratives of racialized pathologization, and as a way to claim authority on the perspective of her own mental health and that of her family. Each of these orientations toward emotion offered a pivot from psychological and sociological studies of women or women of color, not a reversal or rejection. Daughter-narrators employed form to insist on narrative authority—to claim perspective, rather than offer themselves and their stories up for others to interpret.

And finally, feminist science fiction recalibrated the stale mind/body, cognition/emotion debates that forged on in the discourses surrounding artificial intelligence. Emotion was mainstream science fiction's hero of choice. Le Guin and Butler, contrastly, fashioned the future of feeling as something far more complicated and far less sanguine. They blurred the edges between utopian and dystopian literature and uniquely put feeling behind the wheel of hypothesized disaster. Looking out from these fraught landscapes of ethical emotional complexity, they afforded a particularly clear view of the persistence of a binary concept of mind in contemporaneous fictional and technological discourses.

In short, these works did not just tear down one monolithic concept of emotion. They may not have torn anything down at all. They played with what was available and, in so doing, made something new. This was and is always possible and yet I believe more so in periods where less consensus is achieved on how emotions ought to be addressed and managed in American culture. The study of the emotional affordances in literary genres is equally a study of play: Cynical humorists playing with dark topics and sentimentality, Audre Lorde at play with the conceptualization of her mother, Maxine Hong Kingston playing with personal history, chess masters playing at dominance, and feminist science fiction writers who suggest that it is not emotion that will save us, but more cooperative and less competitive forms of play. When we press on the connections between play and affordance, however, I believe we are called upon to answer by the central dilemma of the concluding chapter: Is winning the point of play? (Substituting the term ‘affordance’ we might ask if arriving at a ‘correct’ or ‘ideal’ affordance is the function of cycling through a multiplicity of meanings or usages.)

By treating these concepts of play and affordance as, if not synonyms, then sisters, we are able to argue that striving toward a cultural landscape of emotions that affords more is both preferable and as much a part of our nature as the drive to reduce and monopolize understanding. I look to the work of Michael Tomasello as a means to make this claim. From Tomasello’s perspective, the development of the human emotional mind is grounded in a process of cooperation and collaboration discovered through play. He argues, over the course of several texts, that human evolution is as much or more a story about collaboration and cooperation as it a story about selection and competition. Crucial to his theory is the examination of play as a means of development, signaling more than a make-believe contest for resources. In fact, he utilizes the concept of affordance in his description of, for example, the ways children bend the agreed upon

purpose of objects as means of communication (drawing a laugh from the unexpected).⁵ No one wins; sociality is taking place and play/affordances are making difference meaningful and productive. This is not to side with an oversimplified version of altruism as human nature. Ultimately, in applying Tomasello's theories to the definitions of emotion set forth in the introduction, I arrive at a place in which what changes is the boundaries of the subject itself, and less the subject's qualities or intentions.

The notion of collaboration or cooperation as a function and type of play locks step with the definition of emotion as process and exchange put forth in the introduction. At its core, cooperative play suggests the potential affordances of expanding the subject of emotional experience from the self to the "we." As Tomasello explains:

Human cooperation is structured by what some modern philosophers of action call shared intentionality or "we" intentionality (Searle 1995, Bratman 1992, Gilbert 1989). In general, shared intentionality is what is necessary for engaging in uniquely human forms of collaborative activity in which a plural subject "we" is involved: joint goals, joint intentions, mutual knowledge, shared beliefs—all in the context of various cooperative motives.⁶

Emotion understood as it was once was—the nuisance of scientific measurement, the distraction threatening the rationalist mind—has no place in a theory of human evolution emphasizing "we" events. Emotion, understood as an exchange and a process between the world, the mind, and the body would seem the likely inheritance of a world of play that is more about development than success or conquest. In their subject-bleeding, emotionally complex forms of play, I wish to suggest that the works of fiction herein have done more than contest the specific emotional practices in place at the time of their construction and have put pressure rather on the subject of

⁵ M. Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁶ *Origins of Human Communication* (MIT Press, 2010), 7.

the emotional self as singular. Emotion is comprehensible as not a thing one has but a thing that happens—as Brennan put it, as beyond the “skin,”—only within a definition of the human mind that emphasizes “we” as the primary subject of human experience, a “we” forged in the act of play.

There are many ways it would seem we are, in 2019, on a precipice of newly expansive affordances of feeling not unlike the moment in 1968. LSD is back in fashion. Psychotherapeutic and pharmacological intervention increasingly share space with practices like mindfulness, which like its seventies’ therapy culture counterparts may seem silly in some ways but is at least a sign that there is no monopoly on the emotional mind. I suspect, however, that an immanent or perhaps already begun period of relative disorder is only as good as the boundaries it draws around subjectivity. If we remain, as Baldwin charged, “terrified of our private selves,” perhaps the new affordances we require are not about independent solutions, however alternative or expansive (hallucinogens, yoga, sensory deprivation, etc.), but to play seriously with the question: What might we do with an emotional self that is us and not I?

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