

© Copyright 2019

Denise Grollmus

The Sacred Disease: Narratives of Addiction and the Making of the Post-Secular  
Self

Denise Grollmus

A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2019

Reading Committee:

Kate Cummings, Chair

Carolyn Allen

Eva Cherniavsky

Kathleen Woodward

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

English

University of Washington

**Abstract**

The Sacred Disease: Narratives of Addiction and the Making of the Post-Secular Self

Denise Grollmus

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:  
Dr. Kate Cummings  
English Department

“The Sacred Disease” explores how twentieth and twenty-first century addiction narratives employ religious discourses that challenge addiction’s pathologization and criminalization, as well as the ontological assumptions that undergird these articulations. Each chapter examines a contemporary text that routes addiction through a specific religious framework, including: a Pueblo cosmovision in Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony*, a Catholic conception of original sin in Mary Karr’s memoir *Lit*, the Catholic sacrament of penance in Lars von Trier’s film *Nymph()*maniac; and Voodoo, Santeria, and Brujeria in the television show *True Blood*. Contrary to suspicious readings of addiction narratives – which read their use of religious and spiritual discourses as disciplinary – “The Sacred Disease” uses these frameworks’ religious hermeneutics to theorize and model modes of reparative reading that show how these stories effectively resist white, heteronormative, and masculinist demands for liberal self-governance. I argue these religious frameworks not only revise medical and moral definitions of addiction, but also reframe conventional notions of disease

and agency. They do so precisely because they employ more holistic, porous, and context-dependent ontologies than dominant Cartesian dualisms. Thus, these stories express addiction and recovery as developing a syncretic (what I mean by “post-secular”) selfhood that enables life-sustaining networks of mutual aid and interdependence as opposed to self-governing secular subjecthood. While scientific models of addiction pathologize dependence and disavow the supernatural, these stories enact addiction recovery through interdependent and post-secular processes, enabling a capacious, antiracist, and holistic notion of well-being.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1. Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2. Spider-Woman .....	32
2.1 Disease, Witchery, and Colonialism.....	37
2.2 Gut Knowledge .....	58
2.3 Decolonial Medicine.....	66
Chapter 3. The Sinner .....	75
3.1 The Whitbreads, Ben Franklin, and the Tyranny of Secular Self-making.....	86
3.2 After Suspicion: Reparative Reading, Sinfulness, and the Postsecular Self.....	108
Chapter 4. The Nymphomaniac .....	125
4.1 ().....	138
4.2 The Confessor .....	146
4.3 CUNT.....	153
4.4 “My Name Is Joe and I’m a Nymphomaniac” .....	160
4.5 The Final Impasse .....	165
Chapter 5. The Brujo.....	173
5.1 The Ideally Self-Governing Vampire .....	178
5.2 Vamps, Supes, and Addicts, Oh My!.....	189
5.3 Dealers and Healers .....	202
5.4 Syncretic Visions .....	209
Chapter 6. Epilogue: Me, Too.....	225

Works Cited ..... 240

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project began when I was completing my MFA at Pennsylvania State University, where professors Benjamin Schreier, Jonathan Abel, and Toni Jensen encouraged me to develop my interest in narratives of addiction and recovery. At UW, I found an incredible mentor and chair in Kate Cummings, whose wisdom and clear guidance ushered me through both my comprehensive exams and the planning, research, and writing of this dissertation. It was in Professor Cumming's Citizenship and Race seminar that the question of addiction's relationship to agency and liberal governance with which this project grapples first emerged. Similarly, it was in Eva Cherniavsky's course on Feminist Theories that I was first introduced to the work of Saba Mahmood and, thus, my interest in secularism and religion began, as did the first draft of my *Nymphomaniac* chapter. Finally, it was through Carolyn Allen and Kathy Woodward that I was introduced to the world of affect theory, which had a profound effect on the shape of this project, particularly in its dedication to developing a reparative reading practice.

The fact that this project was actually completed would not have been possible without the incredible support of my colleagues, Chelsea Grimmer and Laura De Vos. While Laura's work on Native American literature helped me realize the importance of proceeding from a decolonial work like *Ceremony*, Chelsea's unwavering support and our dissertation writing group gave me the structure and strength to complete my work, one word at a time.

I am also endlessly grateful to the UW English Department, EWP (especially Candice Rai), and Disability Studies for providing the invaluable financial support that allowed me to do my work. I am also grateful to the men at the Monroe Correctional Complex for sharing their experience, strength and hope with me, and to my English 200 students for helping me think deeply about how secularism as shaped American literature and culture.

Finally, this project would have never existed had it not been for the many women who taught me how to live, especially Bobbi. Similarly, I can't imagine what both my sobriety and doctoral research would have been like without Robin Peringer, Cooper, Trudy, and Karl by my side.

## Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

At my second AA meeting ever, the woman I eventually asked to be my sponsor stopped me just before the wide set of double doors that led into the church's auditorium. I'd later learn how easy it is to spot a "newcomer." We all come in looking embarrassed, unsure, often shaky, sometimes jaundiced, usually clinging to a cigarette, ready to run. Our eyes always seem to be aimed at the ground or darting around, never meeting yours. Later, I'd also learn that it's the job of those with even a second more sobriety than you to make you feel welcome. It's what keeps us sober: helping people like us. We give you first names, phone numbers, manageable pieces of advice, really awful coffee, and just enough space so that if you want to run, you can. But if you stay, we're happy to have you. Because we get it. We were all new once. And we work hard to remember what that was like.

On that day, when I was still new, the woman who became my sponsor—who taught me how to live without the thing that had become the center of my life—stopped me to tell me something that kept me from running or never coming back. She told me "don't listen to the details. Listen to the feelings." Her instructions seemed simple enough—as people told their stories, I shouldn't get hung up on how many lines they snorted or how many DUIs they got. That wasn't really the point. The point was how those things made them feel. Like how the one girl described the distinct thrill of scoring. Or the guy who said the first time he drank felt like a homecoming, because he finally felt comfortable in his own skin. Or the dozens of people who talked about the feeling of panic that washed over them whenever the 12-pack or dime bag or whatever it was ran out. Or how they'd break out into a cold sweat when the bartender cut them off and then fill up with shame when they realized they couldn't stop at just one, or two, or—it didn't matter how many. They just couldn't stop.

It wasn't until almost a decade later, when I began working on this project, that I considered why my sponsor-to-be had given me that advice. It would become vital not only to my sobriety, but also to my scholarship. Much like a PhD program or an MFA program, the program of AA also inculcates its members in distinct reading and writing practices, though these practices and the dispositions they're meant to engender differ dramatically. In the rooms of AA and other 12-step programs—spaces explicitly created and maintained by and for addicts—stories of addiction and recovery are our medicine and like most medicine, they're most effective when taken as prescribed. The difference is that, in this context, it isn't a doctor who does the diagnosing and prescribing, it's us. In this context, we serve as the experts of our own experiences.

This expertise is collaboratively constructed not only through the assemblages of experiences and perspectives shared at meetings, but also through sponsorship. Asking someone to sponsor you isn't unlike asking someone to be your dissertation chair. But instead of taking classes and having yourself evaluated, you go to lots of meetings and get to know different members, their stories, their perspectives. You find out who you feel comfortable talking to and asking questions. When you find someone whose worldview and approach (to both AA and life) works for you—someone who “has what you want” as we say—you simply ask them if they'll sponsor you. What you're asking is if they'll coach you on how to stay sober, how to work the steps, how to get through the day without a drink or bump or whatever it is. Michel Foucault could easily be describing AA sponsorship when he writes in *The Care of the Self* about mentorship in Ancient Greece, “when, in the practice of the care of the self, one appealed to another person in whom one recognized an aptitude for guidance and counseling, one was exercising a right. And it was a duty that one was performing when one lavished one's assistance on another, or when one gratefully received the lessons the other might give.”<sup>1</sup> AA pushes the

reciprocity of this relation even further by arguing that sponsoring someone is as much a practice of self-care and self-cultivation as being a sponsee. In helping others, we help ourselves.

Whenever I'd thank my sponsor for her help, she'd always thank me back.

Like all things in AA, you aren't required to get a sponsor and you can get one whenever you like—after one meeting or 10 years of them. Or never. It's up to you. But if you want to understand the program and work through the 12 steps, sponsorship is recommended. The people who tend to stay sober also tend to have sponsors and sponsor others. A sponsor isn't your boss, nor your sobriety supervisor, and you can “fire” them and get a new one (or not) whenever you please. They are guides and the expertise they hold is their own experience. When they don't have an answer to your question (and even when they do), they tell you to ask others for input as well. Their principal role is to help walk you through the structure and conventions of the program, many of which are outlined in the program's central text—referred to as the “Big Book” by the millions of people who keep the cerulean tome tucked away in their nightstands, their purses, and under passenger seats. Just as my sponsor educated me in the listening and reading practices of AA, she also helped guide me through its storytelling practices—ones quite different from those I'd learned as an investigative news reporter or the ones I would later learn in my MFA and PhD programs. In fact, the structure that all our stories take is succinctly and clearly outlined on page 58 of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, where AA's founder, Bill Wilson writes, “our stories disclose in a general way what we were like, what happened, and what we are like now.” Wilson, who believed addicts could stay sober by sharing their stories with one another, also offers a model in the first chapter, “Bill's Story,” where he fleshes out this highly adaptive tripartite structure with the details of his own torrid love affair with and eventual divorce from alcohol. Since the Big Book was first published in 1939, people all over the world have been

filling their past into this outline, a sort of recovery Mad Lib, where the adjectives, pronouns, and anecdotes may be different, but the narrative arcs are essentially and purposefully similar.

Looking from the outside in (and from the vantage point of literary scholarship, in particular), I can see how this might seem terribly tedious, especially when you add in the endless list of “one day at a times” and “let go and let Gods.” But when you’re sitting in a folding chair in a church basement, hearing one of these stories for the thousandth time, you’re not bothered by the formula or the clichés. Instead, you’re grateful that the person standing before you has a narrative roadmap for expressing their pain, staying clean, and sharing their experience, strength and hope with others. The clichés can become more than cloying phrases and emerge as practical tools. In a conversation I had with Leslie Jamison, author of *The Recovering*, for *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, Jamison said of AA clichés, “for the super self-conscious, hyper self-aware person, part of what the cliché can do is...suggest that perhaps this simpler explanation that feels far too interchangeable to apply to you actually has something to teach you about your own life that you might not already understand.”<sup>2</sup> But most importantly, “we” tell “our” stories. Our stories are an act of communion. Our shared story structure and trite phrases remind us of what we share in common, hold us together, and allow us to feel less alone. Because our problem is not simply alcohol or meth. Our problem is the way in which we’ve convinced ourselves, through different kinds of stories, that we were pathologically unique—a uniqueness which produces a sense of alienation that sits the center of our addictions. It’s not that the details and differences don’t matter—they do. We get to see how differently these feelings and experiences unfurl in people’s lives based on everything from race, class, and gender to sexuality, geographic location, and religion. The beauty is that across these dramatic differences, we not only find so many surprising points of commonality, but a diverse set of strategies, coping mechanisms, and approaches from which we borrow what works and leave the

rest behind. Our narrative and interpretive practices are the vehicle through which our sense of alienation is dissolved, and difference is reframed not as that which keeps us apart, but that which generates a multiplicity of coping strategies. We learn to hear and see ourselves and others differently—in a way that makes living a bit easier.

However, when stories of addiction and recovery appear outside the rooms—when they're being circulated among a much larger audience and not primarily as an act of mutual aid—they become something else. They find themselves being judged against an entirely different set of criteria and with very different interpretive tools. The clichés don't signal a shared and highly adaptive language, they evince lazy writing that evacuates complexity. The narrative formula isn't empowering or community-building, it's disciplinary and subjugating. When I first began reading through the literary and cultural criticism of addiction narratives, I was struck by how at odds the scholarship was with the way I'd learned to receive them in the rooms of AA, the “scriptology” of which many critics reference as the narrative foundation for literary and popular accounts of addiction.<sup>3</sup> Where we read hope and healing in our stories, scholars observed one Foucauldian nightmare after another. In *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson warn that addiction narratives “enforce a Foucauldian self-surveillance that conforms the writing subject to prescriptive norms.”<sup>4</sup> In *High Anxieties: Cultural Studies in Addiction*, Marc Redfield and Janet Farrell Brodie also take up Foucault in order to historicize the addict, who, they write, “like the ‘homosexual’ with whom s/he has often been linked, emerged with the development, a little more than a century ago, of a medico-legal discourse capable of reconceiving human identity in the language of pathology.”<sup>5</sup>

But it was Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's “Epidemics of the Will” that struck me most. The problem is not that Sedgwick, like Redfield and Brodie, also suggests that “the addict,” like “the homosexual,” was born through the explosion of medico-legal discourse at the end of nineteenth

century. The emphasis on modern medicine's transformation of certain deeds into a proliferating set of symptomologies used to identify specific doers as pathologically disordered is well taken and crucial for understanding the development of disease models of addiction as well as the general pathologization of identity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. The problem is that this historicization is paradoxically totalizing and ahistorical. For example, Sedgwick asserts that, before medical discourse brought "the addict" into being in the nineteenth century, the immoderate use of drugs, specifically opium, was merely understood as "a behavior among other behaviors" and a "position of relative homeostatic stability and control."<sup>6</sup> But that's simply not the case. Notably, Sedgwick, along with other cultural studies scholars, ignores the much longer history of how immoderate and compulsive behaviors have been described and understood since the time of Herodotus—approaches and perspectives that not only informed turn of the century medical accounts of addiction, but which also remain relevant today in residual (the concept of addiction as "sin"), dominant (the concept of addiction as an organic "disease"), and emergent (the concept of addiction as a social and spiritual dis-ease or "soul sickness") discourses about addiction.

My contention with these suspicious readings is not that they identify modern models of addiction (including medical, legal, and popular) as disciplinary. All categories of identity inherently are. What is taxonomization if not a form of control? Rather, my discomfort with these readings lies in both their elision of how addicts take up these taxonomies and both resist and/or revise them in crucial ways, as well as how these readings often rely on the sort of binary thinking that narratives of addiction often productively trouble. For example, Sedgwick writes that "in the taxonomic reframing of a drug user as an addict," one is:

propelled into a narrative of inexorable decline and fatality, from which she cannot disimplicate herself except by leaping into that other, even more pathos-ridden narrative called *kicking the habit*. From being the *subject* of her own perceptual manipulations or indeed experimentations, she is installed as the proper *object* of compulsory institutional

disciplines, legal and medical, that, without actually being able to do anything to “help” her, nonetheless presume to know her better than she can know herself—and indeed, offer everyone in her culture who is *not* herself the opportunity of enjoying the same flattering presumption.<sup>7</sup>

Here, Sedgwick suggests that, in the narrative framework of addiction and recovery, the addict can only ever be an object. She is only ever in control *or* out of it. Knowledge of herself can only be produced from the outside. The addict is always told, she can never do the telling.

This is the exact logic that my project challenges. I argue that narratives of addiction and recovery—particularly those told by and/or from the point of view of addicts—take up modern models of addiction and revise them in ways that not only challenge dominant understanding of addiction, but also reframe the concepts of disease and self upon which they depend. The binaries between mind/body, inner/outer, self/other, subject/object, and volition/compulsion upon which modern understandings of addiction are based are troubled by these stories, as they reroute medical models of addiction through various religious concepts of the self. From Pueblo myth and medicine in Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony* and the Catholic doctrine of original sin employed in Mary Karr’s memoir *Lit* to the Christian mysticism of Lars von Trier’s *Nymphomaniac* and the network of minor religions in the television show *True Blood*, each text takes disease models of addiction and, in narrating the lived experience of addiction through particular religious concepts and discourses, reimagines addiction as a “sacred disease” in much the same way that AA does.

In *Alcoholics Anonymous*—what we refer to as the “Big Book” and which was written by AA co-founder, Bill Wilson and first published in 1939—Wilson writes, “we have been not only mentally and physically ill, we have been spiritually sick. When the spiritual malady is overcome, we straighten out mentally and physically.”<sup>8</sup> This particular concept of addiction as a “spiritual disease” not only sits at the heart of AA’s program of recovery, but it also fundamentally reframes the Western secular notion of “disease,” which is understood as an

objectively measurable pathological condition of the body. This conception of disease is based in the historical formation of the Cartesian self, in which the mind is understood as a discrete unit that is separate both from the body and the outside world, and from which the spiritual is largely excluded as a concern of medical science. But by reframing disease as “spiritual,” AA’s discourse recovers a more holistic and integrated notion of the self—one that we find repeatedly in ancient, non-Western, and religious notions of the self, in which human beings are understood as first and foremost spiritual beings, in whom body and soul are one and where the boundaries between the self and outside world—linked through the supernatural—are relatively more porous. Not only does this porosity collapse the distinction between subject and object, and self and other, but it also troubles liberal concepts of agency and the will. The articulation of addiction as a “spiritual disease” thus implies that it is at once a physical, mental, and social disease best resolved through a holistic and communal approach based in bodily, mental, and, most importantly, spiritual practices, such as prayer, being in communion with others through fellowship, and testifying before others about one’s experience. Recovery discourse thus becomes not about recovering the appropriately self-governing modern liberal subject—the one who can stop at one, or two, or however many—but about continually recovering a sense of the self as fundamentally interdependent and vulnerable to outside forces. It is a self that can never simply pick itself up by the bootstraps, man up, or just say no. It’s a self whose health and agency are intimately enmeshed within the well-being of its community.

However, when most people hear “spiritual disease,” for which “prayer” and “surrender to a Higher Power” are some of the suggested approaches, they don’t think of radically holistic and communal-based care. They tend to think: crazy God people. When I encounter suspicion toward AA, both inside and out of the academy, it most readily presents itself as a deep skepticism about “all the God stuff.” In the numerous books, investigative pieces, and op-eds

decrying AA as a pseudo-scientific, quasi-religious cult with inscrutable success rates, the program is most often criticized for its emphasis on the spiritual. Take, for example, Gabrielle Glaser's 2015 *Atlantic* article, "The Irrationality of Alcoholics Anonymous."<sup>9</sup> Glaser correctly points to the fact that 12-step programs are often the dominant—if not the *only*—treatment option available to those struggling with addiction. Even most rehab centers privilege this approach above all others, though Glaser states that addiction research shows AA is basically a failure. Her evidence is a notorious 2013 Harvard Medical School study that claims AA has a success rate of 5 to 10 percent.<sup>10</sup> But the study and its method, as many have argued, is dubious.<sup>11</sup> Even Glaser acknowledges that 12-step programs are notoriously difficult to study (at least from a Western scientific approach) because of their decentralized and anonymized membership. People simply show up to meetings or they don't. Furthermore, the study fails to consider that AA "membership"—for which the only requirement is "a desire to stop drinking"—accounts for a wide range of participation.<sup>12</sup> There are those who are forcibly court ordered to attend meetings and those whose elective participation is limited only to attending meetings. And then there are those who attend meetings regularly while also actively seeking out sponsorship, working the steps, and sponsoring others. And then there are those people, like myself, who don't much attend meetings anymore, but who maintain long term sobriety thanks to what we learned from the people in those rooms. There a myriad of ways to do AA. Another AA cliché: "there a million ways to stay sober, but only one way to get drunk." But even if one were to take all the different ways in which we participate into consideration, discerning recovery success rates in AA is still problematic since the definition of "success" in the study is simply "continued abstention."<sup>13</sup>

Still, Glaser's investigation of the efficacy of 12-step programs and alternative treatment methods, as well as her call for greater access to a wider spectrum of therapies, is vital,

especially when an estimated 2 million people in the United States suffer from substance use disorders and an average of 115 people die each day from opioid overdoses.<sup>14</sup> The problem is the logic that undergirds her critique. While Glaser is correct in acknowledging that AA's emphasis on spirituality is often a major roadblock to 12-step recovery for many addicts, who, like most AA skeptics, shrivel when they hear the word "God," her conclusion that AA is a failure because of its spiritual approach is deeply flawed. First, it assumes that the spiritual or the religious is incapable of existing alongside science itself. Second, it assumes that the problem is with the spiritual or religious itself, rather than with secular attitudes toward these approaches. For example, Glaser (who admits to having attended only "10 meetings" herself) misrepresents the various ways in which the "God" or "Higher Power" concept is variously mobilized in 12-step recovery.<sup>15</sup> She does this from the beginning of her piece, which she opens with an anecdote about an atheist lawyer who, she notes, "speaks in fully formed paragraphs, his thoughts organized by topic sentences," and who, despite being "put off by the faith-based approach of the 12 steps, five of which mention God," still gave the program a try in his desperation to get sober.<sup>16</sup> When the atheist lawyer eventually finds that AA doesn't work for him, Glaser curiously claims that AA's literature frames his failure as his and his alone. Glaser, of course, disagrees with this take (one that also grossly misrepresents the literature). The fault, she goes on to show, is with AA alone, as though the challenge of addiction and recovery ever has a single cause and that it must either be the addict or the program, and not the larger socio-historical context in which the two converge.

Glaser's choice to highlight her lead character's identity as both a lawyer and an atheist in light of his AA failings is telling. It sets up an all too tidy binary meant to suggest that in its emphasis on spirituality, AA must therefore be "irrational" and can serve no reasonable or rational human being. It doesn't matter that 12-step programs count a number of atheists (and

lawyers who speak in complete sentences) among their memberships or that the “God” concept is left purposefully open to interpretation (so long as you understand that whatever God is, you’re not it).<sup>17</sup> And it also doesn’t seem to matter that the science of addiction has continually played a role in AA since its inception or that the group’s inclusion of spiritual concerns and practices does not inherently or necessarily negate the inclusion and continual adaptation of other approaches and knowledges, including those produced by modern medicine.<sup>18</sup> Glaser’s main issue is that AA lacks scientific purity and a hierarchy of officially credentialed “experts,” a fact that she also attributes to the lack of sound scientific research on addiction treatment generally. She claims that “nowhere in the field of medicine is treatment less grounded in modern science,” and points out that many addiction counselors “are in recovery themselves” and some have “little more than a high school diploma or a GED.”<sup>19</sup> Just as she quotes Tom McLellan, a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, Glaser also firmly believes that “Alcohol- and substance-use disorders are the realm of medicine. This is not the realm of priests.”<sup>20</sup>

My critique of Glaser’s article is not meant to debate the efficacy of AA or defend 12-step programs. Glaser is essentially right—our society is failing addicts in terms of providing evidence-based, effective, and holistic care (never mind affordability). More people than ever are impacted by addiction and urgently need effective therapies. Rather, my reading of Glaser is meant to elucidate a larger conceptual problem that I see repeatedly not only in critiques of spiritual-based approaches to addiction, but with regard to almost all discussions of science and religion, which are ahistorically and problematically positioned as “immutable essences” or “opposed ideologies,” when they are, in fact, “concepts that are...interdependent and necessarily linked in their mutual transformations and historical emergence.”<sup>21</sup> Such binary thinking about religion and science—a binary that I argue spiritually-based approaches to addiction and

recovery uniquely and productively collapse—ultimately produces fundamentalist thought on both sides, leaving addicts in the lurch. The logic of Glaser’s critique of 12-step programs represents what I read as the fundamentalist logic of modern science—where, for Glaser and many other critics of 12-step programs (which were created by and for addicts with little to no recourse to treatment), the problem is that addiction treatment is a zero-sum-game that can only be resolved through modern medicine alone, that any spiritual or religious approach to addiction is inherently unscientific and “irrational,” and that only medical doctors—and certainly not GED-holding addicts—can serve as experts on the subject of addiction.

In fact, the fight over who has authority on the subject of addiction is as old as the field of modern medicine—and its definition of addiction—itsself. When Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* was first published in *London Magazine* in 1821, the author framed his memoir as a direct challenge to the medical community’s description of opium use and dependence. He argued that aside from observing that opium was brown, expensive, and lethal if taken in a large enough dose, medical writers—whom De Quincey described as “the greatest enemies” of opium’s “fascinating powers”—had made no real contribution to describing the effects of opium or habitual opium use.<sup>22</sup> He writes, “for upon all that has been hitherto written on the subject of opium...by professors of medicine, writing *ex cathedra*, I have but one emphatic criticism to pronounce: Lies! Lies! Lies!”<sup>23</sup> Just as De Quincey’s *Confessions* inaugurated various tropes—from the Orientalist imagery of intoxication to the Dante-like descent into the inferno of drug dependence—that would define addiction narratives to come, so too did his *Confessions* mark the ways in which narratives of addiction—including those told in the rooms of 12-step programs—generally tend to resist and/or revise medical explanations of addiction.

Take, for example, 2011's *Memoirs of an Addicted Brain: A Neuroscientist Examines his Former Life on Drugs* by Marc Lewis. Recently, the office of the United States surgeon general released what it refers to as the "first-ever *Surgeon General's Report on Alcohol, Drugs and Health*," which has been hailed as "the first comprehensive report on addiction in America."<sup>24</sup> Among its key findings, the report claims that addiction is a "chronic brain disease" that grows worse the more a person continues to use a substance, which "produces dramatic changes in brain function that reduce a person's ability to control their substance abuse."<sup>25</sup> However, Lewis's memoir, as well his work of popular science, *The Biology of Desire*, takes this definition to task. While some neuroscientists argue that what makes addiction a brain disease is the fact that drugs change the brain (in an extreme, pathological way), Lewis, both a recovering addict and a neuroscientist who studies affect regulation, argues that this is a problematic conclusion, because the changes produced in the brain by "addictive" substances are, as far as the research shows, no different from the kind of brain changes that occur "when people become absorbed in a sport, join a political movement, or become obsessed with their sweetheart or their kids."<sup>26</sup> "Brain disease may be a useful metaphor for how addiction *seems*, but it's not a sensible explanation for how addiction *works*," Lewis writes.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, Lewis argues there is nothing inherently pathological or abnormal about addiction. It's just the brain doing what it does—changing and hardwiring habits—a little *too* well and in a way that becomes life threatening. For Lewis and other addicts, part of the problem with disease models of addiction is that they tend to rely on a Cartesian split between mind/body that tends to privilege and isolate physiological functions as the primary cause of a complex and holistic human problem like addiction, which is always experienced socially, physically, psychologically, and spiritually. These models also always assume that addiction is an aberration. It is evidence of an abnormal body or an abnormally "addictive" substance, or an

abnormal attachment. But what if we were to understand addiction as a very normal outcome for the way that human desire and the formation of habits and attachments work? For Lewis, the only answer to escaping the impasse of the disease model is “to remove brain science from the arena of medical politics and connect it back to its natural partners, psychology and personal experience.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, that is often what narratives of addiction do, and, in so doing, they have created a complex discourse of addiction. And, in fact, there was a time when such accounts were considered authoritative.

The reception history of De Quincey’s work, in which he describes himself as the only man who could profess the “doctrine of the true church on the subject of opium; of which church I acknowledge myself to be the only member—the alpha and omega,” also shows us how the medical community displaced the addict as the expert of their own experience.<sup>29</sup> Shortly after the publication of his confessions, De Quincey, who wrote anonymously as the “Opium-Eater,” became the de facto expert on all things opium. As one physician wrote in an 1845 issue of *The Medical Times and Gazette*, “the law of his self-experience is paramount in the profession” and “is the only modern instance...of a non-medical writer submitting, upon a medical subject, an opinion which the whole profession has acknowledged as orthodox testimony.”<sup>30</sup> But the value of De Quincey’s experience soon declined with the rise of the public health movement and the rapid consolidation and professionalization of medicine in the second half of the century. As physicians attempted to acquire exclusive control over opium and other narcotics, they began to turn against the famed Opium-Eater, whose “staunchly *anti-medical*” approach threatened their authority.<sup>31</sup> Praise was soon displaced with dismissals. In 1881, the American physician H.H. Kane accused De Quincey of “a mass of ingenious lies,” while in 1894, the physician Patrick Hehir wrote that, “the language of the opium-eater must...be read with that amount of allowance which we naturally concede to poetical writers, who aim at effect in the language they select, and

are not afraid of the startling and uncommon.”<sup>32</sup> The opium eater was no longer the expert on his own experience. Instead, substance abuse and dependence fell squarely under the authority of scientific discourse and medicine, which classified it as a disease named “addiction.” No longer was addiction “the realm of priests,” figurative or otherwise. Alcohol- and substance-use disorders, indeed, became the realm of medicine.

The problem is that medical models of addiction remain woefully incomplete and there is little scientific consensus around treatment methods. While some argue that addiction is a physiological disease (that has been historically located everywhere from the brain and liver to the mind, the will and the labia), others describe it as a largely psychological disorder, while others argue that it is a culturally specific and wholly social phenomenon. Though many accept that addiction is at once physical, psychological and social, gaining access to care that can address all three of these concerns at once is practically impossible. Furthermore, there isn’t much science on how these various aspects of addiction actually intersect and inform each other. Because these models remain so incomplete and contested, moralist models of addiction that understand the addict as a sinful criminal also persist, allowing for the simultaneous pathologization *and* criminalization of addicts and, in fact, prison is where many addicts find themselves. In fact, 65 percent of all prison inmates meet medical criteria for addiction and less than 11 percent receive treatment.<sup>33</sup>

As addiction researcher Marc-Antoine Crocq writes, “the etiological complexity of addiction” arises from a “history of pendulum swings of social and medical opinion”—a history in which “there is no resting equilibrium on unanimous beliefs” and “it has been common to observe, at the same time and in the same place, the confrontation of opposing attitudes.”<sup>34</sup> Glaser argues that this is largely because addiction is understudied. But while Glaser sees this as a problem that can be remedied through *more* science, I see this as a problem that the tools of

Western scientific study are incapable of comprehending on their own. If anything, the history of addiction research and treatment shows us the limits of the scientific method, not only because its highly taxonomic logic has failed to adequately describe or understand addiction as a holistic problem, but also because it refuses to engage seriously with the spiritual-based approaches and discourses that addicts have created for themselves.

It's a suspicious dismissal that has plagued literary and cultural studies of addiction, too. In *The Saloon and the Mission: Addiction, Conversion, and the Politics of Redemption in American Culture*, literary scholar Eoin Cannon observes that while the concept of addiction fuels a rather prodigious and immensely popular print culture, "very few [scholars] have considered it worthy of investigation" and "those who have taken it up have often had to struggle against seemingly intractable biases, both temperamental and disciplinary, against vernacular spiritual and psychological discourses."<sup>35</sup> Cannon argues that part of the problem with the reception of addiction narratives among scholars is tied to the historical development of addiction and recovery discourse by and through the Modern Recovery Movement (namely via AA).<sup>36</sup> But the problem isn't simply that addiction narratives were developed on the wrong side of the cultural divide. It also has a great deal to do with the historical development of critique as the privileged interpretive practice not only in the academy, but of secularism more generally. As Saba Mahmood writes in "Religious Reason and Secular Affect," because critique is "predicated upon a necessary distantiation between the subject and object and some form of reasoned deliberation" and "is often counterposed to religious reading practices," the hermeneutics of suspicion "caricatures the religious Other" largely by positioning religious reading practices as generally naïve, ignorant, or uninformed misreadings in which the subject is simply too mired in their object and lacking in reason to see clearly.<sup>37</sup> More importantly, Mahmood writes that such a

concept of critique also allows it to remain “blind to its own disciplines of subjectivity, affective attachments, and subject-object relationality.”<sup>38</sup>

In fact, four years after offering her own highly suspicious reading of addiction and recovery discourse, Sedgwick turned the hermeneutics of suspicion on themselves to consider the affective and subjective position that critique inculcates in the reader. She describes critique as a reading practice defined by “paranoia.” It assumes an anticipatory position that is reflexive and mimetic, a strong theory of negative affects that places faith in exposure and which has a “distinctively rigid relation to temporality” that makes it “averse above all to surprise.”<sup>39</sup> In many ways, this paranoia renders the reader unteachable. It is not about looking to discover what you don’t know, but rather it is about being able to expose what you think you know is there. “To a startling extent,” Sedgwick writes that critique also relies “on the prestige of a single, overarching narrative” of the “modern liberal subject,” the hidden violences and genealogies of which such a reading method claims to expose and problematize, but also reproduces.<sup>40</sup>

Part of this reproduction relies on what Mahmood describes as the critical distance between subject and object so central to suspicious reading practices. Though this critical distance is framed in opposition to religious reading practices generally, it is, in fact, inherited from what Mahmood describes as “Protestant semiotic ideology,” which is crucially based in “the distinction between object and subject, between substance and meaning, signifiers and signified, form and essence.”<sup>41</sup> Historically, this distance was developed in response to the Catholic veneration of icons, in which “the power of an icon lies in its capacity to allow an individual (or a community) to find him- or herself in a structure that has bearing on how one conducts oneself in this world.”<sup>42</sup> These competing semiotic ideologies resulted in conflicts between Catholics and Protestants over the worship of religious icons, where Protestant reformers were invested in instituting “the distinction between the transcendent world of abstract

concepts and ideas and the material reality of this world,” while Catholics were invested in maintaining the intimacy of their relation.<sup>43</sup> In the context of the United States, the Protestant distinction between the transcendent and the material came to define not only the privatization of religion and religious practices, but also the developing nation’s structure of governance (with its separation of church and state), as well as the historical process of secularization more generally.<sup>44</sup> It also played a crucial role in the racialization and subjugation not only of Catholics, but of any worldview that countered its own, particularly the cosmovisions of Native Americans and African slaves, who were not only caricatured as primitive Others through Protestant scriptural interpretation *and* scientific discourse, but whose religions and religious practices were effectively outlawed.<sup>45</sup> Even to this day, when American secularism is understood as “the separation of church and state” that allows for “freedom of religion,” the limits of what religious practice is acceptable is very much based on how it is commensurate with Protestant notions of “good religion,” and any practice outside these bounds is caricatured as that of the “religious Other.” Monogamist Mormons are viable presidential candidates, but polygamist Mormons are felons; secular Muslims are reasonable, but devout Muslims are fanatics; Native American spirituality is in vogue, but, until recently, the ceremonial use of peyote was illegal. As Mahmood writes, secularism is not simply “the doctrinal separation of the church and the state but the rearticulation of religion in a manner commensurate with modern sensibilities and modes of governance.”<sup>46</sup>

To that end, the Protestant semiotic ideology that undergirds critique not only produces the ideally distanced reading subject, but also the ideally self-governing political subject. The privatization of the self that sits at the heart of the project of the Protestant Reformation (which sought to free one’s relationship with God from the authority of the Church) also becomes key to modes of secular liberal governance and the liberal concept of freedom, particularly within the

United States. Liberalism presents itself as the liberatory answer to, above all, the authority of the Church (for whom the monarch is a mere proxy), particularly in the way that liberalism emphasizes self-governance as the site of freedom. Liberalism assumes that humans not only have an innate (whether God given or biologically determined) desire for self-governance, but also that we have a normative capacity to do so, thanks to the highest of human faculties: reason. Evidence of one's ability to adequately self-govern has largely been interpreted through the performance of social norms upon which one's right to self-governance is granted or denied.

Though critiques of humanism have sought to challenge this concept of the human by exposing how the performance of social norms do not evince agency, but subjugation and social exclusion, they generally do not problematize liberal accounts of agency and freedom themselves. Instead, even the most suspicious readings of liberal governance often reproduce liberal assumptions about human nature, particularly in their overt privileging of resistance and the transgression of norms as sites of these ideals. Such a positioning proves particularly problematic for readings of addiction that seek “emancipatory possibilities in compulsive drug use,” particularly feminist readings of addiction that describe “addiction and/or ‘excessive’ drinking/drug use as another form of women's lived, embodied protest against patriarchal structures of containment.”<sup>47</sup> Not only do such readings misread addiction as an unproblematic process of choosing pleasure (Karen Kopelson, for example, equates it with simply “being-on-drugs”), but they also tend to insist “on female suffering as the prerequisite for feminist agency” and ultimately reinscribe the masculinist binary of volition/compulsion through “the liberal trope of ‘choice.’”<sup>48</sup>

This isn't to say that critique always produces this inversion. There are also scholars who have offered alternatives to the conventional liberal logic of agency, from Lauren Berlant's concept of “lateral agency” in *Cruel Optimism* and Jasbir Puar's theory of “queer agency” in

*Terrorist Assemblages* to Jane Elliot’s discussion of “suffering agency” and Saidiya Hartman’s consideration of how agency is variously constrained in *Scenes of Subjection*. Not only do I take up these four theories and consider how addiction animates them, but I also show how religious understandings of agency complicate and elaborate on these various theories, too. Ultimately, I argue that part of the reason why narratives of addiction and recovery so often take up religious discourses and concepts of the self is because they often offer a more complex notion of choice—one that moves us away from self-governance as an ideal and collapses the binary between voluntariness and compulsion or subjugation and autonomy on which liberal notions of agency rely. Not only does this liberal notion of agency place the addict in a perpetual double bind of being either an immoral (or subversive) actor or a helpless sufferer of choicelessness-as-a-disease, but it also misreads the ways in which addicts paradoxically experience and narrate their addiction as both a choice *and* a compulsion. Religious concepts of the self often allow for this ambivalence because of the way the self is understood as more “porous” than the “buffered” modern liberal subject of secularism. Here, I borrow and adapt Charles Taylor’s terms of the “buffered and porous selves.” Taylor describes the porous self as one whose “most powerful and important emotions” are often dependent on the ways in which the self is moved by outside forces—both natural and supernatural.<sup>49</sup> Unlike the “buffered self,” whose emotions, desires, and choices are located strictly in the mind and “inner depths” of the self, the porous self’s agency is diffuse and informed by the emotions and desires that circulate outside, between, and through bodies that are held together in a network that is often understood as supernatural in nature. But where Taylor describes the “porous self” as a “premodern” phenomenon that was displaced by the “buffered self” of modernity, I understand them as discursive concepts that exist in a less linear or oppositional fashion. While secularism certainly privileges the “buffered” notion of self,

I argue that the concept of the “porous self” never disappeared but, in fact, remains a facet within a variety of religions and religious practices.

To that end, my argument is not that narratives of addiction merely replace the concept of the modern self with that of a premodern self or that they wholly discard disease models of addiction. To do so would be to ignore all the ways in which the addicts within these texts are situated in modern, capitalist societies and are only able to (re)think their addictions as a result of the self-reflexivity granted by the rich interiority that the modern novel and other contemporary media provide. Furthermore, I argue that these different selves do not exist at opposite ends of some great historical divide, but that they are the products of different discourses, which exist at one and the same time. My argument is that these narratives fuse secular notions of the individual with the porous self of religious discourses in a way that expresses how addiction is only a disease in so far as it is a failure to perform the normative demands of self-mastery and that, when considered in terms of a more porous understanding of the self, addiction is understood as a reasonable, if unfortunate, outcome of being vulnerable to outside forces, especially in a world that pathologizes vulnerability and dependence, while privileging self-reliance and individualism. Along those same lines, in many of these texts, recovery is not about recovering the ideally buffered self of secularism, but about constructing a post-secular understanding of the self. By “post-secular,” I do not mean to suggest that there was ever a finitely secular era and that we are now living in a time where secularity has been discarded in favor of religious thought and discourses. Rather, I mean “post-secular” in the Habermasian sense of the term, where public discourse “does not immediately prioritize the secular over the religious, or vice versa” and which suggests “a new kind of epistemic and practical attitude whose expected outcome is a reciprocal, self-reflective learning process between the actors

involved which assumes the transformative consequences that pluralism and secularization are historically having on their identity.”<sup>50</sup>

This argument emerges from how I use reparative reading practices not in place of critique, but to further animate critique. While critique remains a useful and productive mode of reading in this project, it is not sufficient for understanding why addicts take up spiritual approaches to addiction, nor to what end the employment of these discourses is working as an act of recovery. My approach, which I define as a post-secular reading practice, is not only informed by my training as a literary and culture studies scholar, but also by the reading and listening practices I was taught in AA, as well as the religious interpretative practices employed in each of the texts I take up. Just as critique emerges from Protestant semiotic ideology, my reparative approaches emerge from the interpretative logics of the religions employed in each of these texts, from the Pueblo cosmovision of Silko’s novel to Karr’s induction into Catholic reading practices. While my reparative approach shifts in each chapter depending on the logics of the religion(s) employed in each text, it can be generally understood according to Robert Detweiler’s description of “religious reading,” which attends not only to how the rise of the novel has been charged with participating in the historical privatization and individuation of society, but also to how literary fiction participates in the construction of imagined communities. As Detweiler writes, “a religious reading, therefore, might be one that finds a group of persons engaged in gestures of friendship with each other across the erotic space of the text that draws them out of their privacy and its stress on meaning and power.”<sup>51</sup> Rather than engaging solely in the “logic of opposition” of interpretation, my post-secular approach engages “an attitude of communality” that also aids “the reading community in the construction of myths and rituals against chaos.”<sup>52</sup> Just as the various religions within these texts, this reparative practices “takes over where the ‘rational,’ objectivizing mind can find no resolution to the possibility of chaos as the

fundamental reality, and provides a myth (a narrative of sacred acts) and rituals (the symbolic acting-out of these acts) to create (not represent) a more tolerable view of existence.”<sup>53</sup> In the same way secular understandings of addiction are employed through religious concepts of the self in the texts I examine, my method employs these religious modes of reading alongside critique, so that “the myth and ritual impulse probes the nature of hermeneutics and checks the drive to interpret, not head-on but obliquely, via the elaboration of narrative, festival and belief.”<sup>54</sup>

Ultimately, the goal of this methodology is to participate in the decolonization of literary studies by repositioning critique as one among many reading alternatives—alternatives that have largely been excluded from the field because of how they don’t align with critique’s semiotic ideology. In “After Suspicion,” Rita Felski describes how, above all else, survey courses in literary theory induct graduate students in these exact “techniques of suspicious interpretation,” with which “suspicion slices into a text like a scalpel to expose its complicity with the logic of imperialism or heteronormativity; in other essays, it is ratcheted up to a higher-order skepticism that calls the feasibility of truth into question and that hammers home the contingency and ungroundedness of our beliefs.”<sup>55</sup> Felski argues that this form of critical reading has “colonized” the reading classroom by “synchronizing the practice of scholarship with the exercise of skepticism.”<sup>56</sup> Though Felski’s use of “colonization” here is problematic, since her concern with critique’s dominance in literary studies is less about the subjugation and dispossession of minoritized peoples and more about the decentering of formalism within the field, I nonetheless find the argument that critique has “colonized” literary studies convincing, especially in light of Mahmood’s account of how critique historically emerges out of Protestant reading practices and “caricatures the religious Other.”

To that decolonial end, my project purposefully begins with an indigenous framework. The first chapter centers on a reading of Leslie Marmon Silko's 1977 novel, *Ceremony*, which tells the story of Tayo, a World War II veteran suffering from alcoholism and PTSD. Key to both the content and form of the novel is the fact that Tayo is half-white and half-Laguna Pueblo. His dual identity not only finds him marginalized by the American mainstream and his Pueblo community, but it also informs the fact that neither Western medical approaches, nor "the old ceremonies" of Pueblo or Navajo medical approaches can cure him. Instead, Tayo must create "new ceremonies" that put indigenous knowledges and Western knowledge in conversation in a way that Walter D. Mignolo describes as "decolonial or border thinking," where Western hegemonic logic and subjugated knowledges engage in what he calls, "a double translation or double infection that makes possible a double epistemic movement."<sup>57</sup> Not only does Tayo enact this border thinking in the creation of his new ceremonies, but the book's form, which combines Pueblo oral traditions with the form of the modern novel and Western poetics, does too. In short, Tayo's recovery from alcoholism is produced by routing modern models of addiction through a Pueblo cosmology that includes a more holistic notion of disease and an ontology of the self that directly challenges the trope of the "drunken Indian" in both popular representations and medical literature. In this way, Silko enacts a syncretic practice that allows for the creation of stories that function as decolonial medicine.

In Chapter 2, I examine Mary Karr's 2009 memoir, *Lit*, which tells the story of her alcoholism and recovery, as well as her conversion to Catholicism. I explore how *Lit* takes up the confessional form of the AA narrative and, by resituating it in the space of a literary memoir and through Karr's final act of conversion, reminds us of memoir's history via Augustine, not simply as a secular site of self-making, but also as a sacred site in which one is made through divine grace, inducing a salutary dependence rather than totalizing self-sufficiency or radical

individualism. I also use Felski, Sedgwick and Mahmood's critiques of suspicious reading practices to describe how Karr represents her alcoholism as deeply enmeshed with the "paranoid" worldview she constructs via the hermeneutics of suspicion. I then turn to how Karr develops a reparative worldview through the practices of prayer and fellowship she learns in AA, as well as the scriptural interpretive practices and Catholic rituals she's taught during her preparation for conversion. As Karr delves into Catholic hermeneutics, she not only reveals the Protestant contours of critique and the modern liberal subject—thus troubling the progress narrative of secularism—but she also recovers a Catholic notion of original sin. When understood through this model of sin, addiction is understood not as an aberration, but as a normative outcome of humankind's generally sinful nature, where sin does not describe a person or a behavior, but one's relation to God and thus their community. I argue that in her portrayal of herself as a "sinner," Karr does not reproduce the more recent, Protestant, and secular notions of sin used to criminalize addicts, but reimagines addiction as a form of alienation that can only be resolved through communal and spiritual acts of self-care.

In Chapter 3, I then turn to Lars von Trier's 2014 film, *Nymphomaniac*, in which a woman named Joe takes up the confessional form in order to narrate her story of nymphomania, a term which she prefers to "sex addict." First, I explore the history of nymphomania—how it finds its conceptual and etymological origins in ancient Greek understandings of female sexual desire, how those understandings are inverted through Victorian medical understandings of female sexuality, and how the medical diagnosis of "nymphomania" emerges at the border of moralism and medicine. I argue that part of Joe's insistence that she is a nymphomaniac and not a sex addict has to do with how the term "addict" implies totalized compulsion, and thus a total loss of agency, while nymphomania, with its paradoxical insistence on power and powerlessness, troubles the very notion of choice itself. I discuss how secular definitions of addiction as either a

crime or a disease are dependent on whether addiction is understood as a choice or lack thereof, and how Joe's confession of nymphomania not only troubles the nature of choice, particularly in the context of addiction, but also feminist readings that rely on a liberal logic of choice. The binary between choice and compulsion is further troubled by how Joe both narrates and is narrated by her story, and largely by how her interlocutor, a bookish and celibate hermit named Seligman, intercedes in her narration, suggesting allegories, revisions, and rearticulations of her tale.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I return to Mignolo's concept of decolonial thinking through my exploration of how the television show *True Blood* mobilizes the syncretism of Latin-African religions such as Santeria, Brujeria, and Voodoo. The HBO television series takes place just two years after "The Great Revelation," when vampires "came out of the coffin" and began to integrate into human society and demand equal rights in ways meant to echo the Civil Rights movement and the fight for marriage equality. Part of the impetus for "The Great Revelation" is the invention of Tru Blood, a synthetic blood substitute drink—a sort of methadone for vampires—that has allowed vampires to integrate into human society because it promises that vampires no longer need to feed off humans. While the storyline of the Vampire Rights Movement exposes how addicts have been simultaneously pathologized and criminalized through the racialized drug scares used to justify the War on Drugs, the characters of Lafayette Reynolds, a queer black Santero, and Jesus Velazquez, his Brujo boyfriend, counter the violences of this history through their queer employment of syncretic practices that have historically functioned "as the creative and innovative means of fending off oppressive and dehumanizing values."<sup>58</sup> Through these queer of color practices and the porous notion of self they enact, Lafayette and Jesus reframe addiction as the reasonable outcome of being vulnerable

to outside forces, depathologize dependence, and model a more capacious, antiracist, and holistic notion of well-being.

---

1. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 53.

2. Grollmus, “Anthology.”

3. Smith and Watson, 147.

4. Ibid.

5. Redfield and Brodie, 2.

6. Sedgwick, “Epidemics of the Will,” 131.

7. Ibid., 130-131.

8. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 64.

9. I hone in on Glaser’s critique for the purpose of showing exactly how the logic of most of these critiques unfold. For more, see Wendy Kaminer’s *I’m Dysfunctional, You’re Dysfunctional*, Leslie Irvine’s *Codependent Forevermore*, Maia Szalavitz’s “After 75 years of Alcoholics Anonymous, It’s Time to Admit We Have. Problem” in *Pacific Standard*, and Rebecca Ruiz’s “The 12 Step Dogma” in *Aeon*, among many others.

10. See Dodes, *The Sober Truth: Debunking the Bad Science Behind 12-Step Programs and the Rehab Industry*.

11. See Kelly and Beresin, “In Defense of the 12 Steps,” in *Common Health*, where they dissect the study and its problems and counter its findings with those of the NIH, SAMHSA, the APA, and the VACHS.

12. *AA*, 6.

13. The problem with this definition is something that Glaser’s own research shows—abstinence isn’t the only or best way to recover. There are many reasons why people stop attending AA meetings or start drinking again, and it isn’t always because they’re living in the

---

throes of addiction. Furthermore, many alternative treatments are not based on an abstinence model.

14. CDC/NCHS, “National Vital Statistics System: Mortality,” 2017.

15. Breslaw, “A Chat with Gabrielle Glaser,” *Jezebel.com*.

16. Glaser, “The Irrationality of AA,” *The Atlantic*.

17. In the case of most atheist members, people simply refer to the fellowship of addicts as a power greater than themselves. In fact, when I first entered AA and struggled with the “God” concept, I was advised by members simply to think of the group as my “higher power.” “Me and you are a power greater than yourself,” said my sponsor.

18. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, itself, begins with “A Doctor’s Opinion,” written by Dr. William D. Silkworth about his experiences treating alcoholics, and Carl Jung’s psychological theories of neurosis were used as a basis for the spiritual approach of the program. But also, members variously employ current medical opinions about addiction and many seek and encourage medical treatment—from detox and specific addiction-related medications to anti-depressants and alternative medicine—alongside psychological counseling. The problem is that medical treatment and psychological counseling are rarely ever treatment enough, largely because they don’t attend to the larger social and spiritual aspects of addiction, which is why both medical doctors and psychologists often encourage addicts to attend AA.

19. Glaser, “Irrationality of AA.”

20. *Ibid.*

21. Mahmood, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect,” 836.

22. De Quincey, *Confessions*, 6.

23. *Ibid.*, 44.

---

24. See U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, “Facing Addiction in America: The Surgeon General’s Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health.” See also Kenen’s “Surgeon general ramps up addiction battle.”

25. “Facing Addiction in America.”

26. Lewis, *Biology of Desire*, 26.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 24.

29. De Quincey, 47.

30. Milligan, 543.

31. For more on the evolution of attitudes toward De Quincey in relation to the shifts in the field of medicine and public health, see Milligan.

32. De Quincey, xxxi.

33. CASA, “*Shoveling Up II*.”

34. Crocq, 360.

35. Cannon, 5.

36. Cannon writes: “Because it remains a vehicle of realism in popular memoirs and biographies, as well as in support groups and treatment centers, recovery is known less as a narrative genre than as a profound experience that many Americans share, one of coping with a dangerous affliction. Methods of describing this experience do not occupy a prominent place in cultural history, but instead are traced to a middlebrow self-help trend that arose in the 1930s in tandem with a newly institutionalized, and depoliticized, science of addiction. Recovery’s emotional affect, political neutrality, and embrace of total abstinence left it on the wrong end of a newly hierarchical and hard-edged cultural order and disconnected from the great public debates of the post-Repeal era” (5).

---

37. Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect," 861.

38. Ibid.

39. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 146.

40. Ibid., 139.

41. Mahmood, 843.

42. Ibid., 845.

43. Ibid., 844.

44. I acknowledge that Protestantism, as a body of many religious sects, is wildly diverse. My argument is not that all Protestant faiths maintain this subject-object relationality or argue for this sort of privatization, only that this reading disposition and the privatization of religion and religious practice vigorously emerges during the Protestant Reformation. Indeed, as I show in Chapter 2, there are Protestant perspectives that challenge this move, too.

45. See Thomas Jefferson's "Notes on the State of Virginia (1785)" for an example of how Protestant positions on the inferiority of black people were routed through scientific discourse.

46. Mahmood, 837.

47. Kopelson, "Radical Indulgence."

48. Friedling, *Recovering Women*, 16.

49. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.

50. Monti, "Postsecular awareness," 86.

51. Detweiler, *Breaking the Fall*, 34-35.

52. Ibid., 36.

53. Ibid., 37.

54. Ibid., 36.

---

55. Felski, "After Suspicion," 28.

56. Felski, 29-30.

57. Mignolo, *Darker Side*, 219.

58. Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Sacred Possessions*, 4.

## Chapter 2. SPIDER-WOMAN

From tobacco and rum to coffee and cocaine, substances that have become marked as particularly “addictive,” have also served as the driving economic forces behind the European colonization of the Americas and beyond. But no substance has played a greater role in the formation of Anglo-American culture than that of alcohol.<sup>1</sup> Not only does our national anthem originate from a British drinking song, but when the Puritans set sail for America on the *Arbella*, they did so with ten thousand gallons of wine and “three times as much beer as water” on board.<sup>2</sup> Because of the scarcity of clean drinking water, alcohol—whether rum from the West Indies, beer brewed from maize, or wine imported from Europe—became a staple of colonial life, in which “early settlers drew a strong distinction between drinking and drunkenness, the latter being the work of the Devil.”<sup>3</sup> America’s forefathers not only declared their love of drink, but also described temperance as a both a cornerstone of liberal self-governance and, thus, the health of the nation. Thomas Jefferson wanted to keep tariffs on the importation of wine low, not only because he believed that “wine is necessary for life” (and drank three to four glasses a day), but also because, as he wrote in a letter to a friend, “no nation is drunken where wine is cheap; and none sober, where the dearness of wine substitutes ardent spirits as the common beverage.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, while Benjamin Franklin declared that wine was “a constant proof that God loves us, and loves to see us happy,” it was every man’s role to engage in “temperance,” which he described as the greatest of all virtues, because “it tends to procure that coolness and clearness of head, which is so necessary where constant vigilance [of one’s self] was to be kept up.”<sup>5</sup> Alcohol served as both a mode of social cohesion as well as a topic of extreme divisiveness. While taverns served as a principal site of socialization, various Church leaders and politicians decried the rampant intemperance they observed in early American life and worried about its effects on

the health and longevity of a nation in which the political framework and promise of freedom was based directly upon its citizens performance of ideal self-governance. Along with the rise of the temperance movement, physicians also began postulating theories of “habitual drunkenness” that recapitulated Puritanical distinctions between drink and drunkenness into the language of organic disease, including Benjamin Rush’s landmark work, *An Inquiry into the Effects of Ardent Spirits upon the Human Body and Mind* (1784). Part scientific study and part political treatise, Rush was the first to articulate the disease concept of intemperance—one that informs medical models of addiction to this day.<sup>6</sup>

But nowhere did America’s obsession with drunkenness have a larger and more devastating effect than on Native Americans. The popular belief that Native Americans have a natural inclination for alcoholism has a great deal to do with how Native Americans have been (mis)represented both in popular culture and in scientific literature. In “What’s Behind the Myth of Native American Alcoholism?” Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Dina Gilio-Whitaker assert that “few images of Native peoples have been as intractable and damaging as the trope of the drunken Indian.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the image of excessively drinking Native peoples goes back to at least the 1700s, when Catholic missionaries to North America—particularly Jesuits, who were “trained observers known for their rational mind”—regularly described scenes of excessive drinking in their ethnographies of Native peoples.<sup>8</sup> These descriptions were offered as evidence of Native savagery—a sort of natural inability to practice self-control that would not only become a trope within popular culture, but also codified in scientific theories about alcoholism, including the theory that Native Americans simply can’t metabolize alcohol or are genetically predisposed to alcoholism. As Dunbar-Ortiz and Gilio-Whitaker argue, “the myth about American Indian predisposition to alcoholism is as false as saying that white people are naturally predisposed to alcoholism.”<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, in arguing that Native Americans are more prone to alcoholism, stories

and medical theories of Native alcoholism (along with other discourses of Native illness) serve to reinforce the belief, as Siobhan Senier and Clare Barker argue, that “indigenous people are unable to manage their own resources—their water, their trees, their minerals, their labor” and therefore “in the language of settler colonialism, indigenous people need medical ‘intervention’ and ‘management.’”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the settler colonialist discourse around Native alcoholism—and, more recently, meth addiction—becomes a justification for Native dispossession and containment.

But it isn’t only in racist ethnographies and debunked medical theories that one encounters representations of Native people and communities devastated by the effects of alcoholism and, more recently, addiction (particularly meth).<sup>11</sup> From the nineteenth century Pequot minister William Apess to modern and contemporary writers like N. Scott Momaday, Sherman Alexie and Louise Erdrich, alcoholism and addiction have figured as a prominent theme in Native American Literature, where authors explore how, in constructing “indigenous people as ill and disabled discursively,” settler colonialism “has also produced indigenous illness and disability materially.”<sup>12</sup> Still, despite the ubiquity of alcoholism in these works, no explicit survey of representations of alcoholism in Native American Literature exists.<sup>13</sup> As Siobhan Senier and Clare Barker argue in their introduction to the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* special issue on Disability and Indigeneity, “insofar as alcoholism is widely represented in both indigenous literature and indigenous communities, it is so politically charged that few cultural studies scholars seem eager to take it on as a subject of inquiry.”<sup>14</sup> Senier and Barker contend that such a political charge has a great deal to do with how “settler colonialism is implicated in the production of indigenous disability, discursively and materially,” particularly alcoholism, which they describe as “a public health problem historically ushered in by settlers

interested in manipulating indigenous inhabitants, and one that is maintained, at least in part, through incessant representations of drunken Indians in popular culture.”<sup>15</sup>

When the theme of alcoholism is taken up by scholars of Native American Literature, it is sometimes read as a reinforcement of the drunken Indian stereotype and evidence of colonialist influence.<sup>16</sup> Other times, these “purportedly stereotypical drunken Indians” are read as transgressive expressions of “the recursive, historical patterns of defeat and exploitation of Indian peoples by white civilization.”<sup>17</sup> Most often, however, alcoholism in these texts is addressed (if it is addressed directly at all) within the framework of colonialism more generally and is articulated as a symptom of the traumatic dispossession and displacement of Native peoples. Sometimes, the representation of alcoholism in these texts is read as a sort of traumatic repetition, too. In *Native American Literatures*, Suzanne Everts Lundquist writes that, within texts such as Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*, “alcoholism creates a sense of dis-place-ment; it is a dis-ease that separates individuals from family, community, and a sense of place in the world.”<sup>18</sup> Senier and Barker also emphasize the crucial role that place plays in Native concepts of health, arguing that “because land is considered “an organic extension of the human body in many indigenous epistemologies,” it is often “impossible to speak of indigenous health and wellbeing without also speaking of indigenous land, and vice versa.”<sup>19</sup>

These readings largely emerge from indigenous notions of health and illness, which are relatively more holistic, capacious, and ecological than those of Western medical understandings. In frameworks of indigenous health, alcoholism is read as a collective dis-ease, “tied to the loss of traditional land bases, and/or the destruction of those land bases by colonial settlement patterns, and by capitalist enterprises that poison as well as extract natural resources.”<sup>20</sup> As Senier and Barker explain, “for many indigenous people, distinctions between illness and disability are also problematic” because “indigenous ‘health’ may be so tied up with damage

to—and pathologization—of *culture* that the disabling effects of colonialism are discussed primarily in collective” terms. Similarly, indigenous explanations of certain health problems “can be difficult to comprehend for non-indigenous observers and scholars, and impossible to cure through allopathic medicine.”<sup>21</sup> Because indigenous articulations of disease are often “culturally specific and spiritually nuanced conditions,” they are often “dismissed as superstitious by ‘Western’ psychiatry” and traditional indigenous healing methods have been discouraged or outright outlawed on the grounds that they are “unclean” and/or “barbaric.”<sup>22</sup> For these reasons, within an indigenous framework, illness is also understood as an outcome not only of the “the suppression of indigenous subsistence methods,” but also “the suppression of cultural practices like traditional medicine, ceremony, and even language,” which has “been shown to have devastating effects on indigenous health and indigenous bodies.”<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, it is this destruction and subjugation of Native knowledges and healing practices that Leslie Marmon Silko attempts to repair in her 1977 novel, *Ceremony*. A great deal has been written and said about Silko’s novel. As Allan Chavkin writes in his introduction to *Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony: A Casebook*, “of the numerous works of the Native American Renaissance published between 1968 and the present, it is Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* that has received the greatest critical acclaim.”<sup>24</sup> Not only is *Ceremony* hailed as a masterpiece of the Native American Renaissance, but it has also generally become a popular model of postmodern hybridity, largely because of the way Silko expertly blends Native American and European narrative forms in a way that challenges the privileging of the latter, while recovering and making visible the former in order to reveal how different knowledges are produced, as well as how they have been historically subjugated and privileged. Interestingly, most negative criticism of the novel honed in on “[Silko’s] portrayal of alcoholic Indians,” which some Native American critics believed reinforced “negative stereotypes.”<sup>25</sup> She responded to her critics by stating that a

central aim of the text was “to subvert the stereotype of the drunken Indian by showing the causes of alcoholism and by making readers sympathize with the alcoholic Indian’s plight” as well as posing the question of “why did some veterans become misfits, while others could return to the community to lead stable and productive lives?”<sup>26</sup>

Key to Silko’s subversion of the “drunken Indian” stereotype is how she routes the modern medical concept of alcoholism through Pueblo understandings of the self, disease, and healing. Through her employment of a Pueblo ontology of self that collapses the distinction between mind and body and attends to the spirit, Silko resists the definition of addiction as a finitely organic disease particular to certain bodies, and instead understands it as a physically, psychically, and spiritually felt disorder created and maintained by the logic of settler colonialism—a logic that fails to understand how alcoholism works and, therefore, how to treat it. What *Ceremony* does is reframe recovery from alcoholism and of one’s health as contingent upon the recovery and adaptation of a Pueblo cosmovision.

## 2.1 DISEASE, WITCHERY, AND COLONIALISM

*Ceremony* tells the story of Tayo, a half-white, half-Pueblo soldier who has just returned to his Aunt Susie’s home on the Laguna Pueblo Reservation in New Mexico after fighting in the Pacific Theater during World War II. We first meet Tayo while he’s lying in bed, struggling to sleep as he suffers flashbacks from the war. He’s been diagnosed by army doctors with “battle fatigue,” or what would now be referred to as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>27</sup> But the medicine they gave him during his stint in the Veteran’s Hospital simply “drained memory out of his thin arms and replaced it with a twilight cloud behind his eyes” (14). Instead of making him better, it made him “invisible,” a term that not only marks Tayo’s drug-induced affective state, but also refers to how the hegemonic logic of Western medicine renders native subjectivities, knowledges, and medicines invisible (13). Still ill upon his return to the reservation, old

Grandma sends for the medicine man, Old Ku'oosh, despite the fact that Aunt Susie warns her that "the Army doctor said: 'No Indian medicine.' Old Ku'oosh will bring his bag of weeds and dust. The doctor won't like it," again referring to the deep antagonism held by Western medical approaches to Native science (31). But when Old Ku'oosh arrives, his efforts to cure Tayo are also futile, largely because traditional Pueblo medicine can't cure the ills created by the "white people's big war," especially those ceremonies traditionally used to treat warriors returning from "the old way of warfare," where "you couldn't kill another human being in battle without knowing it, without seeing the result" (32-33). "There are some things we can't cure like we used to, not since the white people came," Old Ku'oosh tells Tayo. "The others who had the Scalp Ceremony, some of them are not better either" (35).<sup>28</sup>

Failed by both Western and traditional Pueblo medicine, Tayo and his friends, most of whom are also veterans suffering from PTSD, self-medicate with alcohol. At first, drinking acts as a reprieve for them. "Liquor was medicine for the anger that made them hurt, for the pain of the loss, medicine for tight bellies and choked-up throats," Silko writes (36). As Tayo "swallowed the beer in big mouthfuls like medicine," he'd feel "a comfortable place inside himself, close to his own beating heart, near his own warm belly; he crawled inside and watched the storm swirling on the outside and he was safe there; the winds of rage could not touch him" (36-37). Beyond the physical and mental relief, drinking also supplies Tayo and his friends with a sense of community, purpose, pride, and national identity. The process of cashing their disability checks, gathering at the bar, and then buying each other rounds of drinks meant to fuel the telling and retelling of war stories, becomes a "ritual," a sort of secularized adaptation of Pueblo oral traditions and ceremonies through which they try "to bring back that old feeling, that feeling they belonged to America the way they felt during the war" (39). But for Tayo, these booze-fueled, secularized powwows ring hollow. Nationalism proves a poor substitute for the

divine. Despite their attempts to instill a sense of self-worth through glorified war stories and whiskey courage, Tayo recognizes its futility, largely because “they never saw that it was the white people who gave them that feeling and it was white people who took it away again when the war was over” (36). Silko writes:

Tayo knew what they had been trying to do. They repeated the stories about good times in Oakland and San Diego; they repeated them like long medicine chants, the beer bottles pounding on the counter tops like drums. Another round, and Harley tells his story about two blondes in bed with him. They forget Tayo’s story. They give him another beer. Two bottles in front of him now. They go on with it, with their good old times. Tayo starts crying (36).

Soon after Tayo’s crying jag at the bar, his drinking, along with the mental anguish and physical discomfort it was meant to soothe, worsens. No amount of beer seems to “keep him loose inside and make his stomach feel better” (56). When he rejoins his friends at the bar, neither the beer, about which “something was different...this time,” nor the stories the men tell instill Tayo with pride; rather they fill him with anger and a sense of alienation (57). In particular, each word uttered by his friend Emo only “pulled the knot in [Tayo’s] belly tighter” (57). As Emo shows off “the teeth he had knocked out of the corpse of a Japanese soldier” and brags about killing high ranking officers, Tayo finally snaps, screaming that Emo’s a “killer,” to which Emo replies, “you drink like an Indian, and you’re crazy like one too—but you aren’t shit, white trash. You love Japs the way your mother loved to screw white men” (58). Sure that “he would get well if he killed [Emo],” Tayo stabs Emo in the stomach, before the rest of the men pull him away and Tayo is dragged off by the police (58).

Not long after the incident with Emo, Tayo’s uncle Robert mentions that Ku’oosh had stopped by and suggested that Tayo see Betonie, a Navajo medicine man who lives in the nearby town of Gallup—a place where white people go to get drunk, “but if you were an Indian, you attended to business and then left, and you were never in that town after dark” (99). Despite insisting that the old medicine doesn’t work, that “the other guys, they’re still messed up too”

and that “the ceremony didn’t help them either,” Tayo agrees to go because “the old feeling was back,” and “he would let them take him—whatever they wanted, because they were right. They’d always been right about him” (99). But when Tayo meets Betonie, he’s struck by how “this Betonie didn’t talk the way Tayo expected a medicine man to talk. He didn’t act like a medicine man at all” (108). Tayo finds something oddly familiar about him, when Betonie reveals that his “grandmother was a remarkable Mexican with green eyes,” acknowledging his and Tayo’s shared experience as “half breeds” (109). Among Betonie’s things, Tayo finds a surprising confluence of white and Navajo cultures. Under “the medicine bags and bundles of rawhide on the walls, he saw layers of old calendars, the sequences of years confused and lost” (111). Tayo observes the way Betonie’s own dual identity is present in the way that Euro-American objects are arranged according to a Navajo sense of place. In *God is Red*, Vine Deloria Jr. writes that “the very essence of Western European identity involves the assumption that time proceeds in a linear fashion,” while American Indian identity is deeply tied to a “spatial point of view” of the world—a difference in philosophical concerns that Deloria highlights as central to the historical problem of translation between the two perspectives.<sup>29</sup> Betonie waves his hand around the confusion of seemingly opposing worldviews and says, “in the old days it was simple. A medicine person could get by without all these things. But nowadays...” (Silko 111). Betonie’s voice purposefully trails off “to let Tayo complete the thought for him,” acknowledging that Tayo’s own lived experience as a half-Pueblo, half-white man would allow him to understand the necessity and logic of Betonie’s syncretic cosmivision (111).

It is ultimately through his relationship with Betonie that Tayo comes to accept that, in order for him to recover, “it is necessary to create new ceremonies,” ones that strategically employ and translate American Indian knowledges (particularly Keresan Pueblo and Navajo knowledges) in and for a world that has been dramatically and irrevocably changed by white

supremacist settler-colonialism (116). This call responds directly to why Tayo has been failed by Western medical approaches and traditional Pueblo medicine alike, while also calling attention to the ways in which these seemingly disparate and historically antagonistic approaches are not so opposite. All of these approaches, unlike the syncretic ceremonies Tayo and Betonie create over the rest of the novel, are life-attenuating, rather than life-affirming, largely because of how they all emerge from the history and hegemonic logic of colonialism. After describing his stint in the hospital, and how “it was white. Everything in that place was white. Except for me. I was invisible. But I wasn’t afraid there,” Tayo tells Betonie, “maybe I belong back in that place” (113). Betonie responds:

That’s true...you could go back to that white place...But if you are going to do that, you might as well go down there, with the rest of them, sleeping in the mud, vomiting cheap wine, rolling over women. Die that way and get it over with...In that hospital they don’t bury the dead, they keep them in rooms and talk to them (113).

Betonie then identifies a similar problem with an orthodox approach to indigenous ceremony. He tells Tayo that the insistence among some people that the ceremonies should be performed “exactly as they have always been done,” denies how “the ceremonies have always been changing”—a changing that Betonie says began “when the people were given these ceremonies...if only in the aging of the yellow gourd rattle or the shrinking of the skin around the eagle’s claw, if only in the different voices from generation to generation, singing the chants” (116). Furthermore, Betonie tells Tayo that while “the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then,” once “the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong” (116). Betonie attributes resistance to change as an effect of colonialism itself, which he describes as a form of “witchery” that robs all living things of their life force. He tells Tayo:

Things which don't shift and grow are dead things. They are things the witchery people want. Witchery works to scare people, to make them fear growth. But it has always been necessary, and more than ever now, it is. Otherwise we won't make it. We won't survive. That's what the witchery is counting on: that we will cling to the ceremonies the way they were, and then their power will triumph, and the people will be no more (116).

It isn't only that colonialism, through mass genocide, as well as the state-sanctioned repression of indigenous cultures, has robbed the ceremonies of their life force. Betonie's argument that the refusal of Native peoples to understand their own ceremonies as living, growing, adaptable beings is the effect of an internalized colonialism, which positions indigenous practices and knowledges as premodern, and therefore backward, obsolete, and extinct. As Deloria writes, "for generations it has been traditional that all historical literature on Indians be a recital of tribal histories from the pre-Discovery culture through the first encounter with the whites to about the year 1890. At that point the tribe seems to fade gently into history, with its famous war chief riding down the canyon into the sunset."<sup>30</sup>

Betonie's analysis of why both Western medicine and orthodox Pueblo approaches fail Tayo, effectively enacts what Walter Dignolo refers to as "decolonial or border thinking" and the "decoloniality of knowledge."<sup>31</sup> In *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (2011), Dignolo defines decolonial thinking as "a relentless analytic effort to understand, in order to overcome, the logic of coloniality underneath the rhetoric of modernity."<sup>32</sup> Central to the enactment of decolonial/border thinking is the "contamination" of Western, hegemonic logic with subjugated knowledges, like those of the Pueblo and Navajo people. Dignolo refers to this hybridization of discourses as a "double translation (and double infection) that makes possible a double epistemic movement, framed by the colonial difference."<sup>33</sup> That is, forms of knowledge that had been discredited from the very inception of modernity/coloniality enter into "a double movement...[that] makes it possible to imagine epistemic diversality (or pluriversality)."<sup>34</sup> Essential to this concept of bi-directional translation is also the idea of contamination and

infection where Western epistemologies and concepts are infected or contaminated by the decolonial option. It is crucial not to think of this as a process of replacement or a mere reversal of the colonial process; rather both manners of thought meet on a border to form a grammatical, syntactical and signifying hybrid that allows for fullness. As Mignolo writes, “‘the decolonial’ option, turn or gesture is always at once analytic of and signs of delinking from coloniality. Delinking means always already being engaged in project and processes of re-existence, resurgence and re-emergence of all signs of living in plenitude and harmony that coloniality repressed, suppressed, or disavowed in the name and justification of ‘modernity’ as salvation.”<sup>35</sup>

Mignolo illustrates his theory of bi-directional or double translation through the example of the bidirectional discourse employed by Subcomandante Marcos, the former spokesperson of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. According to Mignolo, the role of the translator in border/decolonial thinking must be that of the mediator who translates *bilaterally*. They must not only translate Western political philosophy for the local population (i.e. Marxism to the indigenous people of Chiapas), but they must also translate the subaltern’s message (the Mayan people, in the case of the Zapatistas) for the nation (i.e. Mexico). The role of the translator must also displace the “model implanted by the missionaries” whose act of translation for the indigenous people at the beginning of the colonial world was always ideologically unidirectional.<sup>36</sup>

In “Looking for the Meaning of ‘Decolonial Gesture,’” Mignolo extends his concept of bidirectional translation and decolonial thinking to Western literary traditions and their relation to non-Western storytelling practices, arguing that the Western literary tradition has been “understood within the binary of the opposite, as either fictional or not fictional” and according to Aristotle’s definition *mimesis*.<sup>37</sup> This binary poses a problem for non-Western storytelling practices, so tied to ritual and ceremony, because it imposes a mimetic framework. But, “rituals

and ceremonies are no mimicry...in the Aristotelian sense.”<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, in a footnote to this statement, Mignolo refers to *Ceremony* as a prime example of a decolonial text that “confronts precisely this puzzle.” He writes:

[Silko’s] Native American knowledge is translated into the novel form, and the novel form is already caught into the fictional/non-fictional code. Border thinking, dwelling in the borders, involves using but not submitting (or the contrary subverting and re-directing) the novel-form...the novel here becomes ‘storytelling,’ and storytelling in First Nation and Native American epistemology is both and it [is] neither: literature and philosophy, fiction and ceremony, but always from indigenous cosmologies of the Americas absorbing the cosmology of indigenous, Europeans, and their descendants in the Americas.<sup>39</sup>

While Mignolo refers generally to *Ceremony*’s subversion and redirection of the novel form and how Silko repositions it within a Native American concept of “storytelling” that transgresses the taxonomic logic of Western literary genre, I want to draw attention to how Silko crucially redirects the Western poetic form. Part of my desire to focus on Silko’s employment of the Western poetic form, specifically, is because of the crucial role that the poems throughout *Ceremony* play, particularly in how Silko strategically uses the poetic form to import Native American oral storytelling practices and the knowledges that they produce into the text. In fact, it is in the space of the poem—one which sits at the literal center of the novel—where Betonie tells Tayo the story of where the new witchery came from and how it’s different from previous witcheries, that Silko develops and explicitly ties the concept of “witchery” to colonialism. The first stanza reads:

Long time ago  
in the beginning  
there were no white people in this world  
there was nothing European.  
And this world might have gone on like that  
except for one thing: witchery.  
This world was already complete  
even without white people.  
There was everything  
including witchery (122-123).

Here, Silko translates the conventions of Native oral traditions into those of Western poetry in a way that effectively “contaminates” Western colonialist logic with storytelling practices crucial to the production of indigenous knowledges. Susan Rockwell observes how Silko’s poetry generally contains key elements of Native storytelling practices, particularly in her use of prefaces such as “long time ago,” verbal asides, and her use of repetition, as well as her strategic use of Western poetic conventions such as line breaks, stanzaic structure, and line length as a way to translate “the rhythms, tonalities, and inflections” of artful oral delivery.<sup>40</sup> According to Robert M. Nelson, these poems, or what he refers to as “parcels of embedded text” that simply resemble poems, also read like what people of the Laguna Pueblo call “hama-ha[h]” or “long-ago, far-away stories,” that “come from the conventional category of Keresan oral narrative called ‘maai’ma u’beeta’nyi,’ those ‘true’ stories that get reenacted in the ceremonies.”<sup>41</sup>

By integrating these two forms, Silko collapses the hierarchical distinctions between ordinary and poetic language, written and oral form, and between narrative and verse made by the taxonomic logic of the Western literary tradition, while also employing the privileged status of poetry to desubjugate Native traditions. This collapse of formal boundaries also makes possible the various ways in which Silko’s poems disrupt the taxonomic logic of Western thought more generally. As Paula Gunn Allen writes, “the oral tradition is more than a record of a people’s culture. It is the creative source of their collective and individual selves...the oral tradition is a living body. It is in continuous flux, which enables it to accommodate itself to the real circumstances of a people’s lives.”<sup>42</sup> Native oral traditions serve as the critical basis through which indigenous cosmovisions are constructed. I use the term “cosmovision” instead of the more common term, “worldview,” for several reasons. First, cosmovision, which comes from Spanish, is used specifically to refer to the understanding of the world employed by Mesoamerican peoples. Unlike “worldview,” this term refers to how indigenous epistemologies

produce a non-taxonomic view of the world—one where man does not exist outside of nature, but as a part of it, and where the supernatural is inseparable from the realm of human or natural activity—what Western thought marks as the “secular” realm.

For example, in writing about the Andean cosmivision of the Aymara and Quechua peoples of South America, Mignolo asserts that while “the phenomenon that Western Christians described as ‘nature’ existed in contradistinction to ‘culture,’” the Aymara and Quechua Indians had no such distinction; the concept of Pachamama was embraced by people who “saw themselves *in* [nature], not separated *from* [nature]. As such, culture was nature and nature was (and is) culture.”<sup>43</sup> But what is even more crucial than the integrated notion of nature and culture in an Andean cosmivision—something that Mignolo gestures to but does not make explicit—is how that integration is firmly rooted in the supernatural. To speak of natural or human activity is impossible outside of the framework of the Pachamama, the goddess who gave birth to both the world and time and who is revered by all Andean peoples. The Pachamama’s analogue in the cosmivisions of the Native peoples of the Southwest United States is variously referred to as “Spider Grandmother” (Hopi), “Spider Woman” (Navajo), and “Spider Old Woman” or “Thought Woman,” as she’s referred to the sacred ceremonies of the Keres Pueblo people.

In fact, *Ceremony* begins with a poem about “Ts’its’tsi’nako, Thought-Woman,” who literally inhabits the very first line of the book, and who is regarded by the Keres Pueblo people not only as the creator of existence, but as “a [quintessential] spirit that pervades everything...and no thing is sacred (cooked, ripe, as the Keres Indian of Laguna Pueblo say it) without her blessing, her thinking.”<sup>44</sup> By proceeding from Thought-Woman, Silko is firmly locating her story about Tayo within the Keres Pueblo cosmivision, key aspects of which she takes up and illustrates throughout the various poems that sit alongside Tayo’s story. But before we even get to Tayo’s story, Silko offers a retelling of the Keres Indian creation story, which

begins, “In the beginning Tse che nako, Thought Woman finished everything, thoughts, and the names of all things.”<sup>45</sup> Silko revises this telling by adapting it to the formal elements of Euro-American poetry in a manner that again enacts Mignolo’s concept of bidirectional translation.

The first stanza of the poem reads:

Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-Woman,  
is sitting in her room  
and whatever she thinks about  
appears (1).

Here, Silko strategically employs the Western poetic form by using line breaks to emphasize and privilege the role of Thought-Woman as the beginning of all things, including the novel. She also uses line breaks, along with stanzaic structure and varying line lengths, to convey the rhythms, tonalities, embodiment and inflections of spoken language, again adapting the Euro-American poetic form for the purpose of enacting the non-verbal elements of oral storytelling practices crucial to the production of both Laguna Pueblo knowledge, specifically, and indigenous knowledge, generally. How Silko revises the story of Thought-Woman also speaks to the nature not of transcription, but of oral traditions, in which each telling acts as a repetition with a difference that reflects how the oral tradition is, as Allen states, “in continuous flux, which enables it to accommodate itself to the real circumstances of a people’s lives.”

Silko’s inclusion of Thought-Woman as the first line of text also ensures that the text proceeds from a Keres Pueblo cosmivision that demands a mode of thought which is understood to emerge from Thought-Woman, herself. Allen warns us not to read Thought-Woman, the “only creator of thought,” as a “fertility goddess,” a positioning which she describes as “exceedingly demeaning,” and one which “trivializes the tribes and it trivializes the power of woman.”<sup>46</sup> She goes on to explain:

Central to Keres theology is the basic idea of the Creatrix as She Who Thinks rather than She Who Bears, of woman as creation thinker and female thought as origin of material and nonmaterial reality. In this epistemology, the perception of female power as confined

to maternity is a limit on the power inherent in femininity. But ‘she is the supreme Spirit...both Mother and Father to all people and to all creatures.’<sup>47</sup>

In his analysis of the poems throughout *Ceremony*, David E. Hailey also observes that their pattern of grammatical, line break and stanzaic aberrations purposefully construct a series of figures that directly relate to the poems, including a spidermaiden (in the case of Thought-Woman or Spider Old Woman’s poem), a kachina (or Pueblo spirit being), Corn Woman (first mother of the Abenaki and Penobscot creation story), and in the case of the witchery story-poem, a cowboy and a man in Western-style dress, whose hat and head are visible in the poem’s first stanza.<sup>48</sup> In this way, Silko not only gestures to the embodied practice of oral storytelling by constructing figurative bodies with the line breaks of the verse, but she also literalizes the presence of those spirit beings, both good and evil, putting the events of the text into motion at the same time that they are manifested by, through, and in the text. A crucial aspect of Keres Pueblo storytelling practices, specifically, and Native oral traditions, more generally, is how they literally manifest the presence of spirit beings through language. As Gregory Cajete writes, many Native ceremonies are intended to “alter participants’ everyday consciousness to acquire knowledge from the underworld and the universe, which in turn promotes understanding of what goes on in [the physical world].”<sup>49</sup>

By translating acts of Native divination into the Western poetic form, Silko not only disrupts the boundaries of literary genre, but also calls attention to the historically fraught relationship between the Western literary tradition and the divine. From M.H. Abrams’s account of how the supernatural was naturalized by Romanticist poetics to Amy Hungerford’s argument that Matthew Arnold, in turning to poetry, displaced religious belief with a belief in literary form itself, many literary scholars seem to agree that the telos of the Western literary tradition has been defined by a move away from the divine and toward the secular.<sup>50</sup> But what these linear histories fail to acknowledge is that the Western literary tradition’s relationship to the divine has

never been monolithic or congruous, largely because the foundation of that tradition is built on the taxonomic logic that grows out of Aristotle and was variously taken up by different modes of Christian thought, out of which secularism itself emerged. While secularism in the United States is understood as the absence of religion, a neutral position on the subject of religion, or the freedom of religion, recent retheorizations of secularism convincingly show that secularism is anything but neutral with regard to religion. Instead, secularism has a very clear take on what religion is and how it should and can function in our lives and our literature.

First, it's important to recognize that neither the word nor concept of "religion" is "easily translatable into non-European languages."<sup>51</sup> The idea of being able to think about human activity irrespective of the supernatural, let alone the natural world, is illogical for a highly integrated cosmivision such as that of the Navajo Nation or the Mayans, whose epistemologies are based in the study of the relations between things, rather than on the things themselves.<sup>52</sup> That one can think of the supernatural and natural worlds separately or as separate entities arises from Christian thought and specifically from the Christian usage of the Latin term from which we get the concept of "secular" itself. The term "secular," comes from the Latin *saeculum*, which was a unit of time used by the Etruscans and Romans "reflecting the longest normal duration of a human life." In Medieval Europe, the term "secular" was used to refer specifically to "the affairs of worldly existence," or that which occurred on the human scale of time, as opposed to the divine scale of eternity.<sup>53</sup> This eventually comes to inform George Holyoake's definition of "secular knowledge" as "manifestly that kind of knowledge which is founded in this life, which relates to the conduct of this life, conduces to the welfare of this life, and is capable of being tested by the experience of this life."<sup>54</sup> This articulation of "secular" as a specific unit of time, underpins Deloria's argument about Western thought's basis in a linear sense of time and the trouble it has with comprehending an indigenous cosmivision, in which "the traditional tribal

concept of time is of timelessness, as the concept of space is of multidimensionality. In the ceremonial world the tribes inhabit, time and space are mythic.”<sup>55</sup>

According to conventional histories of Protestant-Catholic conflict, the Catholic Church held authority over all aspects of human activity, keeping the secular and sacred intimately linked, until the Protestant Reformation sought to loosen the Church’s grip, largely based on the belief that the Church had abused its power in claiming to be the necessary intermediary between God and mankind. Mankind not only needed no such intermediary, Martin Luther’s *Treatise on Christian Liberty* (1520) argued, but the Church’s “earthly lawgivers,” armed with their “prescribed laws,” had also actively distracted people from doing the necessary spiritual work of nurturing their faith and personal relationships with God.<sup>56</sup> From the prohibition of eating meat on Fridays to the “outer splendor of robes and postures” of priests, Luther castigated the Church for creating a world of rituals and customs that weren’t an avenue to, but a distraction from “the spiritual things through which he by an invisible service intercedes for us in heaven before God.”<sup>57</sup>

While the Protestant Reformation’s privatized version of religious practice and challenging of the Church’s authority helped pave the way for the emergence of secular liberal governance and the institutional separation of Church and State, Max Weber writes:

What has often been forgotten is that the Reformation meant not the elimination of the Church’s control over everyday life, but rather the substitution of a new form of control for the previous one. It meant the repudiation of a control that was very lax, at that time scarcely perceptible in practice and hardly more than formal in favor of a regulation of the whole conduct which, penetrating all departments of private and public life, was infinitely burdensome and earnestly enforced.<sup>58</sup>

Therefore, rather than evacuating religious authority, scholar Tracy Fessenden writes:

The Reformation generated its presence ‘everywhere,’ not least in secular guise—an outcome, it further bears reminding, given as ‘truth’ or ‘freedom’ in the measure that the Reformation frames its program as liberation from the errors and superstitions of Rome. In this sense Protestantism’s emancipation from Catholicism both provides the blueprint for, and sets the limits of, secularism’s emancipation from ‘religion’ itself.<sup>59</sup>

Secularism's emergence out of Protestantism means that it is not neutral with regard to religion, but rather embodies the Protestant ideal of what religion should be and how it should be practiced. As Fessenden writes, "religion comes to be defined as 'Christian' by default, and an implicit association between 'American' and 'Christian' is upheld even by those who have, one imagines, very little invested in its maintenance."<sup>60</sup> Which religious beliefs and practices will be tolerated ("good religion") depends on their remaining largely personal or private ("invisible," writes Fessenden) or, at least, "unobtrusive." "Rational, word-centered, nonritualistic, middle class, unemotional, compatible with democracy and the liberal state . . . [good religion] was what was taught and endorsed in academic environments; for everything else the discipline developed a nomenclature of marginalization (cults, sects, primitives, and so on)."<sup>61</sup>

This default position also explains why secularism includes what Fessenden calls "a variety of possible relationships to different religious traditions." For example, she writes, "an avowedly secular United States is broadly accommodating of mainstream and evangelical Protestantism, minimally less so of Catholicism, unevenly so of Judaism, much less so of Islam, perhaps still less so of Native American religious practices that fall outside the bounds of the acceptably decorative or 'spiritual.'"<sup>62</sup> In the case of Native American ceremonies, the United States has a long history not only of arguing that certain practices, such as the sacramental use of peyote, were not protected by the Free Exercise Clause (a ruling made in 1990, though later reversed), but also of outright bans on specific ceremonial practices, including the Great Sun Dance of the Lakota and the intertribal Ghost Dance.<sup>63</sup>

For this reason, I argue that decolonial strategies can only be effective if they recognize and addresses how secularism has undergirded the colonial project, not only by distinguishing between culture and nature, but also by basing that distinction on a specific notion of "good religion." This is not an easy task for scholars, largely because of what literary Eoin Cannon

describes as “the seemingly intractable biases, both temperamental and disciplinary, against vernacular spiritual...discourses” within the academy.<sup>64</sup> But, as Judy Iseke writes, “decolonizing and spirituality are inextricably linked.”<sup>65</sup> While scholars have written extensively about the centrality of recovering indigenous understandings of people’s relationship to the land in order to move beyond the property logic that undergirds settler-colonialism, Iseke argues that such a move can only be made if we attend to the crucial role that the spirit world, and those ceremonies which honor it, play in enacting indigenous cosmovisions. In fact, it is precisely in the taxonomic logic of Protestant ideology that Mignolo argues the colonial project was born. He writes that at the same time that Sir Francis Bacon “proposed a reorganization of knowledge and clearly stated that ‘nature’ was ‘there’ to be dominated by Man...Western Christians asserted their control over knowledge about nature by disqualifying all coexisting and equally valid concepts of knowledge and by ignoring concepts that contradicted their own understanding of nature.”<sup>66</sup> Not only has this religiously sanctioned taxonomic logic been used to mark certain worldviews as progressive and modern and others as primitive and backwards (thereby justifying slavery and dispossession), but also colonialism’s management and exploitation of human beings is inextricable from both its control and management of the natural world as natural resources and private property, as well as its positioning of non-Western religious subjectivities as essentially evil.

By beginning her novel with the ceremonial poem-story of Thought-Woman and framing the book as a ceremony in and of itself, Silko makes this crucial decolonial move, one that actively resists the sociopolitical repression and decimation of Native ceremonies throughout the history of the United States, even as it infects the taxonomic logic of the Western literary tradition with the essential foundations of the Pueblo cosmovision. These formal and epistemic

hybridizations also make possible the text's disruption of those histories which cast colonialism as a narrative of progress by framing colonialism as "witchery."

Having established and described the epistemological practices and logic of the indigenous cosmovision that Silko engages, as well as how that cosmovision has been subjugated by Western thought, particularly through the historical development of secularism, I want to return to the poem-story in which Betonie tells Tayo the history of colonialist witchery. From the perspective of Betonie and in the decolonial mode of poetry-as-ceremony, we are told that the world "was already complete," and "might have gone on like that" except for "witchery," suggesting that the story of colonialism is not one of progress, but of decay, since witchery is understood as a "mechanistic death force."<sup>67</sup> While the poem clearly establishes a link between this witchery and "white people," it is also careful to note that other witcheries existed and endure among other races. Here, Silko is careful not to simply invert white supremacy's racial hierarchy. In the next two stanzas, Betonie describes how "witch people" from all over the world—"some had slanty eyes/ others had black skin"—"got together for a contest" or "a witches' conference" located "way up in the lava rock hills/ north of Cañoncito" and showed off their dark magic to each other (123).

In his authoritative study of the Keres Pueblo and Navajo pretexts which inform *Ceremony*, Robert M. Nelson asserts that Cañoncito—which appears several times in the novel—crucially "figures as a contact zone where Laguna and Navajo stories overlap both inside and outside the novel."<sup>68</sup> Outside the novel, Cañoncito is the name of a geographical area in New Mexico where one of several Navajo reservations is embedded within the Laguna Reservation. Nelson contends that Silko's choice to make Cañoncito a central site throughout the text, along with her "choice to make Laguna *cheani* Ku'oosh's medicine ineffective against twentieth-century witchery, and to make Tayo the patient of Navajo *hataali* Betonie instead, suggests her

desire...to recover not only specifically Laguna identity but also, in the process, map a template for the recovery of (pan-)Indian identity in the postwar years.”<sup>69</sup> I also argue that Silko’s reference to Cañoncito as a contact zone between the Navajo and Keres peoples speaks not only to a pan-Indian future, but also to how pre-Columbian contact between the Keres and Navajo people reinforces Betonie’s point that “the ceremonies have always been changing” and syncretic. In fact, the concept of “witchery” that Silko employs here is one that emerges directly from that contact.

As Nelson writes, Tayo is a patient of Betonie, “whose medicine is the story set into motion by its oral performance,” and whom Nelson describes as a *hataali*, which means “singer” in Navajo, and is the name used not only for medicine men, but also for witches. *Hataali* play a crucial role in the ceremony and community of the Navajo nation. Aside from being responsible for the well-being of the people, the *hataali* is also the “ideal traditional Navajo father,” and it is believed that “a person treated by a medicine man becomes the child of that medicine man,” as well as a child of the *Diyin Diné*, or Holy People, for who the *hataali* acts as a mediator.<sup>70</sup> But Bernard Selinger points that the Navajo have also “feared medicine men as witches, largely because they have power, which, inevitably, will be used for evil as well as good.”<sup>71</sup> He cites two historical reasons for this. One is the power the *hataali* receives from the *Diyin Diné*, which literally translates to “people possessing great supernatural power,” and who can be as petty and destructive as the Greek and Roman gods. Because the *Diyin Diné* aren’t always “well disposed towards humans,” it is the medicine man’s role to persuade and manipulate the power of the *Diyin Diné* “toward constructive ends.”<sup>72</sup>

The second reason is based in Navajo and Pueblo contact. Before their migration from Northwestern Canada to the Southwestern United States (sometime between 1000 and 1500), the Athapaskan people (named the Navajo in the seventeenth century by the Spanish colonists) were

largely nomadic hunters, “who relied on shamans for their spiritual needs and for helping them procure game,” until they came into contact with the Pueblos, “agriculturalists with an elaborate hierarchy of priests.”<sup>73</sup> The “strong individualism of the Athapaskans and their loosely organized society contrasted strongly with the rigidly organized system within which the Puebloans lived.”<sup>74</sup> As the Navajo adopted the agricultural lifestyle of the Pueblo people, it is believed that the Navajo shamanic tradition came to be seen as a form of witchery—one associated with Coyote, a “former trickster-hero and healer of the old myths but now defamed.”<sup>75</sup> The Navajo shaman became displaced by medicine men who no longer had to rely on “tricks” but “ceremonial knowledge.”<sup>76</sup> Still, the fear and suspicion of the *haatali* spoke to the residual power of the shaman, associated with illness and death, that he retained.

Within the tradition that Betonie is working, there are, in fact, numerous types of witchcraft, some of which are alluded to in the poem-story. For example, when Betonie describes “dead babies simmering in blood” in the cooking pot of one witch, he is referring to what is called “the Witchery Way,” which utilizes a “poison” made of the “flesh of corpses,” preferably children (Silko 124).<sup>77</sup> Generally, all witchery is associated with death.<sup>78</sup> This is also true of the witchery brought by the white people, though how it is enacted takes a different shape, and its effects and reach are far more dramatic and widespread. When Betonie finally introduces the witchery brought by white people—as opposed to that being performed by the Navajo, Pueblo, and other witches during the contest—he remarks that the witch “didn’t show off any dark thunder charcoals/ or red ant-hill beads,” referring to the Navajo “Red Antway” healing ceremonies, some of which are used to treat witchery. Instead of performing a ceremony or preparing “Witch medicine” from “whorls of skin/ cut from fingertips,” this witch—who doesn’t take a human form—“just told them to listen:/ ‘What I have is a story’” (124).

At this point, the poem becomes polyphonic, as Betonie's telling becomes the telling of the white witch, whose story enacts colonialism ("as I tell the story/ it will begin to happen") just as Betonie's story enacts the medicine to heal Tayo from that history. The witch tells the story of "white skin people /like the belly of a fish/ covered with hair," coming from "caves across the ocean." Silko writes:

*They grow away from the earth  
then they grow away from the sun  
then they grow away from the plants and animals.  
They see no life.  
When they look  
they see only objects  
(125).*

Here, Silko writes the history of Enlightenment from a Native point of view, through which the taxonomic logic of Western thought acts as a devitalizing force that paves the way for colonialist violence. The people grow away from the sun and earth as part of the reorganization of knowledge via Bacon that humans (at least white, European, Christian humans) exist apart from, above, and in command of the apparently inexhaustible resources of the natural world, which they see as objects to exploit. Silko writes:

*The world is a dead thing for them  
the trees and rivers are not alive  
the mountains and stones are not alive.  
The dear and bare objects  
They see no life.*

Part of why the white people see no life is because the life force of the spirit world that flows through and connects all things has been displaced by the rise of Western science, portrayed here as colonialist witchery. What enables the violent extraction of natural resources, the mass genocide "from ocean to ocean," the poisoning of water and the decimation of "entire villages...whole tribes" recounted throughout the poem is how secular scientific thought literally

reduces the world into a series of “*objects to work for us/objects to act for us*”—objects whose subjectivities are rendered inscrutable.

Though the poem does state that it is the white people who bring the witchery with them, Betonie tells Tayo that the white people aren't the witchery in and of themselves. Just before Betonie launches into his ceremony-poem, he tells Tayo:

That is the trickery of the witchcraft...They want us to believe all evil resides with white people. Then we will look no further to see what is really happening. They want us to separate ourselves from white people, to be ignorant and helpless as we watch our own destruction. But white people are only tools that the witchery manipulates; and I tell you, we can deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs. We can because we invented white people; it was Indian witchery that made white people in the first place (122).

Here, Betonie makes clear that colonialism also isn't witchery itself, but a manifestation of witchery, which, throughout the poem, is constructed as a disordered worldview that brings only death—to the supernatural, the natural, and the human realm. As a mode of thought that brings only death, this “witchery” is, in many ways, the antithesis of Thought Woman, who is a generative “thought force...that results in physical manifestation of phenomena: mountains, lakes, creatures, or philosophical-sociological systems.”<sup>79</sup> It is also through this mode of thought that Betonie, “turns the usual colonialist paradigm inside-out: diseased Native American identity is presented not as a creature of the European imagination but rather as a creature of a (tribally nonspecific) Native American medicine-story.”<sup>80</sup>

Moreover, Betonie attributes Tayo's illness to this witchery. Not only does the witchery bring disease, but, as a mode of thought that can be transmitted, it is an infectious disease in and of itself. As Allen writes:

Tayo's illness is a function of disordered thinking—his own, that of those around him, and that of the forces that propelled them all into the tragic circumstances of World War II. The witchery put this disordered thinking into motion long ago and distorted human beings' perception so that they believed that other creatures—insects and beasts and half-breeds and whites and Indians and Japanese—were enemies, rather than part of the one being we all share, and thus should be destroyed.”<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, Betonie's ceremony-poem is meant as the cure for Tayo's witchery-induced illness, one that he shares with the rest of the world. As Nelson argues, "By the time Tayo hears about this story in the postwar twentieth century, we are to understand, the world all over has indeed become acutely ill—so ill that Tayo, for instance, cannot see beyond the effects of the witchery and is ready to believe...that the sickness [which he sees all around him] comes from their wars, their bombs, their lies."<sup>82</sup> Here, Silko discards Western secular notions of "disease," which rely on the historical formation of the Cartesian self. Within this ontology of the self, not only is the mind understood as a discrete unit separate both from the body and the outside world, but the spiritual has largely been discarded as a concern of science. Instead, Silko offers a concept of disease routed through a Native ontology of the self, in which human beings are understood as first and foremost spiritual beings, in whom body and soul are one and where the boundaries between the self and outside world are more porous.

## 2.2 GUT KNOWLEDGE

Key to how Silko revises popular and medical models of addiction is her employment of the Keres Pueblo ontology of self. Crucial to this revision is her situating "the belly," rather than the brain or the mind, not only as the site of knowledge production, ancestral memory, and traumatic experience, but also as the origin of all existence. The novel contains 75 instances of the word "belly" and 19 of "stomach." When Silko describes Tayo's internalizations, she hones in not on his mind or other predominantly Western modes of articulating affect, but on the sensations and thoughts that emerge from his belly. Descriptions of the land and other beings are also replete with belly allusions and imagery, echoing Senier and Baker's claim that the land is considered "an organic extension of the human body in many indigenous epistemologies," thus

making it “impossible to speak of indigenous health and wellbeing without also speaking of indigenous land, and vice versa.”<sup>83</sup>

Silko’s focus on the belly as a critical site of self-understanding and knowledge production emerges directly from the Keresan Pueblo creation story, which Silko rewrites in the Thought-Woman poem that opens the novel. In the third stanza, we are told:

Thought-Woman, the spider,  
named things and  
as she named them  
they appeared.

In Pueblo thought, Thought-Woman is known to take the shape of a spider and is sometimes referred to as Spider Grandmother or Spider Woman. June Todd explains: “Spider Woman, the most primal of the Pueblo Earth Goddesses, spins the world into existence by thinking. As she thinks, the thoughts spin and spiral out to become manifest in the world. Spider Woman's spinning/thinking created the world, and this is how it continues to be created, moment by moment. The Earth, animals, plants, stones, and minerals are made of thoughts linked one to another, like strands of a web, into stories.”<sup>84</sup> Notably, Thought-Woman spins thoughts not from her head, but from her belly, like a spider weaving its web from its abdomen.

This becomes more apparent in the second poem, “Ceremony,” when an anonymous “he” reveals the power of stories to “fight off illness and death,” much of which is attributable to the “evil” of the colonizer, who “can’t stand up to our stories. / So they try to destroy the stories / let the stories be confused or forgotten.” Here, the power of storytelling is transferred from Thought-Woman to human beings. As he talks, the speaker “rubbed his belly,” and says, “I keep them here...Here, put your hand on it/ See, it is moving. / There is life here / for the people. / And in the belly of this story / the rituals and the ceremony are still growing” (2). Like Thought-Woman before them, her people keep their stories—a powerful medicine—in their bellies.

I read Silko's assignment of the belly as a site of knowledge production as literal and, in its literality, vitally decolonial. I argue that this displacement of thought from the head to the gut-mind axis enacts a crucial revision of the Cartesian notion of self and Western psychological theories of the human—ones that are currently being revised in ways that better reflect those that have been espoused by knowledges that have been subjugated—dismissed as irrational and naive. For centuries, many women, people of color, queer, and ethnic as well as religious minorities have argued that the descendants of oppressed peoples, particularly those peoples whose collective histories have been largely excluded and undocumented by official and conventional histories or whose histories have been actively repressed and destroyed, very literally carry ancestral trauma in their flesh, their blood, their bones, and their gut. However, these articulations have often been read metaphorically as a sort of racialized and gendered imaginary or magical realism.

By bringing the metaphorized body back as the literal site of these concerns through a Pueblo ontology of self, Silko also calls attention to how the body has largely been robbed of its agency within the humanities and social sciences, where it is always being constituted by and secondary to discourse. In "The Human Sciences in a Biological Age," Nikolas Rose observes that, "nowhere was 'the discursive turn' more problematic than when debates over 'the body' seemed to deny any powers to the bloody thing itself."<sup>85</sup> Silko's positionings of the body as central not only to subjectivity, but also to social formations across time and space can be understood as part of a larger move over the last decade. As Rose points out, "a number of social theorists and feminist philosophers have come to realize that it is not reactionary to recognize the reality of our fleshy nature, and to examine the possibilities and constraints that flow from it...No longer are social theories thought progressive by virtue of their distance from the biological. Indeed, the reverse assumption is common—a rhetoric of materiality is almost

obligatory.”<sup>86</sup> Rather than arguing these issues as a matter of nurture versus nature, these emergent perspectives are dedicated to thinking about the ways in which the biological and social are interdependent and necessarily linked in their mutual transformations and historical emergences. By considering the ways in which the body—the actual flesh and blood of the thing—both reproduces and revises the social, Silko ultimately reminds us that history not only hurts, but it also matters.

As Elizabeth Wilson explains in *Psychosomatic*, the conventional Cartesian hierarchy of mind/body has long suggested that the brain acts as the central processing system where the contents of the mind (thoughts, feelings, beliefs, memories, and imagination) are translated into complex patterns of nerve cell firing and chemical releases that function as commands for the behavior and responses of the body.<sup>87</sup> This traditional articulation suggests a sort of “top-down administration by the cortex” where bodily responses to things like stress—such as various digestive disorders—are read as secondary reactions to or manifestations of psychological events that are “sequestered in the brain.”<sup>88</sup> However, the recent explosion of research on the gut-brain axis and the microbiome of the gut, which contains its own discrete nervous system called the enteric nervous system (ENS), shows that the ENS is “largely independent yet indirectly connected” to the central nervous system (CNS).<sup>89</sup> That anti-depressants such as SSRIs are effective in treating functional gastrointestinal disorders is no coincidence, considering that, within the ENS, or the “brain of the gut,” 95 percent of the body’s serotonin—a neurotransmitter which plays a key role in appetite, sleep, and mood regulation, as well as motor and cognitive functions—is made, stored, and metabolized.<sup>90</sup> Wilson continues, the ENS is not only “anatomically and biochemically more similar to the central nervous system (CNS) than it is to any other part of the peripheral nervous system to which it belongs,” but also “there is relatively little in the way of direct nervous traffic between the gut and the brain.”<sup>91</sup> When there is, it’s

largely information being sent from the gut to the brain, rather than vice versa, suggesting that “the ENS is somewhat sequestered—anatomically and biochemically—from CNS influence.”<sup>92</sup> Not only does this articulation of the ENS posit that the stomach isn’t simply a distal part of the body on which the mind acts, but that it has its own unique “capacity for psychological action.”<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, the fact that the ENS and the CNS share responsibility for innervating different parts of the digestive tract, as well as how they communicate, not only challenges conventional hierarchies of mind/body, but this model also redistributes psychological action across the body in ways that demand a far more integrated, biopsychosocial models of self and health. “Despite recognizing the role of the psyche in disturbances of the gut,” Wilson concludes that “the biomedical literature struggles to understand what kinds of relationships can be mapped between psyche and gut. The clinical and anecdotal data demand attention to affects, attachments, trauma, and chronic discontent, yet most commentators have difficulty integrating these concerns with the available biomedical data.”<sup>94</sup>

At the beginning of *Ceremony*, Silko narrates the struggle of Western science to understand and describe the relation between the psyche and the gut. As Tayo lies in his hospital bed, he recalls being in the Philippines when his sergeant orders him and the other soldiers “to kill all the Japanese soldiers lined up in front of the cave with their hands on their heads” (7). But Tayo, shivering with fever, sweat stinging his eyes, “could not pull the trigger.” Looking at the Japanese soldiers fall as the others fire off shots, Tayo suddenly sees his Uncle Josiah among them. He “stood there, stiff with nausea, while they fired at the soldiers, and he watched his uncle fall, and he *knew* it was Josiah; and even after Rocky started shaking him by the shoulders and telling him to stop crying, it was *still* Josiah lying there” (7). When Tayo won’t stop screaming, the sergeant calls for a medic who administers morphine. Tayo is told to sleep it off and “the next day they all acted as though nothing had happened. They called it battle fatigue,

and they said hallucinations were common with malarial fever.” But even after the medic’s diagnosis and Rocky’s arguments that “it was impossible for the dead man to be Josiah,” Tayo struggles to find solace. He senses there is more to the story. “He examined the facts and logic again and again,” but instead of finding relief in them, Tayo begins to shiver. “He shivered,” Silko writes, “because all the facts, all the reasons made no difference any more; he could hear Rocky’s words, and he could follow the logic of what Rocky said, but he could not feel anything except a swelling in his belly, a great swollen grief that was pushing into his throat” (7-8). The “fact” that seeing Josiah was nothing more than the hallucinatory symptom of an organic disease—a natural phenomenon, like the ache in his belly, that is easily explained by Western Science as a secondary effect—doesn’t *feel* true or complete to Tayo. Instead, these answers leave Tayo with “a great swollen grief” that he is unable to adequately name or describe through the tools of Western logic and science, which claim there is no other logical explanation for his experience and thusly dismiss the feeling in his gut as a naïve misreading of the event.

From a Western scientific perspective, the fact that Tayo can know these facts, but not feel them as true is not a sign of Western science’s inadequacy, but of Tayo’s inability to effectively employ reason. In the framework of Western thought, Tayo’s gut feeling is defined as “intuition.” In the Oxford English Dictionary, the entry for “intuition” includes six definitions and four subcategories. One entry, representing modern philosophy, defines intuition as “the immediate apprehension of an object by the mind without the intervention of any reasoning process.”<sup>95</sup> Interestingly, under an entry representing its predecessor, scholasticism, the term takes on a supernatural dimension, defined as “the spiritual perception or immediate knowledge, ascribed to angelic and spiritual beings, with whom vision and knowledge are identical.”<sup>96</sup> For the most part, however, no matter the definition, intuition is always marked by a lack of reason and is often positioned as reasoning’s opposite. As Gavin de Becker points out, intuition “is

usually looked upon by us thoughtful Western beings with contempt. It is often described as emotional, unreasonable, or inexplicable.”<sup>97</sup> Historically, intuition has been associated with the feminine, understood as inherently illogical, unreasonable, superstitious and emotional. It has also been ascribed to racialized bodies and correlated with class, attributable to one’s lack of education and training in the higher order practice of employing reason. The knowledge produced by intuition, often referred to as “female intuition” or “gut feeling,” is dismissed as unfounded, largely because it lacks empirical evidence. When one’s intuition—one’s sense of truth—contradicts empirical fact, it isn’t a sign that the facts are wrong, but that one is incapable of engaging in the act of reason, often as a result of the subject’s race, gender, or class. One’s feelings—one’s sense of truth—are thus delegitimized and rendered invisible, much like Tayo is invisibilized by Western medicine.

But where Western thought marks intuition as a lack, within a Pueblo framework, intuition is understood as a complex and efficient process of knowledge production. That’s largely because, where Western science struggles to understand the relationship between the gut and psyche, Pueblo epistemologies readily accept that, as Wilson argues, “the gut is in a natural alliance with psychological events, that there is something about the gut that makes it a particularly potent psychological organ,” and that the gut “is one of the most important means by which the outside world connects with body” and “which allows the world to pass through us.”<sup>98</sup> From a Pueblo perspective, Tayo’s sense of dis-ease is an expression of the various knowledges or “stories” that Tayo holds in his gut—the principal site not only of knowledge production, but also of ancestral memories that reach as far back as the moment Thought Woman first wove the world into being. From this perspective, Tayo’s gut feeling is read as a complex psychological action that makes compelling connections across time and space. First, Tayo’s nausea registers an aversion to the extreme violence around him—an aversion that is not general, but deeply

historical. As he sees Josiah among the dead Japanese soldiers, Tayo physically and psychically experiences the historical connection between the imperialist slaughter of Japanese soldiers and the colonialist genocide of Native Americans. In this instance, his gut registers a complex historical truth. Here, history becomes something one can feel and know intimately in one's gut without having to register it in the mind. It is also the feeling in his gut—the origin of his “shaking”—that physically disallows him from participating in the historical violence that led to the destruction of his own Pueblo culture. His gut feeling literally saves him from being complicit in American imperialism. It is not the case that this interpretation of Tayo's experience elides Western medical explanations, but that it elaborates upon them. While the organic explanations can address why Tayo, to some extent, is shaking and feverish, they fail to address why it is that he sees Josiah, specifically. But Pueblo epistemologies have no such problem. Furthermore, rather than registering Tayo's vision of Josiah as simply a misperception, thus invisibilizing his experience, a Pueblo perspective readily and unproblematically accepts that Josiah really was present, that Tayo really did see him, and that, in that witnessing, Tayo's gut was trying to tell him a greater historical truth.

At the time of this experience, Tayo doesn't yet have access to Pueblo interpretative tools. Instead, he must understand himself through a strictly Western framework, one that simply dismisses his experience as irrational and wrong. Thus, the dis-ease that Tayo feels is not only attributable to how his gut registers the war as part of his own ancestral trauma, but also to how Western thought makes this history inaccessible, unspeakable, and invalid, thus leaving him with a “great swollen grief” that nags at him throughout the novel and to which Silko also attributes his alcoholism, showing that Tayo and the other veterans often use booze as a form of self-medication, a way to soothe their troubled stomachs and to quiet their irrational rumblings. She writes, “Liquor was medicine for the anger that made them hurt, for the pain of the loss,

medicine for tight bellies and choked-up throats” (40). She describes Tayo as he “drank the beer slowly and waited to feel it spread from his belly, warming him all over” (50). And she attributes Tayo’s cravings to his belly, writing “he was thirsty. Deep down, somewhere behind his belly, near his heart.” (56).

Notably, however, the belly is not only the site of Tayo’s troubles, but it’s also where the stories and ancestral memories so crucial to his recovery reside. Just as the speaker in the second poem says he keeps the stories capable of fighting “illness and death” and the colonizer’s “evil” in “his belly,” so too does Tayo. By situating these stories in the belly, Silko collapses the Cartesian distinction between mind and body, rendering the body as a discursive site that is both produced by and capable of producing history. She reframes alcoholism as being at once bodily, psychic, social, and spiritual. It is experienced as a bodily discomfort—a perpetual ache in the body that is as much a psychic dis-ease as it is a physical phenomenon. This bodily-psychic experience of alcoholism is also both spiritual and socio-historical as the physical ache and psychic discomfort mark Tayo’s severance from the stories and histories that also tie him to his people and the land. It is a severance produced both by Western worldview—which makes his stories inscrutable—and by alcohol, which is often understood in indigenous frameworks as a colonialist tool of indigenous subjugation.

### 2.3 DECOLONIAL MEDICINE

In order to recover from alcoholism, Tayo must recover the stories and memories that reside in his belly. Thus, recovery from alcoholism becomes a decolonial process, where recovery marks both the recovery of Tayo’s health and the recovery of Pueblo knowledge, a roadmap to health. To recover the stories, Tayo must first stop drinking so that the stories can reemerge. At first, this proves to be a painful process. Without alcohol, “Tayo felt the old nausea rising up in his stomach, along with a vague feeling that he knew something which he could not

remember” (117). Here, Silko shows us what spiritual approaches to addiction, like those in AA, know so well—that to simply quit drinking is never enough. One must change their entire outlook if they want to stay sober and experience true relief. This is what Betonie essentially tells, Tayo, too—that he must adjust his entire perspective in order to get better. In much the same way that a sponsor might lead their sponsee through the conventions and storytelling practices of a 12-step program, Betonie guides Tayo through the conventions and storytelling practices of Pueblo and Navajo ceremonies. At first, he is resistant to and highly suspicious of the medicine that Betonie has to offer. Most of all, Tayo winces at the way Betonie refers to “us” and “we,” not unlike suspicious responses to the spiritual discourse of AA—one that feels so antithetical to Western notions of disease and health as deeply personal and strictly physical. Silko describes how “Tayo’s stomach clenched around the words like knives stuck into his guts. There was something large and terrifying in the old man’s words. He wanted to yell at the medicine man, to yell the things the white doctors had yelled at him—that he had to think only of himself, and not about the others, that he would never get well as long as he used words like ‘we’ and ‘us’” (125).

Alongside his resistance to Betonie’s language, Tayo also feels that something about what Betonie is telling him is true, based both on his experience and his intuition. Indeed, he “had known the answer all along, even while the white doctors were telling him he could get well and he was trying to believe them: medicine didn’t work that way, because the world didn’t work that way. His sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything” (125-26). Still ambivalent about Betonie’s approach, but desperate to find relief, Tayo finally allows the medicine man to walk him through the ceremonies, appearing as a series of rituals accompanied by story-poems throughout the text. One of those stories identifies witchery as the logic undergirding colonialism. This is the

witchery from which Tayo must be cured. The ceremonies employed by Betonie in the book are based in traditional Navajo treatments for witchery and disease. Among these ceremonial cures, the Evilway (*hóchxóji*), also known as the Ghostway or Uglyway, “exorcises diseases—such as severe anxiety, delusions, repetitive nightmares, hallucinations—caused by ‘ghosts of animals or of other beings that travel in darkness (‘witchery of the whirling darkness’)’ and other unknown sinister influences.”<sup>99</sup> Key to the effectiveness of these ceremonies is, as Selinger writes, “something we don’t see in Western medicine,” which “is the way the patient’s mind, body, and senses are fully engaged” through holistic and ritualized approaches that combine everything from dance and sand painting to medicinal herbs and chanting—modes that all work together as an embodied practice of storytelling.<sup>100</sup>

The relief that Tayo eventually finds in the ceremonies comes gradually, as he learns how to use the stories, adapt them and make sense of them in his everyday life. Shortly after Betonie finishes performing the ceremony, Tayo finds himself “thinking about the ceremony the medicine man had performed over him, testing it against the old feeling, the sick hollow in his belly formed by the memories of Rocky and Josiah, and all the years of Auntie’s eyes and her teeth set hard on edge. He could feel the ceremony like the rawhide thongs of the medicine pouch, straining to hold back the voices, the dreams, faces in the jungle in the L.A. depot, the smoky silence of solid white walls” (152). Later, when Tayo hears a man singing Navajo songs outside the bar, “something in his belly stirred faintly” as he found “something familiar in the songs, and he remembered old Betonie’s singing” (166). Slowly but surely, Tayo learns to read his gut and trust what it tells him. Similarly, he also begins to see his relation to those around him, including the land, differently, particularly in the way he describes landscapes and people through the image of bellies, from the “blue-bellied clouds hanging low over the mountain peaks” to how “his belly was smooth and soft, following the contours of the hills and holding the

silence of the snow” (220, 205). As his view of the world and himself change, so do the sensations in his gut, slowly pushing out the witchery, which, by the end of the book, “has returned into its belly” (242).

Here, Silko dramatically reframes medicine not simply as a therapy or drug that cures the individual body of a physical disease, but as a lived practice and way of life that one continually enacts through a holistic and ritualized system of behaviors meant to inculcate a sense of the self as spiritually enmeshed within a larger ecological system of interdependence.

---

1. Tracy and Acker, *Altering American Consciousness*, 2.

2. Ibid, 3. See also Molotsky, *The Flag, The Poet, and The Song*.

3. Ibid.

4. Jefferson, Thomas, “Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Appleton (1816)” and “Extract from Thomas Jefferson to Jean Guillaume Hyde de Neuville (1818).”

5. Franklin, Benjamin, “From Benjamin Franklin to the Abbé Morellet (1779),” and *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 65.

6. Tracy and Acker, 3.

7. Dunbar-Ortiz and Gilio-Whitaker, “What’s Behind the Myth.”

8. Trenk, “Drunkenness and Dreams,” 176.

9. Dunbar-Ortiz and Gilio-Whitaker, “What’s Behind the Myth.”

10. Senier and Barker, 127.

11. For more on meth and Native Americans see the 2006 Senate Hearing before the Committee of Indian Affairs on the Problem of Methamphetamine in Indian Country. Also see Ellen Wulfhorst’s “Fueled by drugs, sex trafficking reaches ‘crisis’ on Native American reservations,” where the author writes that “the rate of meth use among American Indians is the

---

highest of any ethnicity in the country and more than twice as high as any other group, according to the National Congress of American Indians.”

12. Senier and Baker, 123 and 129.

13. In surveys, such as Suzanne Evertsen Lundquist’s *Native American Literatures: An Introduction*, alcoholism is addressed as a theme of Native American Literature, and there are some articles that do take it up as a central concern, such as Stephen Evans’s “‘Open Containers’: Sherman Alexie’s Drunken Indians.” But as central as the theme is to many Native American texts, it has been surprisingly decentralized as a matter of scholarly interest, for the reasons suggested by Senier and Baker.

14. Senier and Baker, 125.

15. Ibid.

16. See Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s and Gloria Bird’s critiques of Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues* and other contemporary Native fiction, which Cook-Lynn argues “catalogue the deficient model of Indian reservation life” and which Bird claims is shaped by the “colonist influence.”

17. Evans, “Open Containers,” 54.

18. Lundquist, 220.

19. Senier and Baker, 129.

20. Senier and Baker, 129.

21. Senier and Baker, 129.

22. Ibid., 125 and 129.

23. Ibid., 129.

24. Chavkin, 3.

25. Ibid., 5.

---

26. Ibid.

27. Silko, *Ceremony*, 7. Hereafter cited within the text.

28. In *Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony: The Recovery of Tradition*, Robert Nelson discusses the Scalp Ceremony in detail and why it can't work for Tayo. Neslon writes, "Tayo is not ill because he has touched an enemy or failed to bring an enemy's spirit under ceremonial control; he is ill because he has been touched by an inimical spirit, the latest strain of the Ck'o'yo disease which has mutated into existence during World War II and the violent inauguration of the nuclear age. What ails Tayo calls for a new variety of medicine, one that old Betonie, one of old Ku'oosh's intertribal colleagues, will help Tayo concoct out of Navajo antecedents" (103).

29. Deloria, *God is Red*, 62.

30. Deloria, *God is Red*, 25. Though Deloria first wrote this statement in 1973, this is still the case today. For example, a 2014 study conducted by education professor Sara Shear showed that 87 percent of references to Native Americans [in elementary and secondary school textbooks] portrayed them as a population only existing before 1900. See Wade, "U.S. Schools are Teaching Our Children that Native Americans are History."

31. Mignolo, *Darker Side*, 219.

32. Ibid., 10.

33. Ibid., 222.

34. Ibid.

35. Mignolo, "Decolonial Gesture."

36. Mignolo, *Darker Side*, 219.

37. Mignolo, "Decolonial Gesture."

38. Ibid.

- 
39. Ibid., see the second footnote.
40. Rockwell, "Writing the Oral Tradition," 202.
41. Nelson, "Kaupata," 2.
42. Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 224.
43. Mignolo, 11.
44. Allen, 13.
45. Purley, "Keres Pueblo Concepts of Deity," 29. This is a literal translation by Purley, a native Keres speaker, from a portion of Thought Woman's story.
46. Allen, 14.
47. Ibid., 15.
48. Hailey, "Visual Elegance," 1-6.
49. Cajete, *Native Science*, 41.
50. See Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* and Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief*.
51. Calhoun, *Rethinking Secularism*, 8.
52. I purposefully use the term "illogical" here as opposed to "incomprehensible" because it is the logic of Native knowledge production that makes this an impossibility. After all, Western "logic" is not the only kind.
53. Calhoun, 8.
54. Holyoake, *The Reasoner*, 100. Holyoake coined the term "secularism" in 1851 and wrote this definition in 1871.
55. Allen, 147
56. Luther, *Christian Liberty*.
57. Ibid.
58. Weber as qtd. in Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, 4.

- 
59. Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, 4.
60. Ibid., 3.
61. Robert A. Orsi as qtd in Fessenden, 2.
62. Ibid.
63. Bivins, "Religion and Politics," 143.
64. Cannon, *The Saloon and the Mission*, 5.
65. Iseke, "Spirituality as decolonizing," 36.
66. Mignolo, *Darker Side*, 11.
67. Allen, 119.
68. Nelson, 124.
69. Ibid.
70. Topper, "The Traditional Navajo Medicine Man," 228.
71. Selinger, "The Navajo, Psychosis, Lacan, and Derrida," 67.
72. Ibid., 68.
73. Ibid.
74. Brugge, *Navajo Pottery and Ethnohistory*, 21–22.
75. Selinger, 68.
76. Ibid.
77. Kluckhohn, *Navaho Witchcraft*, 25.
78. Kluckhohn, 25.
79. Allen, 123.
80. Nelson, 132.
81. Ibid.
82. Nelson, 123.

- 
83. Senier and Baker, 129.
  84. Todd, "Knotted Bellies and Fragile Webs," 156.
  85. Rose, page.
  86. Ibid., page
  87. Wilson, *Psychosomatic*, 36-37
  88. Ibid., 37.
  89. Ibid., 36.
  90. Ibid., 36.
  91. Ibid., 34 and 36.
  92. Ibid.
  93. Ibid., 34
  94. Ibid., 39.
  95. "Intuition, n. 5," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.
  96. "Intuition, n. 4," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.
  97. De Becker, *The Gift of Fear*, 12.
  98. Ibid., 44.
  99. Ibid., 65.
  100. Selinger, 68.

### Chapter 3. THE SINNER

Halfway through her 2009 memoir, *Lit*, Mary Karr describes the first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous she ever attended—or, rather, “the therapy group for people trying to quit” to which she “sullenly” dragged herself.<sup>1</sup> The setting, described from not-yet-sober Mary’s perspective, is beyond depressing, a sort of modern day purgatorio. The room, tucked in the depths of a Cambridge church basement, is painted a musty yellow and its “ancient carpet smells of wet gym socks” (189). The walls are covered in giant posters “spattered with cornball slogans” and the uninviting rows of aluminum folding chairs are “baby-shit brown in color” (189). Crap coffee is served in Styrofoam cups and the cream comes in powder form. For the most part, not-yet-sober Mary experiences the scene through a lens of deep suspicion, particularly whenever anyone mentions the words “higher power.” “*Higher power, my rosy red ass*, I can hear my daddy saying, and *Church is a trick on poor people*” (191). When “a laminated list of suggestions” (the twelve steps, for those familiar) are read aloud, “it sounds to me like *Be good and you won’t get in trouble* and *Stop having fun and grow up* and *Tell everybody how you’re bad and face the firing squad*” (191). She recoils whenever a speaker refers to their story as a “*share*” (a word that makes her “want to spit,” she writes) and largely mines their tales for evidence of how she is *not* like them—how she never blew up her home in a botched suicide attempt, how she never buried beers in the backyard, how she’s *not* an alcoholic (193).

Told through the lens of Karr-the-writer, who was nearly twenty years sober when writing *Lit*, the emphasis on not-yet-sober Mary’s skepticism speaks to a crucial convention of the AA narrative form that Karr employs throughout the book. In many ways, Karr relies a great deal on the structure, tropes, discourse, and teleology of the AA narrative in her construction of *Lit*. But she crucially revises and recontextualizes that narrative form as well. To call *Lit* simply an “AA story” or a “recovery narrative” would be a mischaracterization of Karr’s memoir. While

*Lit* is largely structured around her story of alcoholism and recovery, it is far more expansive in its concerns and themes, particularly in how Karr situates the story of her recovery within the equally crucial stories of becoming a poet, a wife, a mother, a divorcee, and, finally, a Catholic. But *Lit* is not a contemporary memoir in the conventional sense either. Through the act of her conversion to Catholicism and the emphasis she places on the role of prayer in her various transformations, Karr reminds us of memoir's history not simply as a secular site of self-making, but as a sacred site in which one is made through divine grace, inducing a salutary dependence rather than totalizing self-sufficiency or radical individualism. Furthermore, the style in which she writes dramatically departs from the aesthetic qualities of a typical AA lead, in which "voicelessness and inarticulateness in speakers may be valued as markers of powerfully, sincere emotions."<sup>2</sup> Though she employs a number of clichés and slogans from the discourse of AA, she embeds them within her much-celebrated prose, thus raising questions about aesthetic value (which she both explicitly and implicitly explores throughout the text) and challenging the ways in which autobiography, generally, and self-help literature, in particular, has often been read through the lens of "seemingly intractable biases, both temperamental and disciplinary, against vernacular spiritual and psychological discourses."<sup>3</sup>

Karr displaces and revises the genre of the AA narrative in a way that ultimately challenges popular and medical understandings of addiction as a concretely physiological disease or psychological illness attributable only to certain bodies that are marked as abnormal.<sup>4</sup> These models are predicated on the assumption that something like a normative capacity for self-regulation exists and any failure of its performance is a marker of a pathologically diseased subject. However, *Lit* reimagines addiction as a conventional outcome of a generalizable sense of dis-ease—one that does not result from bodies or psyches that lack a normative capacity for self-control, but rather a dis-ease that arises from the ceaseless demand for the performance of

appropriate self-governance. Karr also expands on the ways in which AA articulates both alcoholism, specifically, and addiction, generally, as a “spiritual disease,” largely in the way that she identifies herself as a “sinner,” an identity based not in a secular/Protestant conception of “sin,” but in a Catholic conception of original sin that understands failures of self-control not as evidence of an abnormal subject, but as a normative state. Furthermore, *Lit* illustrates that recovery, like conversion, is a continual process that does not discipline addicts into ideally self-regulating subjects, but which includes a set of mutual aid practices and positionalities that develop new networks of interdependence—ones which differ from dependencies marked as “addiction” because of the way they are life-affirming, rather than life-attenuating.

Crucial to this revision is the central role that reading plays both in the context of Karr’s recovery, as well as in her conversion to Catholicism, which takes place in the fourth section of the book, aptly titled “Being Who You Are Is Not a Disorder.” Not only does *Lit* illustrate the limits of suspicious reading practices, but it also constructs a reparative reading practice based in the semiotic ideology of non-secular reading practices of Catholicism. Ultimately, *Lit* expresses how the self that is recovered in the practice of sobriety, prayer, and religious observation is not secularism’s ideally buffered self—one that is produced by employing reason as a disciplinary or repressive tool against affect—but a sense of the self that is vulnerable to outside forces and which employs reason as a productive tool for rendering affective experiences as sacred moments of knowledge production. Furthermore, Karr’s text allows us to consider the ways in which secularism misrepresents itself as the liberatory answer to religious oppression, particularly in the way that it historically emphasizes self-governance as the site of freedom, as well as what Saba Mahmood describes as “normative liberal assumptions about human nature against which such a movement is held accountable—such as the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when

allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them, and so on.”<sup>5</sup>

My reading of *Lit* is meant to challenge and complicate those that operationalize Foucault’s theories of both biopower and the act of confession as a disciplinary technology to explain how and why both addiction and recovery function as discursive practices through which one is disciplined into a properly self-governing subject. Interestingly, while Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson acknowledge that illness narratives are often “narrative acts of reclaiming a body that has been stigmatized or objectified by medical science” and “often resist naming the body as abnormative and voice critiques of the damaged body as a social construction of Western medicine,” they conspicuously exclude narratives of addiction and recovery from this subgenre in their sweeping introduction to the field of autobiographical studies.<sup>6</sup> Instead, they confine “Addiction Narratives” to their own subgenre, described as heavily indebted to the “scriptotherapy” of AA, which they warn “can also enforce a Foucauldian self-surveillance that conforms the writing subject to prescriptive norms.”<sup>7</sup> As I illustrate in the introduction, this type of suspicious reading is the norm.

In many ways, the scene that Karr constructs of her first AA meeting speaks directly to the problems of these highly suspicious readings and disciplinary biases. This critique largely unfolds through how Karr takes up the AA narrative form and adapts it for a wider audience. To an alcoholic who has heard hundreds if not thousands of what AA members refer to as “leads,” this scene functions as a familiar trope.<sup>8</sup> Many leads contain an anecdote that illustrates one’s initial resistance to and deep suspicion of AA. Told from the perspective of the sober self who, in simply giving a lead acknowledges the ways in which she has given herself over to the recovery program of AA, these scenes serve several purposes. On the one hand, they are used as a method of qualifying what is often referred to as a major symptom of addiction generally—denial. But

more than denial, these scenes also gesture to a painful ambivalence. Just as Karr disavows not only AA's emphasis on spirituality, but also her own alcoholism, her attendance at the AA meeting marks an acknowledgement that she has a problem—a problem that she is looking for help to solve.<sup>9</sup> Such an acknowledgement is markedly profound in the context of narratives of alcoholism, because of the way that AA discourse paradoxically attributes alcoholism to extreme willfulness and independence, even as alcoholism is generally understood as a lack of self-control and pathological dependence. “Our liquor was but a symptom,” suggests *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the central text of AA and referred to as the “Big Book” by members.<sup>10</sup> Instead, “being convinced that self, manifested in various ways, was what had defeated us, we considered its common manifestations.”<sup>11</sup> In many ways, the ambivalence described in these scenes is meant to mark the ways in which it is the self—particularly the assertively autonomous self that repudiates all outside of it—that acts as the source of one's suffering, rather than their drinking, specifically. At one point, Karr writes, “part of my illness is a proclivity for lopping myself off from others while simultaneously blaming them for how lonely I feel” (322).

Karr describes this crucial ambivalence throughout the scene of her first meeting. As Mary fixes herself a cup of coffee, her mouth warped into what Karr describes as “a stiff rictus”—an attempt “to impersonate a good and sober person who's only wandered in through curiosity and happenstance”—her disgust of the scene slackens when she overhears a tweed clad classics professor say to a black Marine: “it's hard to be an articulate ghost.” Karr writes:

Illogically, as I hear this, some frozen inner aspect thaws enough that a small surge of pity swells through me. I heap my watery coffee with powdered cream and stop thinking about myself long enough to come alive a little. I notice in the professor's baggy face his red-rimmed eyes, and the care in the marine's gaze starts to plug me in to something invisible that rivers among these strangers. It's like running from my cardiac area, I've been dragging a long extension cord unplugged from all compassion, and it's suddenly found a socket. The room comes breathing to life... We're asleep most of the time, I once heard the writer George Saunders say, but we can wake up. In that instant, for no reason I can discern, I wake up. Faces cease to be blurs and grow distinct features (189-90).

Instead of the indistinct blur of defeated drunks she sees through the prism of the self that has brought her so much trouble and pain over the last 190 pages—the ideally buffered liberal subject of self-restraint that she not only fails to perform, but which she uses as the model self through which she so carefully crafts her sense of self-hatred—the feelings of compassion and connectivity created by the exchanges and small acts of kindness between the disparate characters in the room shift her perspective. Mary’s thawing continues when someone places a plate of homemade chocolate chip cookies on the table and she grabs one, only to find herself experiencing pleasure for the first time in months, if not years—maybe even since the first time she dropped acid as a teenager, the transcendental experience she describes in the first chapter of the book. The feeling strikes her as counterintuitive. After all, according to the logic of suspicion, this place is not where one is meant to find pleasure, but the place in which one is supposed to learn how to deny herself pleasure. Karr writes, “Pleasure, I feel—mouth to spine to head. A small uprush of pleasure. This, I think, is why other people aren’t screaming. I’ve briefly forgotten to feel sorry for myself, to worry, to generate any kind of report on my own performance” (190).

However, Mary’s moment of socially induced comfort is fleeting. As soon as she sits down and feels the chill of the chair, this “tiny discomfort unplugs me again,” she writes (190). She rifles through her purse for hand lotion—a way to manage her physical discomfort, as well as her psychic dis-ease—when the woman at the front of the room asks everyone to bow their heads in a moment of silence before they begin to pray. She looks around to see the Harvard professor, the black Marine, a musician whose CDs she owns and his attractive friend all in prayerful postures. “Are they serious?” she wonders, before continuing:

Lord, I think, this is some fake Christian cult I’ve wandered into. Then a guy at the front reads some kind of warm-up, saying they’re not a sect or church, reiterating how nobody’s the boss of anybody—we’re all the same—the lie of equality that teachers tried

peddling in high school, where, in fact, the reigning hierarchy would've tied stones to the feet of druggy teens like me and dropped us off bridges (191).

After one woman stands up to say that her higher power helped her to avoid drinking at a recent wedding, Mary imagines that at “any minute, some snake-handling preacher might well get up and start stomp-dancing while his underage wife passes a hat. I slather on more hand lotion and sit perched on the edge of my seat like a bird on a wire.” As people share stories of alcoholic degradation—mostly stories of attempted suicides gone wrong—Mary is struck by the fact that, rather than scorning these storytellers “like schoolmarms for the sin, the room roars—myself among them” in empathetic laughter (192). Mary wonders “when have I laughed so hard in company at the specter of human frailty? Not since the last great poetry reading I’d sat through, when some outcast put a fresh name on the unnamable.” As her perspective of the meeting shifts back and forth between these moments of identification and deep suspicion, Mary describes her psychic turmoil as two “opposing inner judo masters” who “take turns body-slamming each other. One minute, I’m thinking, They’re not all that strange. The next, their laughter bounces off me like bullets from a cartoon Kevlar vest” (193).

The collective laughter among AA members within the scene is crucial to the way that this scene, itself, functions within the context of AA storytelling. Indeed, the scene that Karr describes is just the sort of moment that would draw such laughter within the space of a meeting. Laughter functions as a crucial form of acknowledgement and commonality. We laugh because, from our new perspective, we find our willfulness absurd. We laugh, because we now experience the joy of a worldview through which we can now see how much we needed help. We laugh because we feel the relief of no longer feeling the need to assert our will or be in control. The *we* here is important. It’s not just *I* who tells *my* story in the context of AA. Instead, *we* tell *our* stories. At the start of each meeting, the first two pages of “How it Works,” the chapter of *Alcoholics Anonymous* that outlines the AA program of recovery, including the twelve steps—

the “laminated list of suggestions” that not-yet-sober Mary hears as restrictive and authoritarian—are often read aloud and remind us that “our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now.”<sup>12</sup> In this way, the “Big Book” outlines the structure that these stories tend to take. Robyn Warhol and Helena Michie describe this as a “coherence system,” where “the plural pronoun of the formula—‘our stories disclose’—carries a force beyond the merely referential. A powerful master narrative shapes the life story of each recovering alcoholic, an autobiography-in-common that comes to constitute a collective identity for sober persons.”<sup>13</sup> The focus of AA storytelling within the group is therefore “a communal one, the story collective, rather than individualized; the “self” in AA is conceived as resembling and relating to others, rather than existing in isolated uniqueness. In this respect, the A.A. life story is antiautobiographical, in that it differs significantly from the dominant Western autobiographical tradition that Sidonie Smith has characterized as ‘the unfolding or the development, the reenactment or the discovery, of an individual’s unique historical identity.’”<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, Mary’s suspicion of the false promise made of AA’s equality and sameness is shared by both popular critics and literary scholars, particularly in terms of how the AA narrative form seems to collapse a diverse set of experiences into a sense of sameness. As Trysh Travis writes in *The Language of the Heart*, “contemporary critics steeped in the modern ‘consumerist’ aesthetics of the late twentieth century typically fault the personal narratives some AAs call ‘drunkalogues’ for the way they privilege sameness and repetition over difference and individuality.”<sup>15</sup> Travis points to the popular work of Wendy Kaminer, as well as the literary scholarship of Robyn Warhol and Helena Michie as emblematic of this position. In *I’m Dysfunctional, You’re Dysfunctional*, Kaminer offers a pointedly liberal critique of what she understands as “stultifying” stories that engage in a sort of “religious fundamentalism” that

encourages a culture in which “passivity, social isolation and attitudes contrary to democracy” are reinforced.<sup>16</sup> Though they offer a far more sympathetic perspective, Warhol and Michie are also suspicious of how they understand AA etiquette—formally outlined in the “Big Book”—“requires” members to fit their particular experiences into a tidy and “unidimensional master narrative” that essentially disciplines the speaking subject into an “uncomplicated model of a unitary self” that they see as problematically eliding social and individual difference.<sup>17</sup>

The problem with these critiques, however, is the way they assume that universality and particularity are mutually exclusive concepts, particularly in the context of AA, where speakers not only maintain, but also honor the particularity of their stories—especially in terms of race, gender and class, as well as specific, individuating features—through the details they include, while what people share in common resides largely in the affective economies created by the generic formula they use to structure their stories. In fact, it is these particularities that make it so easy for Karr to dismiss the possibility that she is an alcoholic, because she can’t relate to the specific details of those experiences she hears. For exactly this reason, the collectivization this storytelling is meant to foster is also cultivated in AA listening practices. Newcomers are often told to sift through a person’s lead for what they share in common, rather than for what they don’t. This isn’t meant to collapse difference, but to create a sense of community across difference. It is for this reason that Mary’s sponsor, Joan, advises her, “Try to identify with whoever’s talking without comparing yourself. And confide in at least one person” (228).

However, because *Lit* circulates outside of the AA context at the same time that it employs the formal elements of the AA lead, the *we* and how it is functioning is extended beyond the limits of those who identify as alcoholics or addicts. No longer is Karr’s suspicion of AA specific to the ways in which it describes the ambivalence of one at the turning point of her recovery story, but it speaks to a broader suspicion of AA discourse, especially that which

emerges from specifically academic modes of critique. Ultimately, the discomfort Mary experiences in being unable to understand herself as either part of the group or apart from it has her running outside the meeting for a cigarette, where she finds a young David Foster Wallace, who Karr refers to as “Philosophy David” for most of the book. They engage in what Karr describes as an “inept exchange” in which they tenuously bond over their inability to grasp what is going on inside. While Karr attributes Mary’s inability to “get it” to her deep suspicion of religious belief and practice as well as her belief that she is not, in fact, an alcoholic—a conclusion which is based on “empirical” evidence—David’s inability is predicated on the fact that he enjoys pot (“which can’t be so bad because it’s natural”) more than booze, and that he believes “it’s a logical fallacy that they’re telling me I have a disease whose defining symptom is believing you don’t have a disease, since this a priori implies that any citizen who denies they have this ailment is no doubt infected” (195).

As writers and literary scholars who were both teaching and studying at Harvard University at the time, Mary and Philosophy David embody this positionality, one that Karr frequently depicts as “paranoid,” including in one scene where she is talking to Joan, an AA member whom Karr describes as “an elegant pageboyed social theorist at Harvard” who has “in truth...written articulately about the most unpronounceable continental philosophers” (206-207). After Mary tells Joan that she simply can’t buy into the “higher power” idea, Joan tells her that many of the group’s nonbelievers use the group itself as their higher power. “Here,” Joan says, “are a bunch of people. They outnumber you, outearn you, outweigh you. They are, ergo—in some simplistic calculation—a power greater than you. They certainly know more about staying sober than you” (207). Mary scoffs at the idea of putting her “life in the hands of strangers who give not one real shit” for her well-being. Her ability to know this lies in the fact that, “I am very astute,” she says. “Or paranoid,” Joan retorts.

The fact that Joan marks Mary's interpretation of the group as "paranoid" speaks to the dominant mode of critical inquiry within the humanities at the time. After all, both Joan and Karr were teaching at Harvard in 1989, about the time that this scene would have taken place.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the way in which Mary's suspicion is largely directed at the concept of a "higher power" speaks to how critique positions itself against religious interpretative practices. Ultimately, the suspicion that characterizes the scene of her first AA meeting and which is often used to identify "denial" as a symptom of one's alcoholism is directed not only toward popular perceptions of AA, but specifically academic interpretive practices and the ways in which they are, in fact, "blind to [their] own disciplines of subjectivity, affective attachments, and subject-object relationality."<sup>19</sup>

This is particularly evident in the moment that "Philosophy David" says, "it's a logical fallacy that they're telling me I have a disease whose defining symptom is believing you don't have a disease, since this a priori implies that any citizen who denies they have this ailment is no doubt infected" (195). In this way, Karr reimagines denial not as a specific symptom of alcoholism, but as a position which is produced by the particularly suspicious subjectivity of the buffered self—the self that is not only produced as the ideal self of a liberal, capitalist society, but one that is also reinforced in the academic practice of critique. In a 2010 interview with *Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly*, Karr said "there is a great piety in agnosticism. I think the American religion right now is doubt. Whoever doubts the most wins. Whoever is the most suspicious is ahead. It's a form of safety. Fear is the American disease and fear is the enemy of love."<sup>20</sup> Indeed, it is this position that places both David and Mary outside of the meeting, thus creating a buffer between themselves and the interdependence among members upon which recovery relies. Furthermore, unlike the shared worldview of the room which creates a sense of solidarity, the suspicion that Mary and David share does not reinforce a sense of connection or

community, but merely an “inept exchange.” It is then in this position of suspicion, rather than through the discourse of addiction and recovery, that they reproduce an ideal secular subjectivity. In this way, *Lit* dramatically reframes the concept of disease, and thus, addiction. Disease is reimagined as the social dis-ease created by the reading practices of the buffered, suspicious self rather than a physiological defect—a generalized dis-ease in which “any citizen who denies they have this ailment is no doubt infected.”

### 3.1 THE WHITBREADS, BEN FRANKLIN, AND THE TYRANNY OF SECULAR SELF-MAKING

While *Lit* employs and extends the AA narrative framework in a way that calls attention to how suspicious reading practices can obscure and aggravate rather than explicate or alleviate the experience of addiction, it is not the case that *Lit* enacts a wholesale dismissal of critique. Like Sedgwick or Felski, Karr is not invested in replacing critique, but in thinking through its “disciplines of subjectivity, affective attachments, and subject-object relationality,” to which it is so often blind, as Saba Mahmood argues. Furthermore, Karr crucially engages critique as a way to consider what Felski wonders might come after suspicion. This is particularly true for the way in which *Lit* invites the reader to consider the historical formation of the self-governing subject as a secular phenomenon and an enduring ideal, as well as how the text engages a critique of this subjectivity and the secular self-care practices through which it is produced. Ultimately, *Lit* unpacks the ways in which this normative concept of self is as fantastic as those religious concepts against which secularism pits itself and through which Karr ultimately comes to understand herself as a “sinner” rather than an alcoholic. As Karr stated in her 2010 interview, “What I told myself, very piously, is that I lived rationally and I had this rational view of the world and I only believed what science could prove, but of course I had this whole mind that generated a very dark, Kafkaesque worldview that said the universe, the blind universe,

conspired to take my parking place...My head was my problem. My head thought it could kill me and go on living without me.”<sup>21</sup>

Key to Karr’s repudiation of the buffered self ruled by reason is the ironic representation of her husband Warren’s family, which she notably renames the Whitbreads in the book. In many ways, the Whitbreads embody not only this archetypal self, but also the history of that self, as well as its effects. From the moment that Warren’s family is introduced in the chapter “Inheritance Tax Summer,” Karr portrays the Whitbreads as austere and icy WASPs with deep connections to American political history. They live in a place “posh enough to sport a baronial-sounding name without seeming ridiculous: Fairweather Hall,” where there is a separate wing for the live-in staff of maids, butlers, and valets, who dutifully raised the six Whitbread children, all of whom, like their ancestors, attended Harvard (75). Their family photo album “bulges with enough presidents to fill a high school history book,” as well as a photo of Mr. Whitbread walking up the steps of the Supreme Court, where a journalist reported that “Mr. Whitbread was the only man he ever saw talk *down* to the Supreme Court” (81-85). On the mantle, Mary finds a photo of “all the siblings before the fireplace, glossy-haired and tidy. They actually *match* like the gorgeous silverware. Not resemblance but precise replication” (84). During their first dinner together, “silence rolls across us like a gray sea fog. Ice crystals form around our faces. Forks freeze in place. The salad plates are cleared. Warren sits straight enough to be lashed to a stake” (78). Later, when Mary boasts of Warren’s recent accomplishments in the hopes of extracting some form of emotion from his parents, “the arctic wind blows over us again, for my bragging has breached some protocol too delicate for me to understand yet” (79).

Mary reacts to the patrician world of the Whitbreads with a deeply ambivalent mix of intense shame and proud defensiveness about her own upbringing, as well as a deep yearning for their acceptance and an instinctual desire to escape the oppressiveness of their self-restraint. As

they drive to the Whitbread's estate, Karr writes that she faces "the task with a peasant girl's bouncy determination to wow people not overimpressed by much" (74). In the car, she applies gobs of mascara, failing to consider that her "mother's advice—*You can never wear too much mascara*—is, in this company, deeply wrong" (74). As she studies the "stiff" paintings and uninviting elegance of their home, Mary also feels "a stab of tribal pride that in the cracker-box house I grew up in, Mother's blazing nudes assembled with swashbuckling brushstrokes show way more sensibility" (78). At dinner, she observes how, in the company of his parents, Warren stiffens and Mary feels "the liquid warmth of our time together evaporate as he braced himself for his father's scrutiny" (83). In that moment, Mary imagines herself acting as Warren's savior, throwing her port glass into the fireplace and escorting Warren out "with a poor kid's piety, riding off with him in his Mazda into a life with nary a polo divet to stomp" (83). But Mary finds her resistance to the Whitbread's world dissolve in the face of what Karr describes as "the house's disabling comfort." She writes:

By the time we're in the library, I've begun to breathe in the parents' gentility. The conversation is so adroit—the nonchalance so juicy—I lap it up as Tiger did our fatty scraps, steel bowls rattling on the kitchen tiles. I want to believe I'm at home with these composed individuals. They're liberal in their politics, after all (83).

From their deep political roots to their disarming self-possession, the Whitbreads seem to descend directly from that ideal American self so deliberately constructed in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, the "prototypical narrative for America's myth of the self-made man and the entrepreneurial republican subject, specifically marked as male, white, propertied, and socially and politically enfranchised."<sup>22</sup> I refer to Franklin's autobiography specifically for several reasons. On the one hand, Karr's comically archaic portrayal of the Whitbreads's "WASP-itude" suggests some obsolete conception of propriety that would seem to have no place in contemporary America (109). On the other, the various ways in which Mary is both attracted to and made to feel ashamed by the Whitbreads, as well as the ways in which she attempts and

fails to perform the subject they model, speaks to how enduring, in fact, this ideal is.

Furthermore, as the source text for the myth of the archetypal modern liberal subject, Franklin's autobiography is not only framed as an accounting of his rags-to-riches life—one he addresses to his son, just as Karr addresses her son in the Prologue of *Lit*—but was, moreover, meant as a practical self-help guide, particularly Part Two, which Franklin had intended to publish as a standalone book of instruction called “The Art of Virtue.”<sup>23</sup> In many ways, Franklin's “Art of Virtue” is the ultimate Whitbread assembly guide, offering explicit advice in the art of self-restraint as the means to achieving success. Of course, the prescriptive quality of Franklin's *Autobiography* was nothing new. Life writing has long been both descriptive and prescriptive, including the many puritan spiritual narratives from which Franklin's story took a great deal of its style and form—from its provincial tone and lack of interiority to its emphasis on morality as the site of personal transformation.<sup>24</sup> What is markedly different about Franklin's *Autobiography* from these previous spiritual narratives, however, is the way in which it crucially reimagined what was once a transformation that occurred outside the self—usually by and through God's grace and within the community of the church—and secularized that transformation into a readymade science of self-making that men can (and should) achieve on their own. I argue that it is this secularization that Karr's memoir challenges most directly.

In order to illustrate my argument, it is necessary to first attend to how the sovereign self historically emerged as the ideal of secularism, particularly through secular practices of self-care. In many ways, Franklin's *Autobiography* is a rich site from which to explicate this emergence. First, it is important to point out that Franklin's science of self-making—which is better understood as a science of self-governance and self-control—emerges from an understanding of the self based in eighteenth century faculty psychology, which described human nature in terms of a hierarchical model of the mind that was both descriptive and normative.<sup>25</sup> According to this

model, which further divides the Cartesian self into discrete units, the mind was made up of three distinct components: the rational faculties, which included reason, conscience and prudence; the emotions, which were often divided into “affections” and the negatively defined “passions;” and, finally, the unconscious reflexes.<sup>26</sup> Though reason was considered the highest order of mental activity and should govern the rest and direct the will, the strength of the various faculties were understood as having an inverse relation to their precedence. That is: passion was often considered the strongest faculty, while the rational faculties were considered the weakest. This inverse relation was understood as *the* problem of human nature. As Daniel Walker Howe writes in *Making the American Self*, “it is no exaggeration to call it *the* central problem of eighteenth-century moral philosophy.”<sup>27</sup>

The question of how to strengthen reason’s ability to overcome the passions and direct the will acts as the central motivating concern of Franklin’s *Autobiography*. Because faculty psychology emerged out of and, in turn, reinforced Christian doctrine, the belief was that man, alone, could not direct his own will in a moral or rational manner. In the same way that the passions were motivated from outside the self—by objects of temptation, desire, jealousy, hatred—one’s reason needed guidance from outside the self, as well.<sup>28</sup> And, as Howe writes, long before Thomas Aquinas first developed the Christian concept of faculty psychology in the thirteenth century, it was believed that, even in the face of a concept of free will, only God’s grace was strong enough to supply this.<sup>29</sup> Key to the belief that man needed divine intervention in order to motivate right action was the doctrine of original sin, which held that man’s mental faculties “were corrupted by pride, which alienated humanity from God and prevented the individual from following dictates of reason.”<sup>30</sup> In this way, man’s general incapacity for self-control was understood as normative. For theologians such as Jonathan Edwards—a contemporary of Franklin’s who is often characterized as his intellectual opposite—reason was

the domain of the divine and religion provided “a divine system of ethics” in order to rescue “this fallen human nature”—fallen largely because it was “hopelessly self-centered and incapable of true virtue.”<sup>31</sup> “There is a most sweet harmony between Christianity and reason,” Edwards wrote.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, before its medicalization, addiction was often understood as an outcome of man’s general sinfulness. In histories of addiction, its medicalization is, therefore, often portrayed as a good thing. The story goes that referring to addiction as a disease helped alleviate some of the social stigma attached to being an addict, who, via the language of pathology, was no longer cast as a sinner worthy of punishment, but as a sufferer in need of compassion and care. It allowed for the construction of treatment centers and the development of therapeutic approaches. The disease model implied that the sufferer of addiction could have hope of healing—even if nothing like a cure has ever existed. However, these progressive histories rely on a very narrow concept of “sin,” whereby sin is understood strictly as an autonomously bad behavior that acts as evidence of a bad self. But this concept of sin is markedly Protestant, recent, and secular. When understood through the older, religious concept of original sin, addiction is understood as a normative outcome of humankind’s generally sinful nature, where sin isn’t defined as bad behavior, but is indicative of one’s relationship to God and, thus, the rest of the world. Sin describes a relation, not a person. Original sin, furthermore, isn’t connotative of an aberrantly corrupted subject, but of human’s general distance from grace, which is meant to describe humankind’s struggle to engage in socially responsible behavior, particularly in the face of the passions. Organized religion was, thus, meant to help mankind reconnect with the divine and serve their community. Organized religion was the answer to original sin. And, in many ways, it is through the concept of original sin that Karr comes to understand herself, rather than through medical models of addiction, which, because they remain so incomplete and contested,

have not actually relieved addicts of social stigma, but have allowed for moralist models to persist so that addicts are at once pathologized *and* criminalized.

It is exactly on this point of original sin where Franklin departed from both his religious predecessors and contemporaries. As Howe writes, “although he shared Edwards’s low estimate of human nature, Franklin despised the doctrine of original sin, declaring it had been ‘invented...by priests (whether Popish or Presbyterian I know not) to fright and scare an unthinking populace.’”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Franklin, “did not consider the Christian religion to be based on reason; on the contrary, he thought of Christian faith as an alternative to reason. (‘The way to see Faith is to shut the eye of Reason,’ ran one of his aphorisms.) Encouraging religion was a concession to the strength of the nonrational component in human nature, especially appropriate for people in whom the rational faculty was undeveloped.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, it was exactly his suspicion of religious institutions that drove him to developing a science of morality. In his *Autobiography*, Franklin begins the “Art of Virtue” portion of the text by recounting his own religious education. He writes that he had been educated as a Presbyterian, and “tho’ I seldom attended any public worship, I had still an opinion of its propriety, and of its utility when rightly conducted,” noting that he regularly paid annual dues to the only Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia.<sup>35</sup> Franklin recounts attending a service at the church, when the minister read from the fourth chapter of Philippians, “*Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, or of good report, if there be any virtue, or any praise, think on these things.*”

Franklin writes:

I imagin’d, in a sermon on such a text, we could not miss of having some morality. But he confin’d himself to five points only, as meant by the apostle, viz.: 1. Keeping holy the Sabbath day. 2. Being diligent in reading the holy Scriptures. 3. Attending duly the publick [sic] worship. 4. Partaking of the Sacrament. 5. Paying a due respect to God’s ministers. These might all be good things that I expected from that text, I despaired of ever meeting with them from any other, was disgusted, and attend his preaching no more.<sup>36</sup>

For Franklin and fellow Deists, such as Thomas Paine, organized religion had, in its attempt to maintain power, failed to cultivate the moral rectitude on which it claimed to be an authority. “All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit,” Paine writes.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, this suspicion of organized religion informs secular worldviews to this day.

Still, Franklin concedes that he “was never without religious principles” such as a belief in the existence of “the Deity,” who made the world and governed it and “that the most acceptable service of God was the doing good to man; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished, and virtue rewarded, either here or hereafter.”<sup>38</sup> Franklin’s acceptance of some Christian concepts and not others was predicated on his belief that the tenets he valued were universal—“essentials of every religion,” he writes. Outside of these “universal” values, Franklin argued that the particularities of belief of each sect “served principally to divide us, and make us unfriendly to one another.”<sup>39</sup> Of course, when Franklin writes “every religion” and religious conflict, he is not referring to Hinduism, Buddhism, the Ibo religion, or indigenous belief systems, but to the various Christian sects vying for power in the American colonies at the time, as well as the Catholic-Protestant conflicts in the U.S. and Europe. And though Franklin claims to be at odds with organized religion, in many ways, his argument for shedding some beliefs while retaining those that are seemingly “universal” absolutely falls in line with the very doctrine of Universalism that brought the Christian Church into being when, at the Council of Jerusalem in 50 A.D., St. Paul stated “circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing.”<sup>40</sup>

Franklin’s response to what he saw as the failures of “public worship” was to write his own “little Liturgy, or form of prayer, for my own private use (viz., in 1728), entitled, *Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion*.”<sup>41</sup> Through this move from public worship to private prayer,

Franklin reveals the ways in which secularism is not only highly suspicious of the church's authority, but also the ways in which it is markedly Protestant in its emphasis on the privatization of religion and religious practice. That is, secularization is not a process that disavows religion or is neutral with regard to religion, but a historical process in which religion is reframed, redefined, and resituated in both the public and private sphere according to Protestant ethics. Where the Church long acted as the principle organizer of social life, which was woven together through each man's relationship with God, and thus, himself and each other, secularists such as Franklin believed that God had no interest in the Earthly (i.e. "secular") dealings of mankind, which were much better understood in terms of economic and political systems of relation, rather than supernatural ones. Therefore, secularism reframed religion as an intensely personal, if not intimate matter, the institutions of which are tolerated only in so far as they enable the ideals of secular social networks, namely capitalism and what Carla Mulford describes as "early modern liberalism."<sup>42</sup> At the same time, those secular social networks are also deeply informed by the Christian doctrine they claim to eschew. In many ways, secularism not only reaffirms Christian morality, but foments its power by rearticulating it as a universal ethic based not in religious doctrine, but rationalism, which is crucially framed as a method for establishing irrefutable fact. Furthermore, Franklin frames his science as a commonsense alternative to religious doctrine in a way that frames the latter as little more than baseless belief and dogma—a framing that persists to this day and which is used to determine the toleration of some religious practices, while condemning others, particularly those that challenge rather than cultivate the ideals (and ideal subjects) of capitalism and liberalism. In many ways, it is this secular positionality that not-yet-sober-Mary initially takes within the rooms of AA, and the one that she ultimately abandons through her conversion to Catholicism.

At the point of turning away from public worship, Franklin writes, “it was about this time I conceiv’d the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection.” In order to do so, Franklin composes a list of thirteen virtues and an elaborate system by which he can cultivate each. Again, he notes the supposed universality of his system when he writes:

It will be remark’d that, tho’ my scheme was not wholly without religion, there was in it no mark of any of the distinguishing tenets of any particular sect. I had purposely avoided them; for, being fully, persuaded of the utility and excellency of my method, and that it might be serviceable to people in all religions, and intending some time or other to publish it, I would not have any thing in it that should prejudice any one, of any sect, against it.<sup>43</sup>

Among the thirteen virtues he lists, Franklin includes “order,” “cleanliness,” “moderation,” and “temperance,” honoring that definitions for these concepts are extremely varied and subjective. He writes, “temperance, for example, was by some confined to eating and drinking, while by others it was extended to mean the moderating every other pleasure, appetite, inclination, or passion, bodily or mental, even to our avarice and ambition.”<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, Franklin decides that, “for the sake of clearness, to use rather more names, with fewer ideas annex’d to each” and establishes an order of virtues that attends to the way in which “the previous acquisition of some might facilitate the acquisition of certain others.”<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, Franklin’s list begins with temperance as the primary virtue, which he defines as “eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.”<sup>46</sup> Though “temperance” and “moderation” both imply avoiding extremes, Franklin notes that his employment of “temperance” refers specifically to the consumption of alcohol and food, while “moderation” refers to the avoidance of extremes in all manners of living. On choosing temperance as the first of all virtues, Franklin writes, “temperance first, as it tends to procure that coolness and clearness of head, which is so necessary where constant vigilance was to be kept up, and guard maintained against the unremitting attraction of ancient habits, and the force of perpetual temptations.”<sup>47</sup> Without temperance, Franklin suggests that one can never really be appropriately self-governing.

The rhetorical moves he makes are important, particularly his emphasis on simplicity, common sense, and universality. He frames his science of morality as one that is easily accessible, learnable, and clear. Any struggle to make sense of it or apply it appropriately is, therefore, not a fault of the text, but of the subject, who is interpolated as a person “in whom the rational faculty was undeveloped.” But, in many ways, the deceptively simple definitions of his terms make room for an ambiguity that haunts the social norms of self-regulation to this day. What does it mean to “let all your things have their place,” to “lose no time,” or to “tolerate no uncleanness in body, cloaths, or habitation?”<sup>48</sup> Not only are the rules about cleanliness, productivity, and organization always in flux and culturally specific, but they are seldom explicit and often paradoxical. Within liberal secularist discourses, this ambiguity is often framed as freedom and flexibility, where the subject is given the “freedom” to choose for himself what is appropriate. The belief is that if this choice is made through reason, the subject will choose in a way that corresponds to a natural morality which is constitutive of social norms. What this framing fails to recognize, however, is the ways in which the social norms used to judge appropriate self-governance are hardly natural or universal or deducible through reason and that social mores greatly constrain the field of “acceptable” choices. Furthermore, Franklin’s rhetoric of “universality” also obscures the fact that not only are the concepts he holds as virtues decidedly English, Protestant, and bourgeois, but the rules of virtuous behavior shift dramatically depending on race, gender and class. In this way, Franklin’s science obscures more than it explicates, and perpetuates, rather than corrects, racist and sexist beliefs by interpolating those who fail to perform ideal (white, English, and Protestant) self-governance not as sinful subjects in need of God’s grace, but as racialized and/or gendered bodies naturally deficient in reason.

In *Lit*, Karr captures how rules about socially acceptable drinking not only evade her, but also shift depending on context and are often painfully gendered. Karr writes that she first

learned to drink as a way to bond with her father and block out her mother—both alcoholics themselves. In the book's second chapter, "The Mother of Invention," Karr writes about being taken to college by her mother, with whom she shares a screwdriver-fueled cross-country trip, during which, she writes, "in the room, I got puking drunk for the third night in a row. Hair of the dog, Mother said. The first screwdriver had smoothed me right out. However expert I was at drugs, I remained an amateur imbiber, yet drink was all I had that night to blind me to the presence growing slurry in the next bed" (30). While Karr learns the art of drinking as a coping mechanism both from and in response to her mother, she learns from her father the way in which it is a form of bonding. In the following chapter, Karr reminisces about going to the bar with her father as a young girl, who, "as a kid sitting on the bar, I'd sipped beer through the salted triangle of his aluminum can" (43). She also describes the moment in which her father allowed her to take her first drink of hard liquor—a moment that Karr depicts with the sanctity of a First Communion. "The bottle gleamed in the air between us," she writes. "I took the whiskey, planning a courtesy sip. But the aroma stopped me just as my tongue touched the glass mouth. The warm silk flowered in my mouth and down my gullet, after which a little blue flame of pleasure roared back up my spine. A poof of sequins went sparkling through my middle" (43). By the time Mary is in college, her ability to drink generously acts as a source of pride, rather than shame. Though she writes of being incredibly self-conscious about the poverty from which she came and resents her classmates for the wealth they have ("born on third base, my daddy always said of the well off, and think they hit a home run," she writes), she observes, "but by God, I could outdrink the little suckers." In an attempt to impress a boy, Mary takes several shots of tequila, "forgoing lime and salt." "The boys cheered," she writes (41-42). After dropping out, she gets a job at a bar, where "in the dim light of that horseshoe bar, I was boss," and "binge drinking disagreed with me in no way...I had an appetite for drink, a taste for it, a talent" (45).

It's not until Mary meets Warren that she begins to think of her "talent" as a problem, largely because of the way she is not like him and the way in which she sees him as an ideal subject, who "was bred in quiet and carries quiet in him but elegance also" (81). She writes, "every difference lures me, for if I can yield to Warren's way of being, his cool certainty can replace my ragtag—intermittently drunken—lurching around...I yearn for transformation, and Warren is its catalyst" (89). It's also with Warren that, for a time, Mary is able to control her drinking. Karr writes, "I've been dug in on Warren's one-or-two-beer policy, part of re-forming myself to fit him. As for doing with so little alcohol, so safely squirreled away do I feel in our book-lined rooms, undergoing my willed overhaul, that I could almost subsist on his breath alone" (90). She also attempts to "mimic his gargantuan work ethic—how early he rises to write, the number of sit-ups he grunts through at night" (89). In many ways, Karr's experiences with drinking reflect the unstated promise of female desire, which is "that to want properly will make you be wanted."<sup>49</sup> It is a promise, Carolyn Knapp writes, that "can create a powerful feeling of discord: Although in theory we may have the freedom and resources to satisfy our own appetites any way we choose, we have comparatively little freedom in determining, for ourselves, what those appetites should be, what true satisfaction might look or feel like."<sup>50</sup>

For Karr, performances of ideal self-governance are also intimately caught up with questions of class and race, and it is the presence of the Whitbreads that exacerbates Mary's intense class anxiety above all. She remarks that Mrs. Whitbread's silent judgement during their first encounter creates a moment in which Mary becomes hyper aware of her "half-Indian daddy" returning from a double shift with "grime under his nails" (83). Looking through their pristine and orderly photo albums, she's forced to consider what the "sloppy shoe box of photos in my homestead holds: Mother's cousin Henry drunk dressed as a matador; Daddy and his brothers with alligators they'd killed for the hides strung from a tree" (81). "How would the society page

editor chronicle my lineage for this historic visit to Fairweather Hall,” Mary wonders (81)?

Later, at their wedding, Karr comments on how her family, which she describes as “Texas trash” (109), is “so inadequately small compared to the profligate Whitbreads,” whom “taken together, they’re the tallest people in the room, and possibly the best looking” (107-08). Furthermore, Karr calls attention to the way in which the ideal secular subject is distinctly Protestant when Mrs. Whitbread asks Mary what religion her family practices. Mary answers “we’re not anything, really,” before she relays a few anecdotes about Presbyterian services and a joke about how Episcopalians are basically Presbyterians with trust funds. Her joke, however, does not elicit laughter from Mrs. Whitbread, but “an unmet glance” toward Warren, which reminds Mary that he had once brought home his classmate, Caroline Kennedy, whose “being a Catholic might have been a mark against her” (83).

However, for Mary, it is not that one’s class or race indicates one’s ability to control herself or not. On several occasions, Karr refers to the ways in which the Whitbreads’ performances of perfect self-restraint are just that—performances. Upon waking the morning after their strained first dinner, Karr writes that she overhears the Whitbreads arguing and watches the cook “take two long draws” of dark rum while making breakfast (86). During the wedding, she remarks that Warren’s inability to smell alcohol on her mother must stem from “all those heavy-drinking WASP country club events” where “he’d learned to ignore the average soused-up human” (106). And later, when their couple’s counselor asks Warren if he thinks Mary is an alcoholic, he says no, which inspires Karr to write, “those WASPs down so much sauce—the sober mind observes—that Warren wouldn’t know a dipsomaniac if one hit him with a polo mallet” (178). In this way, Karr renders denial as key to the Whitbreads’s displays of bourgeois disaffection. She writes, “It doesn’t matter that my mother-in-law sobs through much of the meal, not—I’m guessing—out of joy. Warren’s brother Dev says with genuine puzzlement

as we head down the grand staircase, *She was crying?* And I think How do they block this stuff out” (109)? Likewise, Karr acknowledges the ways in which ideal performances of self-restraint have little to do with actual control and more to do with affectation. Key to the ruse of ideal self-governance, which is merely a marker of class, is the way in which evidence of exertion, effort, or labor are concealed. Karr writes:

Effortless, excellence has to be. Tossed off, reflecting the ease you’re born to, which opposes what little I’ve garnered about comportment. I’m bred for farm work, and for such folk, the only A’s you get come from effort. Strife and strain are all the world can offer, and they temper you into something unbreakable, because Lord knows they’ll try—without letup—to break you. Where I come from, house guests have to know you’ve sweated over a stove, for sweat is how care is shown. At the Whitbreads’, preparations are both slapdash and immaculate. You toss some melba toast on a plate next to a fragrant St. André triple-crème cheese, or on Christmas Eve, half a pound of caviar casually flipped into a silver urn. It’s taken me so much effort just to do as medium-shitty as I’ve heretofore done. Just to drop out of college, stay alive, and have my teeth taken care of (82).

Similarly, Karr draws attention to the ways in which the rags-to-riches myth of the archetypal American self is employed to justify the concentration of wealth as a phenomenon of free and fair competition rather than an inherited entitlement. Despite how obvious Warren’s privilege is to both Karr and the reader, he is in absolute denial of it, and, for a while, Mary is too. They keep separate accounts and split bills on a “bleached-out neo-ghetto apartment” (88). This is partly because of Mary’s “poor girl’s need to prove solvency,” and largely out of Warren’s—whose “life’s goal involves living sparsely enough never again to be forced to ask his father for money”—need to believe that he doesn’t have to rely on his parents to succeed (92). When Mary accidentally runs up a twenty-dollar bar tab and has to ask Warren to loan her the money, he “opens his wallet and draws out the twenty, handing it over like a radioactive item with tongs,” an image which fills Mary with shame that is later amplified when Warren reminds her “and you quit your job. With your school loans and your father sick. Are you crazy” (94)? Warren sees Mary’s lack of self-restraint as evidence of insanity--of a person in whom the

rational faculty is underdeveloped. Mary believes this about herself too. Upon hearing the word “crazy,” Karr writes, “this is a buzzword with me, since deep down I know I’m crazy, my chief fear being that everybody’ll find out” (94).

Still, the greatest problem for Karr lies in the sense of isolation that performances of perfect self-restraint induce. While Mary and Warren never visit her family in Texas once in their first years of marriage, they spend every Christmas at the Whitbread estate, “which lures me in some ways and yet always saps me dry,” Karr writes. “This isn’t meant to sound peevish, for the Whitbreads are never not nice. But from the second I haul my bag up the curved stair, the place drains me of force like a battery going rust” (111). Karr partly attributes this to “the anesthetic effect of luxury” the home engenders, but also to the way in which “no sense of connection ever evolves into closeness. Outside each other’s company, Warren’s parents refer to each other as Mr. and Mrs. Whitbread, so I’d never presume first names” (112). And though Karr writes that she is “all too eager to inject myself into the clever table conversations,” she remarks that, “smart as the conversation is, it has a strangely repetitive quality. You never know anybody better—the talk never deepens, but neither does it show the slightest strain, and I’m nothing if not strained to the gills virtually every second. You enter the place and live suspended in amber like characters in a Victorian novel” (113).

In many ways, these feelings of alienation are attributable to the ways in which secularism privatizes practices of self-restraint. While Franklin remarks that his system of self-examination was inspired by “the advice of Pythagoras in his Golden Verses,” his practice is markedly different from those employed in ancient Greece largely in the way that are private, rather than social activities. As Foucault writes of ancient Greek and Roman practices in *Care of the Self*, “around the care of the self, there developed an entire activity of speaking and writing in which the work of oneself on oneself and communication with others were linked

together...[and] constituted, not an exercise in solitude, but a true social practice...[where] the care of the self—or the attention one devotes to the care that others should take of themselves—appears then as an intensification of social relations.”<sup>51</sup> From letter writing to elaborate systems of mentorship, the care of the self was one that emphasized interdependence and mutual aid rather than independence and absolute self-sufficiency. These practices are, as Foucault observes, later routed into various rituals within Catholicism, to which Karr converts.

This is not the case for Franklin’s science of self-making. On the contrary, his *Art of Virtue* is marked by the way in which it necessitates no one outside the self. Franklin makes no mention of interlocutors, advisers, sponsors, or outside influence in his practice, with the exception of one Quaker friend who simply suggests that he had “Humility” to his list of virtues. As Howe writes, “for Franklin, the process of self-construction was secular, deliberate, and highly individualistic.”<sup>52</sup> Critics such as Daniel Shea have characterized Franklin’s *Autobiography* as “a type of all the secular covenants made between Americans and a Puritanism trimmed of its forbidding ideology.”<sup>53</sup> However, I argue that it is not a “forbidding ideology” that Franklin’s secularist worldview discards. This is the myth that secularism spins about itself, when, in fact, it wholly preserves and reinvigorates that forbidding ideology by rearticulating it as a natural morality based in science and reason. Instead, what Franklin’s worldview ultimately rejects is the dependence on others, on the divine, on community, and on institutions frequently fostered by organized religious practice. This repudiation of dependence not only sits at the heart of his *Art of Virtue*, but also of the economic and political philosophies that undergird these self-making practices.

Eventually, through the explosion of medical discourse at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, dependence becomes marked not merely as a problem, but as a pathology, particularly through the emergence of addiction as an official medical diagnosis. Furthermore, while the “very notion

that people can consciously control themselves” fell out of favor by the mid-twentieth century, it has made a strong resurgence as a biological phenomenon in the past few decades.<sup>54</sup> Roy Baumeister and John Tierney write in *Willpower*—a sort of modernized version of Franklin’s “Art of Virtue” that was a *New York Times* bestseller two years after the publication of *Lit*—write that while willpower remained a central concern through the Victorian era, by the mid-twentieth century, concepts of the will became all but obsolete.<sup>55</sup> Instead, social scientists argued that external factors such as political oppression and economic deprivation were the root causes of “misbehavior,” and “the will came to be seem so unimportant that it wasn’t even measured or mentioned in modern personality theories. Some neuroscientists claim to have disproved its existence. Many philosophers refuse to the use of the term...some refer disdainfully to ‘the so-called will.’”<sup>56</sup> However, that began to change in the 1980s, when researchers such as Baumeister began to study self-regulation and claimed that their “experiments first demonstrated the existence of willpower,” and that “the most major problems, personal and social, center on failure of self-control...Poor self-control correlates with just about every kind of individual trauma.”<sup>57</sup> Baumeister and his colleagues now argue that willpower is more than a metaphor. It is a “mental energy” that “is fueled by the glucose in the body’s bloodstream.”<sup>58</sup> From Victorian concepts of the will to Freud’s energy model of the self, willpower has been reborn as a physiological phenomenon and a depletable resource that “like a muscle, becomes fatigued from overuse but can also be strengthened over the long term through exercise.”<sup>59</sup> Baumeister argues that “self-regulation failure,” or “ego depletion,” is “the major social pathology of our time.”<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, he claims that, “not surprisingly, some of these differences [in levels of self-control] were correlated with intelligence and social class and race.”<sup>61</sup> Of the concrete examples he gives of failures of self-control, he conspicuously includes “Serena William’s tantrum” at the 2009 U.S. Open.<sup>62</sup> In many ways, Franklin’s own theories of the will are uncannily similar to

those of Baumeister, who concedes that his studies have produced biological explanations of willpower that “looked an awful lot like [a quaint Victorian myth].”<sup>63</sup>

*Lit*, however, resists this medicalization. Through her participation in AA, her divorce from Warren (and, by extension, the Whitbreads), and her conversion to Catholicism, Karr comes to understand that the only way she can live without drinking herself to death is in networks of interdependence and socially-oriented self-care practices. Joan, the social theorist with the elegant page-boy haircut who Mary nicknames “Joan the Bone” and who eventually becomes her sponsor, tells her as much while they grab coffee together after a meeting. At this point, Mary still remains highly skeptical of AA, but continues to go to meetings because “doing it alone is not working” (205). “You spend way too much time alone,” Joan says to Mary (209). She advises her to do some volunteer work and all the requisite AA aphorisms, like take it one day at a time or let go and let God. “Let go, they urge me. Let go,” Karr writes. “I have no idea what this letting go means beyond surrounding myself with sober women—I mostly talk to women—and grouchily take their suggestions” (242). Soon, the growing sense of isolation and intense loneliness Mary feels throughout the book shifts. Stranded without childcare, she seeks out Chris, “an ex-hooker” she met at the halfway house, to help watch her son, Dev (243). When she breaks down on the side of the road, two acquaintances from AA find her and fix her radiator. Invited to attend an award banquet, another fellow AA member offers to go with her for moral support. And when Dev contracts bronchitis and “his codeine cough syrup looks tasty one night, it’s Patti who squirrels the bottle away in her glove box and drives by after work every evening to dispense his single teaspoon” (314). Soon, Mary finds herself with an immense support work, one in which she is also surprised by the ways in which she is “starting to ask after other people—a change from pouting alone on the porch before” (244). These material acts of mutual aid not help Mary establish a much-needed support network, but they also teach her the

ways in which asking for help and needing others is not a weakness, but a strength. They orient her to others, who are no longer cast as audience members for whom she must perform ideal self-composure. They are now equal participants in a communal act of life-sustaining practices. Five years into sobriety, Mary and two friends reflects on how the group has changed them. One of them jokes, “I wish I’d found it easier to love myself without having to love you two” (308).

But as her bonds within the fellowship of AA strengthen, Mary finds her marriage further deteriorating. Where Mary once saw Warren as the means through which she could create a sense of community and escape her own family’s insanity and addiction issues, he becomes part of the problem long before she even attempts to get sober. Shortly after giving birth to their son, Warren morphs from “comrade to capo” (165). She resents that he receives “endless praise” for dropping their son off at daycare, while the teachers and other Cambridge parents simply remind her of all the ways in which she fails at everything from laundry to her work as a Harvard English Department adjunct. “My longed-for family is choking me,” Karr writes. “The silk bow ties on my cheap business blouses—that middle-class disguise I’d wished for—are choking me. The good family name for my son is a strangle, since it forces me to drive with a restless kid hours in murderous traffic to dine with polite people who never, not in decades, stop being strangers” (165). She no longer sees Warren’s incredible self-restraint as a model, but as a constant insult, particularly in the face of her ever-increasing drinking, which grows alongside the ways in which she feels overwhelmed by the demands of both domestic and academic labor. When he questions her about polishing off a whole case of beer, Mary retorts, “Well, maybe you’re drinking more than you know,” which, Karr writes, “is laughable, as Warren is a fount of discipline, a completer of sit-ups, a runner of many miles. We have a rowing machine setup up in his study, and at night he pulls against oars for an hour at a pop. He barely uses a whole pat of butter on a potato. He slices turkey thin enough to read through” (174). And when Mary does

enter AA, Warren is more bewildered than relieved. Were Warren to write his own version of this story, Karr writes, “I’d no doubt appear drunkenly shrieking; spending every cent I could get my mitts on; alternately crowding his scholar’s home with revelers, then starting to vanish nights into a kind of recovery cult” (87). After their marriage becomes “nights on end of cordial agony,” they finally agree to a divorce—the first in the Whitbread’s unvarnished family tree. When Warren does break the news to his parents, “the channels between the family and me snap so totally shut, I don’t hear the fallout” (313).

However, Karr feels no great loss in her banishment from the Whitbread’s world. In many ways, it allows her to develop new structures of kinship—mostly those among the women she meets in AA, as well as spiritual guides she meets in the Catholic Church, and, most importantly, those strained bonds she shares with her own mother that I explore in the following section and which are intimately tied to her deepening relationship with God. In fact, the way in which Karr situates her divorce in her larger story of recovery and conversion directly contradicts Warhol and Michie’s description of how the “public recovery story” is “typically embedded in another important cultural master narrative: the marriage and reproduction plot.”<sup>64</sup> In considering the ways in which the effects of the AA narrative form shift when employed outside the context of AA and within stories meant for the consumption of the general public, Warhol and Michie observe that stories of recovery “frequently end with marriage and/or the birth of a child” where “euphoric marriage and professional successes structure and give meaning to recovery” and “marriage and recovery serve both as signs and guarantors of recovery.”<sup>65</sup>

*Lit*, however, frames the relationship between recovery, marriage and reproduction quite differently. Interestingly, Karr does frame the entire book as a search for family. In the first paragraph, Karr describes herself at the age of seventeen, staring out at the Pacific Ocean with a

group of “extremely stoned surfers.” “My family, I thought them to be,” Karr writes. “For such was my quest—a family I could stand alongside pondering the sea” (13). Karr’s yearning for family comes from her belief that her own biological family—marked by alcoholism, co-dependency, disease, poverty, infidelity, and violence—was fundamentally broken and, therefore, so was she. If she can only create the right family, then she’ll be complete, Mary believes. But, in fact, Mary finds the opposite in her marriage to Warren. Five years into sobriety, Karr writes that she “can see how Warren’s very essence looked like a corrective to who I was and didn’t want to be, which is unfair to him...someone who views a man as an antidote to her very being will find—over time—that antidote becomes an irritant” (312). By the end of the book, Mary discovers that reproducing the bourgeois family unit is, in fact, a misguided attempt at achieving what Charles Taylor describes in *A Secular Age* as a “sense of fullness.”<sup>66</sup> The belief that the reproduction of the bourgeois family unit acts as a source of fullness is indicative of what Taylor describes as the position of the secular subject, or “unbeliever,” who understands “fullness in terms of a potentiality of human beings understood naturalistically.” For the unbeliever, the power to attain fullness often “centers on our nature as rational beings.” Instead of a reverence for God’s power, the unbeliever feels a reverence for the power of rational agency, which, “when we finally manage to give this power full reign, and so live by it,” we find “the place of fullness.”<sup>67</sup> Crucially, this power comes from within, reinforcing the belief that “morality must be autonomous and not heteronomous.” This stands in contrast to the believer, for whom, “the account of the place of fullness requires reference to God, that is, to something beyond human life and/or nature.” Taylor writes:

For believers, often or typically, the sense is that fullness comes to them, that it is something they receive; moreover, receive in something like a personal relation, from another being capable of love and giving; approaching fullness involves among other things, practices of devotion and prayer (as well as charity, giving); and they are aware of being very far from the condition of full devotion and giving; they are aware of being self-enclosed, bound to lesser things and goals, not able to open themselves and

receive/give as they would at the place of fullness. So there is the notion of receiving power or fullness in a relation; but the receiver isn't simply empowered in his/her present condition; he/she needs to be opened, transformed, brought out of self.<sup>68</sup>

As I will show in the next section, it is this believing, porous-sense of self that Karr recovers as a site of fullness.

### 3.2 AFTER SUSPICION: REPARATIVE READING, SINFULNESS, AND THE POSTSECCULAR SELF

While suspicious reading practices dominate Mary's worldview for the first half of *Lit*, she spends the second half developing a reparative reading practice, one that begins in AA and then continues in her conversion to Catholicism, particularly through her training in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, which culminate in an act of Revelation in the final chapter of the book titled "My Sinfulness in All Its Ugliness." As I stated in the previous section, these reading practices are not developed in opposition to paranoid practices, but alongside and in a productive tension with them. Despite the ways in which Karr has been taught to resist seeing the world through a suspicious lens by fellow AA members, towards the end of *Lit*, Karr again finds herself in the role of the paranoid reader when she goes "God Shopping." Up to that point, Mary's experience with prayer sits firmly in the private and ambiguously—if not inoffensively, at least to secular humanist sensibilities—spiritual realm, rather than any organized religious practice. She writes, "despite my prayer life, organized religion still strikes me as bogus. Though Mother had poured over sacred texts of every kind, she was—as I've said before—no more able to commit to a faith than to a husband. She quoted Marx calling religion the opiate of the masses. So I'm suspect of the hierarchies" (331). Similarly, in a 2010 interview, Karr remarked that, until her conversion, "I thought I was curing myself with biofeedback. My big smart brain was keeping me sober. I took it as some sort of neurological phenomenon. I had a very materialist view of the world."<sup>69</sup>

Mary's ability to embrace "spirituality" and skepticism of "religion" is emblematic of a secularist view of "good" and "bad" religion that emerged directly out of the Protestant-Catholic conflicts in the U.S. and Europe, where the term "spirituality" has come to identify "good" religion, i.e. Protestant or Protestantized religion, which is understood as "benign, democratic, and self-evident."<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, "spirituality" also means to define an essential quality of all religion and has become "the common ground of opposition to 'bad' religion, the implicit category to which all purportedly constraining, undemocratic, backward forms of faith are consigned."<sup>71</sup> In "The Problem of the Postsecular," Tracy Fessenden observes the ways in which recent literary scholarship that defines itself as "postsecular" frequently employs the term "spirituality" as "shorthand for good religion—good insofar as it is spiritual, spiritual insofar as it is good—all the while seeming to float free of its own normative power." Fessenden argues that part of the problem with mobilizing "spirituality" in this way is that the term "naturalizes this progressive history of religion" rather than challenging it, as postsecular critique claims to do. Furthermore, it perpetuates false assumptions about religious practice and belief in the past versus the present, where religion of the past is defined as monolithic, homogeneous, and totalitarian, and religion of the present is defined as multiple, elective, and unmoored from doctrinal purity and dogma. As Fessenden writes, "The myth of a once uniform and replete, now scattered and vestigial religious past not only obscures the different pasts that inhere in and constrain the present. It also assumes a developmental model of religion that continues to shape the way we talk about it within and beyond university walls."<sup>72</sup> In many ways, Karr's process toward conversion troubles this dichotomy, as well as false assumptions about organized religious practice, particularly as a site of little more than doctrinal purity and dogma.

Mary's move toward organized religion begins when her eight-year-old son Dev requests that they go to church, "*to see if God's there.*" Initially, she and Dev attend an Episcopalian

church, because that's where "the only guy I know who goes to church" goes (331). "So disinterested am I, so devoid of curiosity, that I climb into my friend's car toting a paperback, like the one I carry to soccer fields stiff with frost, to pass time," Karr writes (331). Before they even enter the "capital-C Church," meaningfully located "between the university on one side and the housing projects on the other," Karr writes that she anticipated "some *Ozzie and Harriet* episode in progress...everybody in that old fluorescent light the color of cucumber that makes white people look so seedy" (331). Once inside, however, she's surprised to find that "this parish is half black, with people wearing jeans and khakis." After an inoffensive service, "somebody brings me coffee like I like"—an "uninvited niceness" that "seems like a trap" (332). Mary ultimately decides not to go back because "I find it too cold—not emotionally but physically," recalling the chill of the chair that "unplugs" her at her first AA meeting (190). At that point, Mary and Dev set out on a "God shopping" spree. While Mary enjoys the Hebrew at the conservative temple, Dev doesn't. While Dev likes the reform service, Mary finds the talk of Middle East strife "more political than spiritual." Same with the Baptist church, where she loves the gospel music, but not the anti-gay diatribe. When she attends the super-liberal Protestant parishes that shun dogma and claim not to believe in evil ("so obviously untrue," Karr writes), she finds them bloodless, particularly the sermons, which have "so squeezed out any mention of God or Jesus, maybe to sound modern, there's no sense of history" (332).

It isn't until attending a Catholic mass a year into god shopping that Karr's attitude toward organized religious practice shifts. She admits to having been particularly weary of Catholicism, having associated it with "the shame of my lapsed pals or the Inquisition's torture devices." However, at the particular service she attends, she's charmed by the way in which "the whole surface of the room is sloppy with kids" and how Father Kane, "a blue-eyed Irishman...takes us through Mass in the most unvarnished way, with none of the maudlin piety

I've seen at some other churches and temples." Also alluring to Karr is the ritual of Communion, which conjures both a sense of the self in which body, spirit and mind become fully integrated, while the self is situated in a more immediate and intimate relationship with her ancestral past. As she watches Dev sneak up to take a wafer, Karr writes, "I think how ancestors on both sides of his family sought this sacrament," which "is painfully carnal if you think of it. The body of the god is absorbed by the human body to nourish the spirit" (335). Karr later again comments on Catholicism's carnality, particularly in contrast to what she sees as the bloodlessness of Protestantism. When her mother, who is Episcopalian, "likens my church to a butcher shop," Karr writes, "At least there's a body on the cross, I say. There's carnality there. Protestants have this Platonic—I don't know—*idea* of a body. Too subtle for me" (353).

On the one hand, Karr's description of her search to find God as a form of shopping speaks not only to the ideology of the suspicious reader who finds capitalism wherever she looks, but also to the ways in which secularism constrains religion into a consumable object, where choosing a religion is no different from selecting a certain model of car or style of jeans. On the other hand, by reducing her opinions of various religious practices to brief aesthetic judgements, Karr also calls attention to the ways in which religious practice is a performative act of identity formation like any other. Furthermore, she points to the central role of aesthetics in both secular and religious identity formation and meaning making. Throughout *Lit*, the literary is crucially bound up with the sacred. Indeed, one of Mary's first spiritual experiences occurs not in church, but at a poetry reading. She writes, "I sat on the hard floor almost aquiver. Writers had heretofore been mythical to me as griffins—winged, otherworldly creatures you had to conjure from the hard-to-find pages they left behind" (49). Similarly, when Mary gets her first job teaching poetry in a group home for retarded women, she writes, "the way an uncertain believer might stumble onto proof of God, the women at the group home fully converted me to the Church of Poetry"

(54). Karr writes of how struck she was by “the unchecked emotion they embodied,” the scene of women, “part spelling bee, part revival meeting,” where they clapped ecstatically, “shouting with a gospel’s singer conviction” for Neruda and Yeats, while booing the “crummy ones” (57-58). When the women write their own poetry, Mary is enamored, if not envious, of their stripped down, unvarnished language, the way their poems were free of the “fancy names and references” that had cluttered her “poser’s pages” with “artistic pretension” (57). Ultimately, they form for Mary not only her aesthetic sensibility, but also her belief that poetry’s power as a “spiritual act” capable of producing a state of awe or fullness, which, for Mary, is always about *feeling* a connection. “Awe was okay with them, possibly their natural state,” Karr writes (59).

Similarly, Mary is initially drawn to Catholicism by its aesthetic sensibility, particularly the way in which it imbues the ordinary with the supernatural, and the present with the past. She is enchanted by the way Father Kane breaks the Eucharist, how “the movements are simple, stripped of any show—with the solemn dignity of an enlightened master mechanic adjusting a carburetor” (353). She prefers Catholicism’s aesthetics of embodiment in relation to the bloodlessness of Protestantism. And while parts of its history deeply trouble her, it has a history—both ancestral and cultural—with which she can materially connect through the rituals. Echoing these exact sentiments in her 2010 interview, Karr said of her initial attraction to Catholicism:

What struck me really wasn’t the grandeur of the mass, it was the simple faith of the people. It’s almost what you get with poetry, you see people in a state of profound feeling. And so, particularly that first mass, I was reading, doing work for a lecture, when they made their intentions...and I thought, wow, these are people in a public venue bringing their greatest terror and their greatest hope and who couldn’t do reverence to that? You’d have to be dead inside. I did believe in the human heart and the human soul I think as a poet, I think the only awe I really had was around poetry, was that sense of wonder at what we endure as human beings, and what we can share with each other through language and through art.

Karr's aesthetic evaluation of her first Mass echoes T.S. Eliot's meditation on the aesthetic goals of poetry in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," where he writes of poetry's need to have

[A] perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity...No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.<sup>73</sup>

In many ways, Karr models these qualities in her own prose—a mix of coarse Texan colloquialisms, lyrical syntax, and AA clichés that purposely imbues everyday language and life with a sense of both history and the sacred. She also pays homage to literary history throughout, framing the book with an epigraph from Homer's *The Odyssey* ("Passage Home? Never."), while each chapter—forty-five in total—features an inscription culled from the works of everyone from Don DeLillo and Louise Gluck to Milton and St. Augustine. What, Karr seems to be asking, do these seemingly disparate works all share in common other than the literary value they've been assigned? What makes poetry like prayer? Is it something in the way it is written, or something in the way it is read?

After a week or two of attending Mass, Mary realizes that she's "not just coming for Dev anymore" (336). At that point, still incredibly skeptical of organized religion, she also begins reading "all manner of theology," a "historical interest, I tell myself" (335-36). While being well aware that "historically, plenty of Catholics worked *for* tyranny," she also becomes familiar with "the lay tradition of working with the poor and against political tyranny" through her church's Peace and Social Justice Committee, where "they argue like mad. Say what you will about Catholic dogma, like it or lump it, it sure gets people yakking it up" (336). Still, Mary struggles with reading the Bible in a way that doesn't confirm that "Jesus Himself seems sappy—a chump

or a fool” (336). In one conversation with Father Kane, she cites a scene in which she argues Jesus is being “snotty to the lady at the well...putting her down for sleeping around” (336). Father Kane responds, “You think He’s angry?...I always thought He was joking or teasing her. And she was just shocked He knew that stuff about her life.” When Mary goes back to review the story, Karr writes, “It’s true. Looking at the text, I’ve overlaid a judgmental tone on the story” (336). Karr’s religious training becomes further enmeshed with that of her literary training when Tobias Wolff—her literary mentor and colleague whom she describes as “one of my literary heroes” and who later becomes her godfather (338)—is tasked by Father Kane with giving her private readings on the gospels in preparation for her baptism. For Karr, the greatest struggle remains accepting Jesus as more than just “some carnival trickster” or that any of the supposed miracles in the Bible ever happened (349). As Mary breaks down the text—citing its lack of evidence, logical fallacies, and general unfathomability—Toby stops her and asks why she has never taken communion at any of the churches she’s visited. “Those priests don’t know if you’re Catholic or not,” he says. Mary remarks, “That would defile the Sacrament, insult the belief of all those people in church who’re committed to the faith.” “So, he says, that is sacred to you?”

Karr never does resolve her ambivalence about the figure of Jesus. Her confession is not a statement of belief in the crucifixion as a miraculous event or a story about how she was able to logically prove that Jesus is, in fact, the son of God. She ultimately converts because, as Dev remarks after his baptism, “*We belong to a great big family,*” one in which Karr is bonded to others through a social framework that contains a complex set of social practices, rituals, ideas, norms, and laws. And what Karr comes to understand about faith is that it “is a choice like any other. If you’re picking a career or a husband—or deciding whether to have a baby—there are feelings and reasons pro and con out the wazoo. But thinking it through is—at the final hour—

horse dookey. You can only try it out” (351). The fact that Karr feels no need to resolve her attitudes about Jesus and the reasons why she ultimately converts draws attention to what secular definitions of religious life fail to recognize—that religion has historically functioned as much more than blind belief. As Craig Calhoun writes in *Rethinking Secularism*, the concept of “religion” as “an ideological construct of beliefs joined with an institutional community unrelated to public life” emerged out of the Enlightenment, when the “image of the triumph of the secular over religion required a clear notion of the ‘religion’ that was being contained.” In fact, “the term ‘religion’ was not one that was frequently used, even by Christians, until the Enlightenment’s deployment of the secular/religious distinction.”<sup>74</sup> Outside of secularism’s containment, religion, in fact, denotes a wide range of human activity and behavior that is no more or less invested in belief than any other social organizing framework—all of which also demand and make space for a great deal of blind faith. As Fessenden writes, “people do, after all, live with all manner of belief in registering its pressures, possibilities, and psychic costs...fuzzy belief is hardly foreign to religion...or sedimented in history, including the history of doctrines and creeds.”<sup>75</sup>

In many ways, Karr comes to accept Catholicism and organized religious practice in an older sense of the term. While there is debate over the origins of the term “religion,” some argue that it comes from the Latin *relego*, “to read again” or “repeat,” as “one might do with scripture or creeds.” Others argue that it comes from *religare*, “to bind anew, as in a contract or covenant” And then there are those who point to *res-legere*, “with regard to a gathering,” as in a religious group.<sup>76</sup> All etymological senses of the term seem applicable to the ways in which Karr comes to appreciate Catholicism—as a community, as a renewed bond, and as a form of reading. In fact, the final scene of the book portrays Karr reading from her mother’s childhood bible only to experience what she describes as a “miracle,” though, she warns, “this is not the parting of the

Red Sea. This is not a dead friend arisen from his gauze windings and peering out of the stone tomb or stilling the waves about to upend up my boat...[a]s miracles go, it may not even seem like one” (383).

After a grueling day of moving her mother out of her decrepit home and into her new condo, Mary arrives at her mother’s new place feeling exhausted but exalted by being “able to help Mother for once with more than a check in the mail” (377). However, gratitude is not what Mary’s mother has waiting for her. Instead, Mary is met with a relentless verbal assault, in which her mother accuses her of raping her and robbing her of all she holds dear. “I’ve been sitting here wondering whether it would make you happy to come in and find me with my brains blown out. That’s what would really make your day,” her mother shouts (378). Caught off guard by what she describes as an “ambush,” Karr writes: “I feel the entire fabric of the world began to undergo a profound shift. I cease to be myself, or rather, my adult self. Time arcs back, carrying me in it” (379). Suddenly, Mary finds herself robbed of serenity, emotionally and psychologically reverting back to a place in which she would drink the poison to hurt those she most loved. Though Mary doesn’t pick up the bottle, she launches back at her mother with an equally nasty slew of insults that ends in “*you selfish fucking bitch*” (380). It is in this moment, Karr writes, that she finds her “sinfulness in all its ugliness—not in prayer but in its absence. Without God, any discomfort makes me capable of attacking with piety the defenseless—including a frail, confused old lady who’s lost her home of fifty years. And it’s for this type of realization that God—in His infinite wisdom—created mirrors. I put Mother to bed and catch a glimpse of us as I pull the covers up to her chin” (381).

But it is not only in her mother that Karr recognizes her own ugliness, her ability to be moved to such cruelty and anger. After apologizing to her sobbing mother, who is “claiming to understand,” Mary then retreats to her bedroom, where she has a fitful sleep that results in

nightmares that force her to wake, screaming. Though she tries to pray, “I feel the words sucked from my mouth into a vacuum where God is not,” she writes (381). That’s when Mary recalls the Scriptures that Sister Margaret, “a bulky Franciscan nun” who has been acting as her spiritual director, instructed her to read (368). Mary digs through a box of books to find a Bible, which she does, “floppy and old, its binding cracked and peeling like a batwing” (381). In it, she reads an inscription from her grandmother to her mother from 1927. As she flips through the onionskin pages in search of verses seven through twelve of Psalm fifty-one, “what I see makes the skin of my scalp prickle, for the lines are marked in pale chalk. A child’s hand has drawn a wavy line in the margin—not across the whole psalm, only alongside the lines I’ve been steered to—verses seven to twelve, which very deliberately traverse two sections of verse from the middle of one to the other” (382). Nowhere else in the bible does she notices any other markings, with the exception of the exact passage in the Epistle of James that Sister Margaret also suggested she read. Karr writes, “it feels as if God once guided my mother’s small hand, circa 1920-something, to make two notes I’d very much need to find seventy years later—a message that I could be made new, that I am—have always been-loved” (383).

In this way, Karr models a reparative reading practice best understood not according to the “semiotic ideology” of secular reading practices, but to what Saba Mahmood describes as an “understanding of icons that...has a long and rich history within different traditions, including Christianity and ancient Greek thought” and in which “the power of an icon lies in its capacity to allow an individual (or a community) to find him- or herself in a structure that has bearing on how one conducts oneself in this world.”<sup>77</sup> It is a semiotic ideology in which, “the term *icon*...pertains not just to images but to a form of relationality that binds the subject to an object or an imaginary.”<sup>78</sup> It can also be understood according to Aristotle’s concept of *schesis*, which describes “a modality of attachment” between reader and representation that is defined by “a

sense of embodied habitation and intimate proximity that imbues such a relation.”<sup>79</sup> *Schesis* captures the way in which the divine and its representation exist in a “living relation because of its heightened psychophysiological and emotional connotations and its emphasis on familiarity and intimacy as necessary aspects of the relation.”<sup>80</sup>

Within the scene from *Lit*, Mary experiences this intimacy of relation when she reads her mother’s childhood markings not only as having been put there for her, but as an unquestionably divine intervention. From the perspective of a “modern sensible” reader, Mary’s interpretation would be construed as a misreading in which she misrecognizes what the signs mean.<sup>81</sup> But from a different perspective, the meaning that Mary makes from her interaction with the text is perfectly reasonable in the way that instantiates a set of relations between her, her mother and God in a way that allows her to experience grace—grace for which she is rescued from her “sinfulness.” Again, sinfulness here does not function in its secular sense of a bad deed that marks an aberrantly bad person. Sinfulness, instead, marks the way in which Mary, like all human beings, are incapable of controlling their passions according to the doctrine of original sin.

As the culminating scene of *Lit*, a book that is ostensibly “about getting drunk and getting sober,” this moment profoundly redefines “addiction” in several ways. First, the doctrine of original sin suggests that one’s inability to exercise reasoned control over one’s passions is not emblematic of an abnormal person, but is the normative state of all human beings. By identifying herself as a “sinner,” Mary thus resists pathologization and reframes her inability to control her drinking as normative rather than not. Second, the central problem of addiction is not dependence, as medical models suggest, and recovery is not about regaining self-control. The problem with those dependencies we mark as “addictions” is that they are life-attenuating, largely because of the way they interfere in building social relations that are life-affirming. The

goal, then, is not to extinguish dependency, but to establish new practices and habits of interdependence that are life-affirming and build a sense of community.

---

1. Karr, *Lit*, 189. Hereafter cited in the text.

2. O'Reilly, *Sobering Tales*, 145.

3. Cannon, 5.

4. There is great debate both inside and out of AA about the commensurability of alcoholism with other addictions, largely because of the different types of social stigmas and cultures that surround different types of addictions, though almost all AA members acknowledge that the root causes of all forms of addiction are ultimately the same (i.e. "the self"). This has created huge controversy over the years and it is one that still remains unresolved, even though a majority of members have struggled with multiple addictions and there are many AA members who never struggled with alcohol, but with other substances, but who prefer the culture of AA over groups such as Narcotics Anonymous (NA), for example. These differences of opinion are reflected in different types of meetings. While some emphasize a "singleness of purpose," in which members are asked to refrain from referencing addictions outside of alcoholism, there are others where members discuss issues related to heroin, meth, sex, gambling, and shopping as much or more often than they do alcohol. For the purposes of my dissertation and this chapter, I use "alcoholism" and "addiction" interchangeably, while also attending to the ways in which they are differently stigmatized.

5. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 5.

6. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 142.

7. *Ibid.*, 147.

---

8. A “lead” is a reference to the role of the “lead speaker” who has been invited to share her story of alcoholism and recovery at an AA meeting—usually those people who have at least one year of sobriety.

9. This isn’t to say that simply attending one meeting of AA marks someone as an alcoholic or an addict. Many people do realize that AA isn’t for them. This is to say that those who eventually adopt the perspective of the program (such as Karr) cite this moment of ambivalence and suspicion as crucial to their story. Furthermore, though I find the concept of “voluntariness” to be problematic, particularly in relation to addiction, many people, unlike Karr, find themselves at AA meetings under more coercive circumstances, whether they were court ordered or given ultimatums by family members. But even these people sometimes find that such interventions, legal or familial, were crucial to their eventual recovery because they would have never sought help on their own. Similarly, those who having seemingly gone to an AA meeting without outside force claim often claim that they didn’t feel as though they had a choice in going or not. Indeed, one of the goals of this dissertation is to problematize the concepts of voluntariness, agency, and autonomy.

10. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 64.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *AA*, 58.

13. Warhol and Michie, “Twelve Step Teleology,” 328.

14. *Ibid.*, 336.

15. Travis, *The Language of the Heart*, 130.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Warhol and Michie, 348.

---

18. Though Karr doesn't give an exact year, she was born in 1955 and in 2011, when *Lit* was published, she was 22 years sober.

19. Mahmood, "Religious Reason," 861.

20. "Mary Karr: Prayer, Poetry and the Catholic Faith."

21. Ibid.

22. Smith and Watson, 116.

23. Smith and Watson, 116.

24. Shea, *Spiritual Autobiography*, 234-248.

25. Franklin used the terms "science" and "art" interchangeably when referring to his "Art of Virtue." See Howe, 30.

26. Howe, *Making the American Self*, 21.

27. Ibid., 22.

28. I purposefully refer only to the masculine subject here, because of how faculty psychology reinforced beliefs that women were less capable of self-governance than men, though they were paradoxically held to a higher standard of restraint.

29. Howe, 35.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. As quoted in Howe, 34.

33. As quoted in Howe, 35.

34. Ibid., 26. Of course, the concept of "people in whom the rational faculty was undeveloped" was explicitly tied to issues of race, gender, and class.

35. Franklin, 63.

36. Franklin, 63.

---

37. Paine, *Age of Reason*, 6.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. *King James Bible*, 1 Cor. 7.19. For more on Christian Universalism, see Badiou, *St.*

*Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*.

41. Franklin, 63.

42. See Mulford, *Benjamin Franklin and the Ends of Empire*.

43. Franklin, 70.

44. Franklin, 64.

45. Ibid., 65.

46. Ibid., 64.

47. Ibid., 65-66.

48. From Franklin's definitions of "Order," "Industry," and "Cleanliness," 64-65.

49. Ibid., 15.

50. Ibid.

51. Foucault, 51-55.

52. Howe, 44.

53. Shea, 239.

54. Baumeister and Tierney, 8.

55. Baumeister and Tierney, 8.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid., 2.

58. Ibid., 1.

59. Ibid.

---

60. Ibid., 11.

61. Ibid., 13.

62. Ibid., 2.

63. Ibid., 9.

64. Warhol and Michie, 344.

65. Ibid., 346.

66. Taylor writes of fullness: “We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be. This is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring. Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition, e.g., of peace or wholeness; or able to act on that level, of integrity or generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness. But sometimes there will be moments of experienced fullness, of joy and fulfillment, where we feel ourselves there” (5).

67. Ibid., 8

68. Ibid.

69. “Mary Karr: Prayer, Poetry and the Catholic Faith.”

70. Fessenden, “The Problem of the Postsecular,” 165.

71. Ibid.

72. Ibid.

73. Eliot, 37.

74. Calhoun, 7.

75. Fessenden, 159.

---

76. Calhoun, 7.

77. Mahmood, 845.

78. Ibid.

79. Ibid., 847.

80. Ibid., 848.

81. Ibid.

## Chapter 4. THE NYMPHOMANIAC

When we first meet Joe, the protagonist and embattled narrator of Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* (2014), she is lying bloodied, beaten, and unconscious in an alley, where she is discovered by Seligman, a hermit-like bibliophile on his way home from grocery shopping. As Seligman leans over Joe's body, he dispassionately delivers the first lines of the film: "you've had an accident. You need an ambulance. I'll call for one. I'll be right back. Lie still here." Slowly regaining consciousness, Joe utters "No. No," with a dulled resistance.

"No what?" Seligman asks.

"I don't need an ambulance."

"I can clearly see you do. I'll call for one," Seligman insists.

"In that case, I'll be up and gone before you have time to come back," Joe threatens, struggling to lift her head and open her eyes.

"That will hurt," Seligman warns.

"That's possible. But it doesn't matter to me."

Seligman remarks that Joe would probably also prefer he didn't call the police. "Yes, that's exactly right," Joe says.

"Is there anything you want?"

After taking a few seconds to consider his question, Joe soberly replies, "I would like a cup of tea with some milk," at which Seligman chuckles.

"Well, you have to come with me. I don't serve tea in the street."

Back in his apartment, Seligman helps Joe into bed. As he gathers up her things, he tells her that he will wash her clothes.

"Not my coat," Joe insists while crawling into bed.

“It smells rather badly,” Seligman insists.

“It’s my coat. The smell won’t come off it anyway.”

“It’s your coat,” Seligman agrees, before going to retrieve Joe’s cup of tea.

As Joe lies in bed, sipping her tea, Seligman asks “so what happened? Were you robbed?”

Before Joe can even answer, Seligman is already pulling up a chair in anticipation of her story.

“It’s my own fault. I’m just a bad human being,” Joe says.

“I’ve never met a bad human being,” Seligman replies.

“Well, you have now.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Seligman asks.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“I wouldn’t know where to start.”

And so begins the film, in which Joe tells Seligman the story of how he came to find her in a state of total abjection. It is a story that, once she finds a way to start (hint: it begins with her “cunt”), Joe warns is long “and moral, I’m afraid.” But even before Joe can begin telling her story, this opening scene directs our attention to how her personal narrative is forced to maneuver a series of assumptions made about her—namely that she is a helpless victim in need of medical intervention. At least, these are the assumptions made by Seligman in what we later learn is his misreading of the scene—a scene which von Trier constructs as a cinematic cliché so intensified that its form calls attention to how Joe is as much a victim of visual representation and language as she is of diegetic violence. Before Seligman appears, the camera slowly pans across the alley, deliberately accruing meaning as parts of Joe’s body are juxtaposed with trash

cans, gutters, and, especially, the dark, gaping hole of a garbage chute—a visual echo of the parenthesis that mark the *NYMPH()MANIAC* title shot meant to name not only the film, but the lifeless woman in the alley. After the camera’s slow pan down the chute, the film then jump-cuts to a long shot of Joe lying in diffuse light. When Seligman finally stumbles across the scene, his dispassionate observation that Joe has “had an accident” draws our attention not only to the scene’s overdetermined form, but also to how Joe is being visually represented in a film of which she is ostensibly the narrator. Before Joe can assert who she is, she has to argue against who she isn’t, fighting not only Seligman, but also von Trier. As soon as she regains consciousness, Joe actively resists how Seligman interpolates her as a victim and engages with her as such—tucking her into bed, offering to wash her clothes, bringing her tea, and prompting her to tell her story in a way which suggests that, in her telling, she might be able to unburden herself, find healing, recover some of her agency. But Joe adamantly insists that Seligman neither call an ambulance nor the police. She refuses to let him wash her coat, just as she will later disallow him to sanitize her story, because it is *her* coat, and *her* story. And when he suggests that she has been the victim of a robbery, Joe promptly corrects him that she is no victim, she is “a bad human being,” a statement that Seligman finds incredulous and immediately dismisses hoping to relieve Joe of her negative self-image. But Joe does not want to be relieved, because, for her, it is only in the teleological narrative of the “bad human being” that her agency can be made visible.

Seligman’s interpolation of Joe as an absolute victim and Joe’s emphatic insistence on being a “bad human being,” speaks to the central problem of modern models of addiction, which, as Peg O’Connor argues, “rest on a false dilemma” between choice and disease, a fallacious binary that “posits that only two options exist...[and] must be mutually exclusive.”<sup>1</sup> As I discussed in the previous chapter, the conventional history of addiction suggests that its medicalization was a good thing. Where the addict was once understood as a sinner worthy of

punishment, through the language of pathology, the addict is instead described as a victim in need of compassion and care. Through medicine's reframing of addiction-as-disease, the addict is able to escape the criminalization of addiction-as-sin. But this has not been the case. At the same time that addiction is defined by the National Institute on Drug Abuse as a "relapsing brain disease," addicts are also incarcerated at staggering rates.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the simultaneous pathologization and criminalization of addicts paradoxically troubles the very binary on which these conflicting modern models of addiction are based.

But the problem isn't simply that, despite the medical model, a residual, moralist model of addiction stubbornly persists—one that Bennet Foddy and Julian Savulescu describe as "the Lay View," which understands addiction as a choice and addicts as "morally corrupt hedonists who value immediate pleasure above all else."<sup>3</sup> The problem is also that medical models reproduce the very moralism they claim to repudiate. For example, in its symptomology of addiction, the DSM includes the "continued use of the substance despite having persistent or recurrent social or interpersonal problems caused or exacerbated by the effects of its use" and "recurrent use of the substance resulting in a failure to fulfill major role obligations at work, school, or home."<sup>4</sup> Though medical models attribute these behaviors to a pathological lack of will, rather than a willful hedonism or personal moral failure, they continue to assume that these disruptive and arguably immoral behaviors are evidence of a disordered self, rather than the outcomes of the normative self. That is because both medical and moral models of addiction are based on the same liberal concept of self.

In *Beyond Individualism*, Jack Crittenden traces the historical formation of the liberal self from Plato, "for whom the illumination of the order of being was found externally in the realm of the Forms," through Augustine, "the initiator of the use of 'radical reflexivity,' which we use to return to God," and, finally, to Descartes and Locke, "both of whom situated the moral standards

and sources within us.”<sup>5</sup> Crucial to the formation of the Cartesian self was also the objectification of the body. As Crittenden argues, “to objectify the body meant, and means, to separate it from subjectivity; mind, not matter, is our essential nature. Because mind is now separate from matter, it is also separate from the cosmos, as the universe of matter.”<sup>6</sup> In *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor describes this as the “internalizing move of modern humanism,” a move in which Crittenden writes, “the capacities that once flowed out of a public order” become understood “as inherent in man's own nature.”<sup>7</sup> Also understood as inherent in man’s nature—and that which separates him and places him above other living beings—is his employment of reason in his decision making process. In his famous humanist treatise, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” Harry Frankfurt writes, “it is my view that one essential difference between persons and other creatures...[is] that they are able to form what I shall call ‘second-order desires’ or ‘desires of the second order.’”<sup>8</sup> Crucial to this second order process is the economic theory of rational choice, which suggests that, when faced with a set of options, human beings generally employ reason in order to choose the best one. In fact, much of how liberal governance works rests on this assumption.

But this is hardly the way human beings make the majority of their choices. From Pierre Bourdieu’s social theory of “habitus,” which argues that human beings do not generally act according to rational calculations of the mind, but according to their “feel for the game,” to neuroscientific studies of habit formation and cognition, there is a wealth of research that shows how human beings are hardly rational actors.<sup>9</sup> Take, for example, the scientific data on how habits are generally formed—how they live in an entirely different part of the brain from where conscious thought occurs, how they get hardwired into our neural networks thanks to the pleasure pathways they repeatedly activate, and how they are incredibly difficult to break, because the conscious effort required to do so is something the brain naturally resists in its effort

to work efficiently.<sup>10</sup> Where Immanuel Kant attributed his strict routine of rising every morning at 4:55 and his healthy diet to his skilled employment of reason and self-restraint, neuroscience attributes his private self-management to the same neurological patterns that can produce one's addiction to crack.<sup>11</sup>

When one examines the sheer amount of psychological, neurological, biological and sociological research that shows how reason is but one of numerous social, biological, and psychological factors that inform our actions, it becomes clear that the understanding of self and choice on which modern models of addiction are based is deeply flawed. But despite all this evidence, the concept of the self as inherently rational continues to serve not only as the justification for liberal forms of governance, but also as the yardstick by which we determine who is capable of appropriate self-governance or not and, thus, who is granted access to human rights. If one makes the “right,” i.e. moral, choice, then one is understood as reasonable, rational and engaged in appropriate self-governance. But if one makes the “wrong,” i.e. immoral choice, then one is understood as unreasonable, irrational, and incapable of appropriate self-governance. This is true despite whether the reason for that failure is attributed to an organic disease, a psychological disorder, or willful immorality. Either way, the addict's engagement in “irrational” behavior signifies a lack of reason that demands an institutional intervention, be it judicial or medical. Often, as the data shows, it's both.<sup>12</sup>

The central tension of *Nymphomaniac* thus emerges from this double-bind, which it frames as a problem of narrative, visual representation, and methods of interpretation. Over the course of four hours (five for the director's cut),<sup>13</sup> the film reveals how both the disease and lay views of addiction function as archetypal narrative forms and cinematic clichés that constrain the addicted subject, whose only recourse to agency is via the “long and moral” narrative of the “bad human being” who must suffer the consequences of her actions. But rather than reinforce this

teleology, *Nymphomaniac* often employs what Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai refer to as “anxiogenic” comedic techniques that call attention to “forms of intersubjectivity we usually don’t think about but that we rediscover as presupposed by our very compulsion to make jokes and judgments in the first place.”<sup>14</sup> Through his use of incongruity and his employment of biosociation and Bakhtinian narrative techniques, von Trier constructs a series of serio-comic impasses in which assumptions about choice and disease, responsibility and agency, and volition and compulsion are placed into crisis.

Key to this world-building is how von Trier intensifies and ironizes a variety of cinematic tropes and clichés. As Joe observes of her own story, “All of this sounds frighteningly close to the clichés of our times.” Bonnie Honig and Lori Marso argue that von Trier’s films often act “as intensifying clichés of gender, power, and politics in ways that ironize them and may usefully press democratic and feminist theory in new directions.”<sup>15</sup> Crucial to this intensification is how Seligman and Joe are caricatured as extreme opposites—self-restrained rational masculinity on the one hand and carnal, excessive desire on the other. While Joe is a self-described “nymphomaniac,” Seligman is a self-described “asexual” virgin. While her way of knowing the world is produced through sex, Seligman’s knowledge solely comes from books. And while Joe continually insists throughout her “moral” story that she is a “bad human being,” Seligman frequently interrupts her story, using evidence from the books he has read, to argue against her self-representation. Seligman’s interjections and moments of “mansplaining” not only speak to how medicine has repeatedly displaced addicts as the authority of their own experiences, but it also speaks to the narratological double-bind addicts find themselves in as *either* suffering victims *or* repentant sinners, and most often as both at once.

But it also isn’t the case that Seligman and Joe are always at odds, merely functioning as overwrought narrative foils, or that Joe is merely a victim of Seligman’s analysis. Not only do

their opposing perspectives generate a productive ambivalence about agency, moralism, and storytelling, but Seligman's digressions and metaphors—from biblical stories and Bach to fly fishing and Poe—also help reveal as much as they obscure about Joe. When he misses the point, Joe lets him know it, and when his wanderings resonate, Joe gladly takes them up and uses them to structure and enrich her story, often synthesizing them with her lived experiences in ways that re-materialize the disavowed intimacies between empiric and cultural knowledge systems. Furthermore, Joe frequently uses objects she finds in Seligman's apartment as inspiration for the framing and themes of her story, reminding us that the process of telling one's own story is always a social act that cannot be understood as *either* an act of subjection *or* an act of self-determination. As Joe says at the beginning of the final chapter, "The Gun," "whether I left society, or society left me, I cannot say. I suppose you can make an argument for both sides."

Crucial to this ambivalence is Joe's repeated insistence that she is a "nymphomaniac" rather than a "sex addict." The distinction isn't merely semantic. While "sex addiction" did evolve directly out of "nymphomania" and, for a time, replaced it in the DSM, its meaning is dramatically different, and its history is much shorter. As Carol Groneman writes in *Nymphomania: A History*, "the idea that sex could be an addiction developed in the late 1970s and 1980s at a time when addiction appeared everywhere: not only alcohol and drugs, but too much gambling, shopping, working, eating or having sex."<sup>16</sup> Though "sex addiction" made an appearance in the 1987 revised edition of the DSM-III—replacing "Don Juanism" and "Nymphomania" as terms—it was quickly dropped.<sup>17</sup> Though still not officially recognized by the APA as a disorder, "sex addiction" has gained traction as a legitimate phenomenon in the public sphere and among addiction researchers. In 1999, Oprah Winfrey claimed that "sexual addiction was the number one addiction in the country, affecting over 20 million people, with over 2,000 support groups meeting nationwide."<sup>18</sup> Not only is there a Sex Addicts Anonymous,

along with numerous M.D.s, Ph.D.s, and social workers who specialize in sex addiction—sometimes also referred to as “hypersexual disorder” (a term which nearly made the DSM-V)—but there is also an academic, peer-reviewed journal on the subject titled *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*. A 2016 study states that sex addiction is most common among men, is often linked to a history of sexual or physical abuse, and often appears alongside other sexual disorders, such as pedophilia.<sup>19</sup>

Nymphomania, on the other hand, refers solely to women, and, as Groneman contends, while it’s a “relatively modern concept”—first appearing in the early eighteenth century—“its roots are ancient.”<sup>20</sup> The concept emerges from the second century Greek concept of uterine fury, which “occurred particularly among young widows whose loss of sexual fulfillment could drive them to madness.”<sup>21</sup> Like uterine fury and hysteria, nymphomania was linked to the nature of women’s bodies, understood in ancient Greek medicine as delicate, leaky and highly volatile, already or always on the verge of becoming disordered. While Melissa Friedling describes the addict as the “contemporary inheritor of hysteria,” the nymphomaniac is best understood as the addict’s most direct ancestor. Indeed, the nymphomaniac appears at the dawn of modern medicine and almost two centuries before the consolidation of the medical field. She sits at the nexus of moralism and medicine, of differing conceptions of the female body, the self, and disease. She ushers back in the issue of the spirit and the supernatural in her links to both Ancient Greece and Christianity, and exposes how religious and secular thought exist not as opposing forces, but how they’ve been “necessarily linked in their mutual transformations and historical emergence.”<sup>22</sup> Joe’s insistence that she is a “nymphomaniac” and not a “sex addict” forces us to consider the difference by placing medical models of addiction “within the longer history of notions of not only health but embodiment and of what it means to be human.”<sup>23</sup> In doing so, Joe’s story of nymphomania not only highlights how addicts are simultaneously

pathologized and criminalized by modern models of addiction, but it also employs understandings of the self that both trouble liberal accounts of agency, and expose why it is that we cling to them.

Ultimately, Joe's insistence on the term "nymphomaniac" and on her inherently sinful nature feels absurd, not only because it's an archaic concept, but also because it overtly violates the binary of disease and choice on which modern models of addiction are based. But, as Honig and Marso suggest, it is precisely through this absurdity that *Nymphomaniac* opens up new possibilities for feminist theory. The film produces what Friedling describes as a "rhetorical exigence" for feminism because of the very logics that it disturbs.<sup>24</sup> Friedling explains that because addiction is "simultaneously understood to be both a physiological (disease) and a cognitive (question of will) phenomena," it "threatens dominant binary logics of mind/body dualism" and "also jeopardizes the guarantee of addiction's paired term, voluntarism, and in turn disrupts the dependency/autonomy, passive/active, sickness/health, queer/normal, female/male, black/white dyads central to dominant logics that affirm the ascendancy of the second term."<sup>25</sup>

But rather than develop new theories of agency out of this rupture, feminist readings of addiction have most frequently employed a "recovery rhetoric" that ultimately recovers the "normative operations and terms of binary thinking" that undergird what she calls a "heteronormative logic" of agency.<sup>26</sup> As Friedling shows, representations of anorexia and other forms of addiction among women are most often read by feminist scholars as either "symptomatic of patriarchy or as uniquely *female* symbolic forms of protest."<sup>27</sup> These two types of readings also dominate feminist interpretations not only of *Nymphomaniac*, but also von Trier's other films—many of which focus on stories of brutalized and pathologized women, from *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark* to *Antichrist* and *Melancholia*. As Rex Butler and David Denny write, "there is no shortage of controversy surrounding von Trier and women."<sup>28</sup>

On the one hand, those who read von Trier and his work as misogynistic tend to do so from the position that his female protagonists (and actresses) are little more than victims of his sadistic narratives.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, those that interpret his work as feminist do so through readings of his protagonists as explicitly transgressive figures. For example, in his review of *Nymphomaniac* for *The New Yorker*, David Denby describes the film as a feminist work, largely because he understands Joe's self-diagnosis as a "nymphomaniac" as a transgressive act of feminist agency. "Joe chooses, she demands, she arranges," Denby writes.<sup>30</sup>

As Friedling argues, the problem with such readings is not only that they "insist on female suffering as the prerequisite for feminist agency"; they also employ what she calls "dominant heteronormative logics," which "remain confined to and complicit with traditional binary calculations of mind and body and operations of power/resistance within dominant institutional structures"—the very logics that she claims "representations of addiction are bound to disturb."<sup>31</sup> Therefore, Friedling argues that "feminist agency must be figured as *queer*."<sup>32</sup> However, as Claudia Schippert argues, queer theoretical frameworks and interpretative methods also fall victim to the same privileging of transgression-as-agency. Schipper writes, "In particular, transgressiveness or resistance that is understood as 'freedom from norms' had become something like a queer ideal which, problematically, is too easily connected to liberal individualism and conceptions of a humanist subject."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, in *Terrorist Assemblages*, Jasbir Puar warns that "in this problematic definition of queerness, individual agency is legible only as resistance to norms rather than complicity with them, thus equating resistance and agency."<sup>34</sup>

There are, however, theorists who have offered alternative theories of agency. In "Suffering Agency," Jane Elliot considers how neoliberal personhood constrains people into a series of choices that are "unfairly constructed yet still meaningful, imposed upon [us] yet still

[ours] alone.”<sup>35</sup> Here, Elliot’s notion of “suffering agency” under neoliberal governance resonates with Saidiya Hartman’s articulation of the constrained agency of emancipated slaves, for whom “the advent of freedom was characterized by forms of constraint that, resembling those experience under slavery, relied primarily on force, compulsion and terror and others that fettered, restricted and coined the subject precisely through the stipulation of will, reason and consent.”<sup>36</sup> These theories of agency help us to understand how agency is not only variously constrained, but also how it is placed on us a burden, particularly in forms of liberal governance, where “in the inexorability of what is commonly called the ‘self-preservation instinct,’ we glimpse something of the imprisoning nature of suffering agency, the way in which choices made for oneself and according to one’s own interests can still feel both imposed and appalling.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in “Slow Death,” Berlant offers an alternative theory to “transgressive agency,” one she calls “lateral agency,” which speaks to our efforts to just get by under the conditions of “slow death,” which “refers to the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence.”<sup>38</sup> Lateral agency not only speaks to the social constraints placed on agency, which becomes a burden under the ceaseless demand for ideal self-governance, but also to how we survive those constraints by using moments of “choice,” even those coerced and highly constrained, as moments of “self-abeyance” and “floating sideways.”<sup>39</sup> Her example is eating—something we must do, but also find pleasure in. Eating exists at the crossroads of habits and choices, of need and desire. Berlant suggests that “Eating can be seen as a form of ballast against wearing out, but also as a counter-dissipation, in that, like other small pleasures, it can produce an experience of self-abeyance, of floating sideways....Eating amid the work of the reproduction of contemporary life is best seen as activity releasing the subject into self-suspension.”<sup>40</sup>

These theories are useful for thinking about how agency isn't always some act of verticality or reaching upward and that choice, the will, or agency is hardly, if ever free. These theories also address how making choices is often a burden placed on us by liberal governance and capitalism and that choice can and often does produce its own sort of suffering. In both liberal and transgressive accounts of agency, the assumption is that we innately desire the freedom to choose. But self-determination is often exhausting and having too many choices can be paralyzing. Sometimes, we choose not to have choices, to let others decide. In "Data for Life: Wearable Technology and the design of Self care," Natasha Dow Schull observes how the popularity of wearable self-tracking devices—from posture correctors to step and calorie counters—speaks as much to people's desire to be relieved from the labor of constant self-management, as it does to their desire to self-regulate more efficiently. As Schull writes, "By offering consumers a way to simultaneously embrace and outsource the task of lifestyle management, I argue, such products at once exemplify and short-circuit cultural ideals for individual responsibility and self-regulation."<sup>41</sup>

But where does addiction fit into these theories and how might it animate new ones? While these theories speak to how agency is socially constrained and how those constraints create a variety of psychic effects, they do not account for the way the body factors into how and why we act. I suggest that we might use the neuroscience on the formation of habits (and addiction) to further revise our understanding of agency. For example, while we culturally privilege conscious, rational thought as the highest form of human behavior and the best method for decision making, our bodies vigorously disagree. As the neuroscience shows, the brain, as a matter of biological efficiency, prefers routinization over conscious thought any day. While some of these routines are learned, others are ancestral—passed down through our evolutionary biology. How might this conflict between biological and social ideals and preferences force us to

think of agency not as something unitary, but multiple? What does this understanding of biological agency expose not only about how choices are constrained by both the social and biological, but also how they are actually made?

Furthermore, while these theories allow us to understand how agency is constrained and burdensome, how it is not unidirectional—not just lifting us up, but moving us sideways and sometimes down—and how we are often ambivalent about our own agency, they also don't address how agency is something that is often distributed across and between bodies rather than within them. It's not just that the social acts on and forms our agency—it's that our agency is literally dispersed across it. This is where religious concepts of the self can also be particularly useful, since, through the divine, our agency and our will are always understood as part of some greater will, always enmeshed with and inseparable from larger agencies. In these frameworks, our agency is often understood as necessarily interdependent. But religious understandings of the self can offer more than just new theories of self—they can also offer rich alternatives for being in relation with others—another sort of ballast against wearing out and the burden of agency.

It is not that *Nymphomaniac* offers such a theory of self or agency. Rather, von Trier's use of intensified clichés creates an impasse for thinking about agency in a conventional, liberal sense—an impasse that invites us to think creatively about what agency might be.

#### 4.1 ()

Before we even enter the world of the film, we are confronted by the title shot's sensational spelling of the movie's title, *NYMPH()MANIAC*, where, instead of an "o," there sits the curved brackets of parentheses, a term which comes from the ancient Greek, "παρένθεσις," which literally refers to the act of inserting and which, in its contemporary usage, refers to "an amplifying or explanatory word, phrase, or sentence inserted in a passage from which it is usually set off by punctuation," "a remark or passage that departs from the theme of a

discourse.”<sup>42</sup> A parenthesis is a digression, an interlude, an interruption of meaning. Set in the center of the word “nymphomania,” these seemingly mundane grammatical markings are instantly overdetermined by their context. They appear as an abstracted vaginal abyss, a visual euphemism that both threatens the term and is threatened by it. It disrupts the term, splits it up into two different words. To the left of the parenthetical void sits “nymph,” which, in Greek mythology, refers to minor female deities. These animating spirits of the natural world were invariably represented as beautiful young maidens. However, the term “nymph” designates a variety of other phenomena, too, including a young bride, a maiden, a type of mollusk, water, insect larvae, and the clitoris. In Latin, “nubere,” or “to marry” is a cognate of the word nymph and in the sixteenth century, physicians began referring to the labia minora as “nymphaea.” While denotations differed, the connotation of nymph posited a divine linkage between the natural and feminine, as well as the dialectical presence of delicate, feminine beauty and powerful, if not dangerous, generative sexuality. In the case of the word “nymphomania,” “nymph” refers specifically to the labia minora, whose literal translation, “madness of the labia,” places the origin of the disease at the site of the genitalia—the gaping hole which now sits tall at the center of the film’s title. Indeed, in the eighteenth century, medical men linked nymphomania directly to what they observed as enlarged, swollen, or engorged female genitalia.<sup>43</sup> The treatment for nymphomania consisted of everything from cooling baths (to treat the overheating of the female genitalia) and bloodletting (including the application of leeches to the labia) to female circumcision and hysterectomies.<sup>44</sup>

To the right of the parenthetical gap sits the word “maniac,” from the ancient Greek word “μανία,” or “mania,” which not only means “madness,” but also “excessive desire.”<sup>45</sup> To desire too much was to be insane, incapable of rational thought. In the Greek and Roman worlds, mania was linked to the feminine. Groneman traces the nymphomaniac’s history back to second-

century Greece, when disease was perceived as an imbalance of the body's humors and women's bodies were perceived as always on the verge of imbalance. Women, it was believed, had particularly "cool and wet" humors that "required sexual intercourse to open the womb, and to heat and drain the blood."<sup>46</sup> If women did not have enough sex, it was believed that their uteruses could contaminate the body with various forms of mania. Therefore, the cure for hysteria—the excess of feminine emotion—was impregnation, while a lack of sexual fulfillment could lead to uterine fury—the excess of feminine desire and the proper ancestor of nymphomania.<sup>47</sup> Because the female body seemed to demand sexual intercourse in order to keep it in its delicate balance, women were perceived as more carnal than men and also less capable of controlling their desires. Not only was the excess of feminine desire pathologized, but also female sexuality was generally considered its own sort of pathology—the originary site of madness as well as the abnormal antithesis of masculine moderation.<sup>48</sup> Like nymph, mania also has a divine connotation. In ancient Greek mythology, Mania was the goddess of insanity and madness, while in Roman mythology Mania was the goddess of death, mother of ghosts and the undead, and a ruler of the underworld.

These are the various mythologies and histories that surround the () of Von Trier's *Nymph()maniac*. They contain it and circumscribe it with a profusion of meaning. But even as these terms overdetermine the image of the (), the parenthetical gap holds its own sort of power, too. On the one hand, as a visual representation of female genitalia, the () is marked as the etiological center of the word—a visual echo of early medicine's attribution of nymphomania to the genitals. On the other hand, the () also destroys the term. It breaks it up, moving it away from the medico-sexual discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Instead, the () gives us the ancient Greek terms of "nymph" and "mania," a sort of invocation of the divine and older, equally constructed notions of women not as less sexual, but as more carnal than men. In fact,

“medical ideals of women’s sexuality insatiability...remained essentially intact until the eighteenth century,” when nymphomania first appeared as a medical diagnosis.<sup>49</sup>

Groneman attributes the dramatic shift in understandings of female sexuality to the rationalizing and industrializing forces of modernity and the emergence of the middle-class, which removed women from the marketplace and modern modes of production and placed them firmly in the domestic sphere as the “angel in house”—the moral and chaste center of family life. At the same time, the explosion of scientific discourse provided explanations of female physiology and psychology that offered seemingly irrefutable justifications for this positioning of women in the new social order. These biological explanations of female sexuality were dramatically different from those produced just a century earlier. Groneman illustrates this shift through a comparison of anatomical drawings from the Renaissance and those from the nineteenth century. While those from the Renaissance “pictured women’s reproductive organs as an interior version of men’s,” by the nineteenth century, “these images had given way to a new model of male and female generative organs as totally different.”<sup>50</sup> In this way, modern medicine “reconceived men and women as completely dissimilar, not only in body but in mind and morals as well.”<sup>51</sup>

Not only does the presence of the () at the center of the term destroy this Victorian idealization of female sexuality as more chaste and virtuous than that of men, but it also establishes a gaping silence at the center of the word. Inside the curved brackets, there is no parenthetical statement. It is a stubbornly silent gap, empty, and void of meaning. It stands defiantly silent at the center of a term that has too much to say about what the () is and what it should mean. “Let it talk,” the () dismissively suggests through its body language. But the () is also a place marker awaiting the penetration of discourse. Its curved brackets not only wait to be

filled with meaning, but the negative space it creates also threatens to engulf that meaning. It appears as a vessel that can be endlessly filled and is instantly filled by the reader/viewer.

Most importantly, *Nymph()* *maniac* is a referent to someone—it names the film’s protagonist even before we meet her and it speaks to her highly collaborative self-construction, where the telling of her story and her ()—which she exclusively refers to as her “cunt” throughout the film, and which she marks as the source of her power and her “filthy, dirty lust”—is mediated by a flurry of discourse. We never apprehend Joe on her own terms, because she has none, made obvious by the ways in which Seligman and his life inform and interpret her telling, which is a telling that is dependent on all the tellings of sex and the female body before it, tellings that *make her mean*.<sup>52</sup> Within the logic of this system, Joe’s only recourse to being subjugated and overdetermined by this profusion of discourse is to reclaim terms like “cunt,” which, in its larger cultural reclaiming, intends to recover the symbolic power of female genitalia as a threat to patriarchy, where “cunt is a channel drawing all towards it. Cunt is knowledge. Knowledge is receptivity, which is activity. Cunt is the symbol of erotic science, the necessary corrective of the maniacal conquest of technology.”<sup>53</sup>

The film explicitly links Joe to the () in how it juxtaposes the () of the title shot with the dark abyss of the garbage chute, into the darkness of which the camera descends before the jump cut to the long shot of Joe in the alley. But Joe is not simply reduced to an (), since the () is visually represented as a site of proliferation, a powerful metonym. It not only accrues a profusion of meaning, but it also troubles meaning, disrupts it, subsumes it, revises it, obscures it, refuses it, makes new meaning and makes meaning anew. In typical von Trierian fashion, the conflation of Joe with the () also baits accusations of misogyny. What could be more sexist and violent than reducing a woman to an abstraction of her genitalia? By objectifying her as nothing more than a hole waiting to be penetrated—by language, by sexual fantasies, by phalluses, by

von Trier's camera? However, in order to draw this conclusion, one must willfully ignore the ways in which the () is visually represented as an agent of meaning itself. In many ways, the () calls attention to the problems of the discursive turn in literary scholarship and cultural studies that I discuss in Chapter One. Similar to how Silko situates the belly as a literal site of knowledge production and ancestral memory through the Pueblo ontology of self, the visual representation of the () and its conflation with Joe positions the body as central not only to subjectivity, but to social formations across time and space. The () (re)produces bodies of knowledge.

The understanding of the body, particularly the female body, as its own site of knowledge production has been both embraced and derided by feminist theories. On the one hand, the disavowal of the flesh has largely been a response to “patriarchal rationalizations of male domination that have served to oppress objects rather than agents of symbolization, sociality, and culture.”<sup>54</sup> If patriarchy made women excessively corporeal, feminism had to respond by making them excessively discursive. On the other hand, there are feminist thinkers, such as Greer, who have embraced notions of female corporeality as crucial sites of power that destabilize the mind/body hierarchy rather than merely reinforce it. Take, for example, feminist readings of female Christian mystics from the medieval era. These readings take seriously how the body—the actual flesh and blood of the thing—both reproduces and revises the social. The body isn't only written, but it also writes within an elaborate relay between culture and nature, the hierarchies of which are collapsed and the boundaries of which have been blurred. In fact, it is through the flesh that sacred knowledge is produced, largely because “mystical experience is necessarily ineffable,” thus “it is communicated more effectively through the responses of the mystic's body,” rendering the body, itself, as a sacred text.<sup>55</sup> This is what Jennifer Judge refers to as “bodily knowing,” one that not only emerged out of the patriarchal (and often misogynistic)

doctrines of the Catholic Church, but also transgressed and disrupted that doctrine specifically through sacralized somatic acts of the female body.<sup>56</sup> The problem, however, is that these acts often included extreme pain and suffering—from starvation to mortification of the flesh. Thus, attempting to recover agency (at least in a liberal sense) in them risks equating female agency with acts of suffering, as Friedling warns.

The question remains: how do we take seriously the agency of the body and, specifically, the female body, without reproducing its violent objectification? This impasse is represented through von Trier's histrionic representation of Joe's "education" within the film. In the narration, Joe explicitly links her nymphomania both to how she learns about the world through multiple sex partners and to her drive to study gynecology. Shortly after she claims that her sexual desire "strengthened my wish for a serious education," the film jump cuts to a classroom, where a young Joe, dressed in a school girl's uniform and holding a variety of pedagogical props, engages in a number of erotic poses. We soon realize the image is constructed not from Joe's perspective, but from Seligman's when Joe asks him "why are you smiling?" and he tells her, "well, I just pictured how an education would be conveyed in your storytelling." Joe, unamused, scolds Seligman, "well, that's nothing to smile at."

Here, the male gaze disrupts the feminist act of recovery. It takes Judge's concept of "bodily knowing" and distorts it into the sexy school girl cliché of male sexual fantasy. This ironized representation of "bodily knowing" also echoes a tired cinematic trope—one popular in both women's coming-of-age stories and pornography, from *An Education* (2009) to *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973). While we watch boys become men through acts of solitary discovery, we most often observe girls becoming women through sexual encounters, whether in the form of marriages or gangbangs. The idea that women come to know the world through sex becomes not a feminist battle cry, but a story as old as time.

But I'd argue the problem here is not the body itself. Rather, it is the conception of "knowing" being mobilized and the types of knowledge we privilege that demands a revision. The reason Joe's "bodily knowing" becomes a porn-like farce is because Seligman attempts to assimilate her form of bodily knowledge to his idea of how knowledge is ideally produced—empirically, in the classroom, with phallic instruments. When he places his sexualized fantasy of Joe in this context, they seem absurd in their seemingly opposing natures. But the problem is not Joe's body. The problem is the framework of knowing her body is being forced into. When we speak of knowledge produced by the body, we speak of knowing the world in a different way—one that doesn't exist in opposition to "masculinist" empirical forms of knowledge, but in a state of interdependence.

In the next scene, von Trier reinforces the incongruity between Western ideals of knowledge production and bodily knowing when Joe elaborates on her time in medical school. The scene stands in stark opposition to Seligman's prurient tableaux. We see young Joe standing in a group of medical students in a sterile operating room as their instructor explains how to perform an abortion. The scene, unlike the previous, is in black and white as a doctor sedately describes the procedure: "We open up our cervical channel to enter the uterus and to get access to the fetus..." Here, the body is purely an object being acted upon by medical instruments and discourse. Though medicine is the study of life, there is paradoxically no life here. At the end of the scene, Joe explains that "it was harder and harder for me to concentrate, so I studied less and less until finally I dropped out." Her statement is productively vague. On the one hand, it implies that Joe dropped out of medical school because she was incapable, potentially reinforcing the belief that women, more corporeal than men, are less capable of rigorous study. But, on the other, it also suggests that the failure is not Joe's, but the approach to the body of medical science itself. It doesn't produce the sort of knowledge that Joe is looking for. In fact, despite all

its elaborate discourses and methods, it tells us very little about the self, at all.

## 4.2 THE CONFESSOR

In the previous chapter, I discuss how *Lit* challenges suspicious readings of AA's "scriptotherapy" by linking it back to its literary origins in Augustine (and the Catholic sacrament of penance), thus reminding the reader of the confessional form's history not simply as a secular site of self-making, but as a sacred site in which one is made through divine grace. *Nymphomaniac* also bears out how secular forms of self-making do not oppose but are variously rooted in religious doctrine and practice, though the film highlights this historical relationship to different, much more ambivalent ends than Karr's memoir. That's largely because, instead of the AA narrative form employed by, for, and among addicts, the film focuses on the form and power dynamics of modern talk therapy, which function very differently from that of the AA lead in terms of form, audience, and purpose. Specifically, von Trier calls our attention to how modern talk therapy emerges out of, reproduces, and revises the Catholic sacrament of penance, largely through the construction of Joe as the confessor/patient and Seligman as her therapist/priest. While Seligman remarks that he is Jewish and non-religious, he is also a celibate man who is exceptionally well-versed not only in a variety of scientific subjects, but also in the history of the Catholic Church and New Testament scripture, both of which he uses in explicating, analyzing, and contesting Joe's story. In effect, Seligman functions as both a Freudian-like psychoanalyst and priest-like absolver of sins.

Foucault gestures to the historical emergence of talk therapy out of the Catholic act of confession in *The History of Sexuality*, where he traces the "steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex" since the seventeenth century to the evolution of the Catholic sacrament of penance, particularly after the Council of Trent.<sup>57</sup> Though he doesn't fully explicate its impact, the Council of Trent is crucial in the historical formation of the sacrament, because of how it

dramatically revised and reframed the sacrament.<sup>58</sup> According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, also referred to simply as “confession,” is when, after confessing one’s sins against God, someone “obtains pardon from God’s mercy for the offense committed against him, and [is], at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by the sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labors for their conversion.”<sup>59</sup> Here, confession and reconciliation is framed in terms of one’s relationship with God and, thus, their larger community, which is held together in the body of Christ. To speak of God is always to speak of one’s community and vice versa. These social relations are understood as inseparable from the divine, since it is through God that all things are connected. Still, it is to God that one confesses and from whom one receives forgiveness. In fact, priests or any other human representatives of God or the Church remain conspicuously absent in this definition. The point of confession is not simply for the Church hierarchy to identify bad actors who break its rules and discipline them. The purpose of confession is to help members of the community identify actions that separate them from God, and thus their community, and rejoin the fold of their community by correcting that behavior. As the *Catechism* states, “it is called the *sacrament of conversion* because it makes sacramentally present Jesus’ call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father from whom one has strayed by sin.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, confession is meant to be rehabilitative, rather than punitive. It serves as a ritual of self-reflection, where one, in communion with another (or others), consciously reflects on one’s actions, their effects on one’s community, and how to repair one’s relationship to that community by returning to God’s grace through prayer, by example, and in helping others. These rehabilitative measures speak to the more porous concepts of agency and self being mobilized in this framework. Because one’s will is informed as much by outside forces (natural and supernatural) as inner forces (emotions and thoughts), sins, in this concept of self, aren’t evidence of a bad self that needs to self-correct.

Sins are, instead, evidence of being swayed by negative, life-attenuating forces, and it is only through God's grace and the support of community that one can move away from sin.

In the early formation of the Church, what one confessed was based on variable and localized interpretations of the Ten Commandments and included everything from murder, theft, and gossip to drunkenness/intemperance, sorcery, and insanity.<sup>61</sup> Who one confessed to also varied. One could make a public confession before one's community or it could be done privately with a presbyter (a sort of predecessor to the priest). However, as the Church evolved and consolidated power, the rules around confession gradually became more uniform, authoritative, and expansive. The list of confessable sins expanded and were organized into explicit categories of sin—some of which were considered unforgiveable.<sup>62</sup> In some cases, penance became less about correcting behavior through God's grace and more about forcing someone to suffer for their sins. In other cases, one's confession could result in ex-communication, which resulted in one's social death, since the Church served as the principle organizer of social life. By the fourteenth century, all sorts of rules and protocols, in the form of the *Summa confessorum*, were put in place for how priests, now the official overseers of confession, should engage confessions, which became elaborate interrogations meant to extract "full confessions."<sup>63</sup> In fact, one of the greatest misgivings Protestant Reformers had with the Church was how the sacrament of penance placed more importance "on the sacramental absolution of the priest" than on one's relationship with God—the singular grantor of forgiveness.<sup>64</sup> In 1551, the Catholic Church responded to its critics by doubling down on its authority, when, during the Council of Trent, it declared: "If anyone says that the sacramental absolution of the priest is not a juridical act, but the mere ministry of announcing and declaring that sins are forgiven...let him be anathema."<sup>65</sup> Not only did the Council of Trent intensify the process around confession, but it also consolidated the power of priests, who were no longer

mere proxies for God's forgiveness, but judges endowed with the power of absolution themselves.

Already, in the sixteenth century doctrine of the Catholic Church, we see the historical process of secularization in motion—a move away from the power of the divine and toward the power of men, as well as a move away from confession as a communal and spiritual act of rehabilitation to a juridical act focused on the individual. Indeed, Foucault sites this historical shift as key to the emergence of interrogative procedures and discourses that were easily adapted, “broken apart, scattered, and multiplied in an explosion of distinct discursivities which took form in demography, biology, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, ethics, pedagogy, and political criticism.”<sup>66</sup> In tandem with the rise of the Cartesian concept of self in the seventeenth century, these interrogative technique became less about identifying sinful behavior and more about using sinful behavior as evidence of a sinful self. In the case of the State, “sin” became “crime” and “sinner” became “criminal,” while, in the sciences, “sin” was reconceived in the language of abnormality and pathology.

The complex historical relations between sin, criminality, and pathology are frequently born out in Seligman's interactions with Joe's story. For example, when Joe cites the discovery of her “cunt” at the age of two as evidence of her nymphomania, Seligman challenges her claim. “No, no, no one can be a nymphomaniac when they're only two years old,” he says. “I don't think even the strictest God would see anything else than a child's normal behavior. What about fetuses? It's common knowledge that fetuses often touch their genital organs. Can a fetus somehow be sinful?” Here, Seligman serves the double function as therapist and priest, though not in the way we'd expect. On the one hand, he employs reason (“no one can be a nymphomaniac when they're only two years old”) and scientific evidence (“it's common knowledge that fetuses often touch their genital organs”) to refute Joe's claims that she is

somehow inherently abnormal. The simple discovery of her “cunt” at age two cannot act as evidence of her diagnosis because it’s not part of the symptomology and, in fact, her behavior matches that of normal two-year-olds. On the other hand, he also marshals religious law to argue against her sinful nature, which he conflates with disease, both in his reference to God and his final question “can a fetus somehow be sinful?” Thus, the border between medicine and morality collapses.

What is most striking is how Joe insists on this collapse. She doesn’t simply insist that she is a nymphomaniac, but she also demands she be understood as a bad person. As Seligman tries to explain away Joe’s sinful nymphomania, Joe stubbornly clings to it, refusing absolution. Throughout the film, Joe enumerates her various transgressions—the lives she destroyed, the child she abandoned, the work she ultimately took up as an extortionist—as evidence that she is, in fact, “a bad human being.” When Seligman argues that certain actions or behaviors don’t exactly act as evidence of a bad human being, but can speak to a perfectly good person who simply made bad choices, Joe offers up motive and intention as evidence. As Joe says, “I discovered my power as a woman and used it without any concern for others. It is completely unacceptable.” For Joe, “nymphomania was callousness,” and she frequently chastises Seligman whenever he tries to diminish that callousness by justifying her behavior or normalizing it. “What else do you want me to say?” Seligman asks her at one point, gesturing to how his role as her confessional interlocutor has been placed into crisis. “That I behaved reprehensibly, that my actions show that I’m a terrible human being...I’ve consciously used and hurt others for the sake of my satisfaction,” Joe answers. After Joe recounts one particularly dramatic story about how she ruined the lives of an entire family by deceiving a married man into believing that she loved him (part of an elaborate game of statistics and dice that she develops in order to juggle her plethora of lovers), Seligman asks her how the episode affected her life. “Not at all,” Joe says

without any hint of regret. “Not at all?” Seligman asks incredulously. “Can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs,” Joe says. Seligman assumes that Joe’s lack of empathy can only be understood as the irrational side effect of an addiction. “Some people blame the addict, other people feel sorry for the addict,” Seligman says. “But I was an addict out of lust, not out of need,” Joe replies.

I read Joe’s insistence that we necessarily understand her as both a nymphomaniac and a “bad human being” as the sort of anxiogenic comedic technique that Berlant and Ngai describe. Not only is her claim absurd because it betrays the binary of disease and choice—how can one choose a disease defined by choicelessness—but it also points to the absurdity of the discursive double bind in which addicts actually find themselves. Not only does Joe perform how addicts are simultaneously pathologized and criminalized, but her insistence that she “consciously used and hurt others for the sake of my satisfaction” because she was “an addict out of lust” produces a discursive impasse, to which Seligman struggles to respond. “What do you want me to say?” he asks. This impasse is largely produced by how the confessional form, at least in this iteration, can only seem to produce two types of selves: the diseased self who needs healing or the sinful self who requires absolution. But Joe can’t pick between these two. She needs them both because they each hold qualities that feel true to her experience, even if the coexistence of those truths is discursively impossible.

This is also the only part in the film where Joe refers to herself as an addict. However, she makes a distinction that she feels is crucial: she is an addict out of “lust” and not “need.” Joe’s distinction between lust and need most directly confronts the binary of volition/compulsion on which the liberal concept of agency relies, because lust and need are not necessarily opposed and therefore, their distinction at the level of lived experience is not really a distinction at all. While need implies the requirement or absolute necessity for something—oxygen, food, water—

lust, understood as intense or excessive desire, can imply the same in terms of how it is felt. That is: lust and need often feel the same. When someone lusts after something or someone, they feel lust as a necessary need, the thing they must have in order to survive. Similarly, a need always manifests itself as a compulsion—one must have that thing in order to live. We know what we need because of our intense desire for it. Indeed, lust frequently manifests itself as a need, thus complicating our notions of what we actually need, especially when we feel need for something like alcohol or heroin as strongly as we do oxygen or water. The real distinction between lust and need is, therefore, cultural. Even if we understand or feel our needs as an instinctual, pre-discursive bodily drive, they are always highly mediated, constructed, and managed. We never experience our needs or desires as pure instinct, but as culturally constructed concepts. Our needs arrange themselves according to what it is acceptable to need. What one society perceives as a necessary need—a cell phone, perhaps—another society sees as a luxury—an object of excess, those things that sit outside the ever-shifting borders of what we think one actually needs to live. The border between need and lust—which are both compulsions—is always socially constructed. While needs are compulsions, they tend to be ascribed to the domain of the socially acceptable and are therefore culturally constructed as rational desire. In contrast, lust is most commonly associated with sexual desire, and accordingly deemed to be an irrational, wrongful desire for something that is an indulgence, not a need in the sense that a need is a normative compulsion. In short, the difference between lust and need is established at the culturally constructed border of what compulsions are acceptable or not. The question of volition/compulsion is, in fact, a false binary. The question of volition is not is this person in or out of control of their desire, but rather is their “object-choice” culturally normative. Even if someone can have a compulsion for a glass of water in the same way that they have a compulsion for heroin or sex, it is only the person who has a compulsion for heroin or sex that is marked as out of control.

Joe's access to agency, therefore, depends as much on the moral contours of her actions as it does on the question of whether she is in or out of control. In order for Joe to insist on her humanity, so dependent on the visibility of her agency, she must insist that she is evil. It is "a lust that led to destruction," she says. Again, Seligman attempts to diminish the moral valance that Joe assigns to her compulsion when he says, "addiction often leads to an absence of empathy." Here, Seligman suggests that any immoral behavior—the absence of empathy—cannot be understood as necessarily immoral if a person has been rendered without choice in the face of their compulsion. Morality has to do with choosing between what is right and wrong. A person without choice, therefore, cannot be read along the lines of morality. But it is exactly that moral contour that Joe desires. "For me, nymphomania was callousness," she says.

### 4.3 CUNT

The discursive double binds that Joe often finds herself in arise from the fact that Joe has no terms of her own—no way to describe an experience that has been rendered indescribable by modern models of addiction and the liberal logic of agency on which they depend. In *Nymphomaniac*, this is made clear by how Joe structures her story in relation to objects in Seligman's room. As Joe says in the beginning of the film, she has no idea how to start her story, which is to say, she has no terms of her own. Instead, she must borrow them from Seligman's home—a veritable stash of Western knowledge.

Shortly after Joe tells Seligman that she doesn't know how to start her story (and that even if she did, he wouldn't understand), she notices a fly fish hook on the wall. "Why is that ridiculous fishhook hanging there?" she asks Seligman, who goes on to explain the art of fly-fishing at length. "Do you fish a lot?" Joe asks. "Some, but I don't catch much," Seligman answers. He then goes on to describe a boyhood book he "worshipped"—a sort of "romantic nature bible." The book is Izaak Walton's *The Complete Angler*, first published in 1653. A work

of fiction, it tells the story of Piscator, a master angler who adopts a young and devoted disciple, Venator, whom he teaches not only to fly fish, but also how to live a Christian life. Through the story of their relationship, Walton creates not only a practical guide for fishing, but also presents fishing as a religious ritual through which one cultivates a relationship to nature and thus God. The relationship between Piscator and Venator models that between Jesus and his disciples—among whom, Walton writes, were four fishermen, whom Jesus favored most among his followers—as well as that of Socrates and his pupils. In one passage, Venator tells Piscator:

And my good Master, I will not forget the doctrine which you told me Socrates taught his Scholars, that they should not think to be honored so much for being Philosophers, as to honor Philosophy by their virtuous lives. You advised me to the like concerning Angling, and I will endeavor to do so, and to live like those many worthy men of which you made mention in the former part of your discourse. This is my firm resolution.<sup>67</sup>

At the time of its publication, *The Complete Angler* was both the second and third bestseller in the English language, the second being, for a time, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the first being the Bible.<sup>68</sup> In *Quest for the Golden Trout*, Douglas Thompson writes that the book was also well-known and cited amongst nineteenth century American transcendentalists, including Henry David Thoreau—a fact that Thompson marks as a “surprise” because of Walton’s religious politics.<sup>69</sup> While American transcendentalism emerged directly out of the Puritan Revolution and the “religious freedom and shared governance movement that motivated the pilgrims’ journey to Plymouth plantation,” Walton, himself, was “sympathetic to both the king and the Anglican Church.”<sup>70</sup> Thompson writes that Walton was even part of a “plot to smuggle the crown jewels for King Charles II.”<sup>71</sup>

But it isn’t any political arguments about the power of the Church or the divine right of the kings that distinguishes *The Complete Angler* from the secularist and Reformationist worldviews of those who took it up as a model text. What is so striking about Walton’s story is not only that it suffuses both secular life and the natural world with the sacred, but also how his

description of fishing as a fundamentally spiritual practice remains a key trope of fishing books to this day.<sup>72</sup> The book's depiction of the wilderness as inherently divine stands in stark contrast to those works produced by Puritan thinkers such as Cotton Mathers, who often depicted the American wilderness, in particular, as the "Devil's Territories," which must be tamed and dominated not only by man, but by the institution of the Church.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, Walton's work, in which practical, everyday life is suffused with the sacred, also stands in stark contrast to the secular "Art of Virtue" developed in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. While Franklin understood self-improvement as a private, secular, and highly individualized practice in which nature must be subdued, Walton describes the process of self-improvement as a social and sacred practice in which nature must be worshipped and channeled, rendering the fishing pole as a sort of divining rod.

Joe takes up this narrative form in order to tell her own story, wherein fishing becomes the act of cruising for men on city trains. Shortly after Seligman describes Walton's "romantic nature bible"—a description which is accompanied by shots of illustrations from the book—Joe finally finds herself inspired, stating "Maybe I know where to start." After warning Seligman that her story will be "long and moral," a title shot appears: "Chapter 1: The Complete Angler," over which we get a voice over narration from Joe, who says, "to begin with the bait, I discovered my cunt as a two-year-old." As the title shot jumps to the image of a naked toddler, shown from the shoulders up, but looking down in a way that implies she's in the act of discovery, Seligman interrupts Joe's voice-over in order to take issue with her choice of words. "Cunt is a very strong word," he says, as we watch the little girl examining herself. "Let's call it Pandora's box then," Joe suggests, to which Seligman replies, "no, no, cunt is better."

This moment is both incisive for all the reasons that it is also uncomfortably funny. First, there's the matter-of-fact way Joe takes up and modifies the religiously-framed narrative of

Walton's "romantic nature bible" by linking the idea of bait not simply to her "cunt," but to her two-year-old "cunt." Then, there is the semantic squabble between Joe and Seligman over whether "cunt" or "Pandora's box" is a more suitable term—as though those are the only euphemistic options. Not only does this argument occur in the voice over narration, but it is also accompanied by the image of a two-year-old girl who we are to assume is in the act of exploring the object they are so crudely naming. The blasphemous appropriation of Walton, the disruption of the voice-over narration, and the usage of the term "cunt" (and "Pandora's box"), particularly in reference to a child, produce a discomfiting humor that includes all the essential Bakhtinian qualities of comedy, from the scene's employment of heteroglossia and the grotesque to its carnivalesque subversion of norms. It is comic for all the reasons that it is incisive because of "how interwoven play is with the serious and the serious with play."<sup>74</sup> It is at the point of laughter that the viewer is forced to become aware. As Andrew Horton writes in *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, "to be *Homo ludens* is to be *aware*: to be alert to others and to alternatives, probabilities, possibilities, and chance (the major factor in games of every sort). Thus, play and discipline go together."<sup>75</sup>

First, there is the issue of how Joe takes up Walton as the inspiration for her own story, which begins by associating bait with her "cunt." Here, the source of laughter is two-fold. On the one hand, we laugh at the way Joe's move seemingly evacuates Walton's story of all that makes it sacred and renders it as something blasphemous and profane—a story that is about little more than "bait," which echoes the term "jail-bait" and references the concept of statutory rape, which elicits its own uneasy laughter. On the other hand, we laugh at how Joe's move also seems to gesture to the notion that Joe is so obsessed with sex that even a Christian text on fishing can inspire her lust. In this way, we laugh at both Joe's seeming misappropriation of Walton, as well as at the hyperbolic representation of her "nymphomania," if not the idea of nymphomania and

excessive female desire itself. But the humorless way in which Joe delivers the beginning of her story also forces us to take her seriously and on her own terms, just as Seligman must accept not only that “cunt” is the best word, but also that Joe’s usage is, itself, sacralized—a fact that becomes clearer as the first chapter progresses.

Then there is Seligman’s interruption of Joe’s voice over narration. Here, we laugh because of the way that this disrupts the norms of a familiar cinematic device and amplifies its conceit. As a non-diegetic element, the voice over acts as a site of authority which, “functions not simply as elucidation but really does advance the action by setting out, in the sequences of messages, meanings that are not to be found in the image itself.”<sup>76</sup> In *Invisible Storytellers*, Sarah Kozloff explains why voice-over narration has been so disliked by so many scholars and critics, whether it’s the way it intrudes on the primacy and “purity” of the image or because it violates the first law of narration: show, don’t tell (even though showing is simply another form of telling, as Kozloff notes). It is viewed as a redundancy, a distraction and disruption, and a “last resort of the incompetent.”<sup>77</sup> Here, von Trier mobilizes this device in a way that heightens all that troubles critics and, in so doing, places issues of authority and representation into crisis, thus problematizing the question of agency and competency in the construction of any narrative, including his own.

The incongruity between the voice and the image also speak to the problem of agency. As Kozloff writes, the disparity between verbal narration and the image sits at the heart of cinematic irony and also throws the narrator’s reliability into question.<sup>78</sup> For this reason, the disjuncture between the close-up of a two-year-old girl and Joe’s statement that, “to begin with the bait, I discovered my cunt as a two-year-old,” produces laughter that also instantiates a moment of discomfiting self-awareness for the viewer. Joe’s coarse remark feels incongruous with the close-up of the face of a two-year-old girl not only because there is nothing in the image itself to

suggest that the girl is involved in any sexualized activity, but also because societal norms and laws are “especially ferocious in maintaining the boundary between childhood ‘innocence’ and adult ‘sexuality.’”<sup>79</sup> Of all the modern taboos, there is no greater violation of norms than sexualizing the body of a child. This fact is enshrined in our legal system, which, as Gayle Rubin writes in “Thinking Sex,” “Rather than recognizing the sexuality of the young and attempting to provide for it in a caring and responsible manner, our culture denies and punishes erotic interest and activity by anyone under the local age of consent. The amount of law devoted to protecting young people from premature exposure to sexuality is breath-taking.”<sup>80</sup> As Claire Rasmussen shows in *The Autonomous Animal*, laws governing the sexuality of children are also explicitly tied to children’s perceived inability to appropriately self-govern (a perception often undergirded by science).<sup>81</sup> Because children are understood as incapable of “adequately controlling themselves,” they are understood as incapable of consenting to and therefore engaging in sexual activity.<sup>82</sup>

Seligman’s interruption of Joe’s narration and their clash over “cunt” adds yet another layer. First, there is the fact that he airs his grievance in the space of the voice over narration, which is meant to act as a non-diegetic space of authority that, in the context of this film, is inhabited by Joe. Seligman thus violates Joe’s authority, as well as the boundary between the diegetic and non-diegetic spaces of the film. Though the voice-over narration is typically derided as a form of “telling,” Seligman’s interruption reframes it as a form of showing. In particular, it shows how the authority of the female voice is frequently undermined, violated, and revised to accommodate masculinist logics and discourses. The fact that Joe is also talking about her “cunt” frames Seligman’s questioning as a violation of her agency as the narrator of her own story. But more than undermining her authority, it also calls into question the status of her authority in the first place. After all, the terms that Joe selects and the narrative form that she employs precede

her story. Joe does not come before language, and language is never neutral or ahistorical. But it is also the case that one's usage of language revises its meaning and purpose.

This is further emphasized in the juxtaposition of “cunt” and “Pandora’s box” as the only two terms Joe offers up as options for her story, each bringing its own history and profusion of meanings to bear on concepts of female sexuality and desire, while also drawing our attention to the fact that, as Emma Rees writes in *Vagina: A Literary and Cultural History*, there is “no acceptable word” for women’s sexual organs.”<sup>83</sup> Even the clinical-sounding “vagina” falls short. Though it is used to refer to the entirety of female sex organs, it is actually “very anatomically specific, referring as it does to the birth canal.”<sup>84</sup> In fact, it was because vagina, “in its omission of ‘all the bits that make it fun,’ felt offensive, not least in its violent sexist etymological roots associating it with a ‘sword sheath,’” that Germaine Greer attempted to rehabilitate the usage of “cunt” in the 1970s.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, “cunt” is not only the oldest English slang term for “vagina”—about 800 years old—but it is also “the most *inclusive* term, referring to the vulva, labia, vagina and clitoris.”<sup>86</sup> Greer suggests that “there’s something inherent in the *sound* of the word ‘cunt’ that conveys most forcibly the *power* of women’s genitals in a way that ‘vagina’ simply cannot. ‘Cunt’, Greer argues, ‘demands to be taken seriously.’”<sup>87</sup> But also, the “indecent nature of ‘cunt’” and its connotations of nasty women weren’t completely established until the nineteenth century.<sup>88</sup> In taking back the term “cunt,” Greer also formulated a theory of what she referred to as “cuntpower,” which was “a claim not just to the varieties of orgasm women could experience—vaginal, clitoral, or combined—and the pleasures of penetration, but to the ecstasy that could result, transforming women from their eunuch status and releasing the energy necessary for revolution.”<sup>89</sup>

Conversely, Pandora’s box emerges not as a direct referent to female genitalia, but as an object within classic Greek mythology—one that later became the fruit of knowledge picked by

Eve in the Garden of Eden. In fact, what was mistranslated as a “box” by Erasmus in the sixteenth century, was actually a “pithos,” or a large jar, sometimes the size of a person, which was used to store everything from wine, oil, and grain to human remains. Interestingly, the slang term “box” emerged as a euphemism for female genitalia in 1638 as a “tinder box.” In classical Greek mythology, Pandora, herself, was the first woman. She was created as a curse on men, who had been given the gift of fire by Prometheus and against Zeus’s orders. As punishment, Zeus chained Prometheus to a rock and sent eagles to eat his liver, which grew back and was feasted upon daily. Meanwhile, Zeus also ordered Haphaestus to create a woman in the mold of Aphrodite. Each god bestowed gifts upon her that made her irresistible to men. Among them was a jar Zeus told her not to open, knowing that she would, since she’d also been given the gift of curiosity. Pandora behaved as expected and when she opened the box, it released all the evils into the world, including sickness, hunger, and death. Pandora quickly tried to close the box, hoping to contain its many evils, but all she managed to hold back was hope. In this regard, it makes sense that Seligman would prefer “cunt” to “Pandora’s box.” Though “cunt” is the seemingly more grotesque and inappropriate term, it is “Pandora’s box” that connotes the most troubling rendition of female sexuality.

Once Seligman gives his approval, Joe barely moves forward with her story when he interrupts again. This time, he takes issue with Joe’s statement, “I was a nymphomaniac.”

#### 4.4 “MY NAME IS JOE AND I’M A NYMPHOMANIAC”

Nowhere are the stakes and justifications for Joe’s choice of “nymphomaniac” over “sex addict” rendered more clearly than in the two scenes that end and begin the final two chapters of the film. About three-quarters of the way through the film, Joe is shown at a particularly low point in her life, what one might refer to as her “bottom,” a term often employed in recovery discourse to mark not only the lowest point of degradation in an addict’s life, but also the crucial

turning point from addiction to recovery. She has struggled through losing her ability to orgasm, is now estranged from her husband and child, can only seem to find sexual gratification in being brutalized by a sadist who whips her until she bleeds, and masturbates to the extent that her genitals are covered in sores. Still, it isn't until her boss stages an intervention and tells her that, unless she seeks help, she'll lose her job, that Joe acquiesces to recovery. In the next scene, Joe attends a support group, where she stands before a circle of recovering female sex addicts and announces, "My name is Joe and I'm a nymphomaniac."

"Sex addict," one of the women corrects her.

"My name is Joe and I'm a nymphomaniac," Joe retorts indignantly.

"We say sex addict. Here, everyone's the same."

Despite her skepticism, Joe decides to give recovery a chance. As instructed by a group member, she goes home and removes everything from her apartment that reminds her of sex, which just so happens to be everything in Joe's life. Through montage, we watch as Joe dutifully cuts the chord to her phone, tosses away books, artwork, bathroom sundries and a toilet bowl plunger, paints over mirrors, and then swaddles all the sharp corners of her furniture and fixtures in foam. When she is finished "purifying" her living space, the camera zooms out from her bedroom windows—covered in newspaper—to show Joe, dressed in a puffy coat and mittens, lying like a mummy on an unmade mattress. Her bedroom—once the locus of her lust made manifest—has been transformed into a DIY deprivation chamber. Amidst all the self-imposed sterility, Joe grows restless. She removes her mittens and reaches for the one object she has allowed herself—her journal, filled not with words, but with cuttings from the trees that she and her father used to collect when she was a child. As a matter of utility, Joe licks her fingers in order to flip more easily through its yellowed, brittle pages, until the sensation of licking her fingers acts as a compulsive trigger, transforming her innocuous finger licking into the rapacious

fellatio of her hand, which she struggles to yank from her mouth in an embodied battle between self-control and desire. When she's finally able to stop herself, Joe squeezes her eyes shut, palpably overwhelmed. If Joe has failed to live as a functioning member of society with her desire, it appears that without it, living at all will be practically impossible.

In the next scene, Joe is back among her recovery group, where she announces, "My name is Joe and I'm a sex addict, but I haven't had sex for three weeks and five days." After a bit of sedate applause from the group, a member asks Joe to share how she managed to abstain, prompting Joe to unfold the piece of paper in her hand. "Dear everyone," she reads awkwardly, like a child reading from a book report, "don't think it's been easy, but I understand now that we are all alike." Joe pauses, lingering on her statement, when she looks up toward a mirror, inside of which she catches the reflection of her younger self, who appears to be seated behind her. Startled, Joe quickly turns around only to find the seat empty, though the girl's reflection remains, rendering her a figment of Joe's mind. The group leader offers Joe a glass of water, from which Joe drinks while keeping her gaze fixed on the image of her younger self.

Joe's hallucinatory encounter with her younger self is yet another scene where von Trier employs an intensified cliché that troubles conventional accounts of agency. The visual representation of the psychic confrontation with the "true" self is a familiar cinematic trope, one that signals to viewers a moment of self-confrontation, where the younger self is meant to evoke a pure, inner self—the unconstrained, sovereign self—to which the protagonist must decide to be true or not. Most often, the hallucinated younger self appears as an injunction just before the protagonist is about to engage in a violation of her integrity and often before an audience of conspirators who demand that violation in exchange for social acceptance. Upon seeing one's "true" self, the protagonist is faced with a very specific double bind of self-sacrifice: either violate the self and achieve membership in a society of cruelty where the self can never exist in

its “true” state or honor the self and risk martyrdom and total alienation. According to the script of American individualism, the hero (from Prynne to Thoreau) always chooses the “ideal freedom of the self” over society.<sup>90</sup>

Faced with this same choice, Joe confidently tears the paper in half and begins again, this time without the safety of her script. “Dear everyone,” she says confidently. “Don’t think it’s been easy, but I understand now that we’re *not* and *never will be* alike. I’m not like you,” Joe says gesturing to one of the women, “who fucks to be validated. You might just as well give up putting cocks inside you. And I’m not like you,” she says, turning to another, “all you want is to be filled up and whether it’s by a man or by tons of disgusting slop makes no difference. And I’m definitely not like you,” she says, addressing the group’s leader, who has functioned as Joe’s sponsor. “That empathy you claim is a lie, because all you are is society’s morality police, whose duty it is to erase my obscenity from the surface of the Earth so that the bourgeoisie won’t feel sick. I’m not like you. I am a nymphomaniac and I love myself for being one, but above all, I love my cunt and my filthy dirty lust.”

But rather than setting off into the sunset of her authentic self, Joe’s life becomes one of total abjection. However, that doesn’t stop von Trier from littering her story of decline with the cinematic clichés we often associate with the transgressor’s victory over society’s constraints. From the stillness of the sex addicts’ meeting, the film abruptly cuts to an image of a burning Mercedes Benz parked in front of a mansion and the blaring soundtrack of The Talking Heads’ “Burning Down the House,” the upbeat rhythm of which imbues Joe’s exile from society with a sense of celebration and liberation, even as her story is also marked by grief and loss. At this point, Joe transitions into the final chapter of her story, “Chapter 8: The Gun,” which opens with a shot of Joe throwing a Molotov cocktail into the car, music still blaring. “Whether I left society, or it left me, I cannot say. I suppose you can make an argument for both sides,” Joe says

in in the over voice narration. Joe then recounts how, unable to function in society, she is forced to take a job as a shady debt collector for the mob, often resorting to sexual violence in order to extort her victims. Her work in the criminal underworld leads her through a series of events that ultimately find her being beaten and pissed on by both her estranged husband and lesbian lover/partner in crime—who also have vengeful sex in front of her—in the back alley where we first meet a bloodied, unconscious, and piss-soaked Joe at the very beginning of the film.

The juxtaposition of Joe's intense degradation with celebratory symbols, sounds, and visual cues of transgressive agency produces one of the film's most striking incongruities. The self-conscious imposition of these tropes onto the effects of Joe's exile from society forces us to reconsider our culture's general fetishization of agency. At the same time that von Trier mobilizes these tropes, he reminds us of the details that such stories of "heroic" transgression leave out—the very real consequences that those of us who fail to assimilate often suffer, particularly addicts. The abandonment of loved ones, the loss of social safety nets, capital, security. The basics of living. The "life" of a non-person. Is this really a victory to be celebrated? Are we convinced that so long as Joe has remained true to her "authentic" self that nothing else really matters?

More than anything, though, this scene acts as a visual representation of how a liberal account of agency is forced onto us. It is not simply an ideal we hold, but a burden we bear. Joe literally suffers agency and pays a dear price for it. In refusing the "scriptology" of SA, she takes up the narrative teleology of the transgressive heroine, but she is hardly "free" or "liberated." In fact, it is through this script that Joe finds herself beaten and bloodied in an alley. Here, the fiction isn't the self we construct in recovery discourses, in a confessional booth, or in the doctor's office. The fiction is the liberal account of agency itself—the fiction that we ever have it, enact or, or really want it in the first place.

## 4.5 THE FINAL IMPASSE

But even if we accept that this account of agency is a myth, even those most critical of its damaging effects struggle to let go of it. Nowhere is this clearer than in the final scene of the film, when Seligman attempts to rape Joe and Joe responds by killing him. This scene tests the limits of our ability to rethink agency, largely because of the challenges that rethinking poses for issues of consent and responsibility. It is much easier to call for a more complex account of agency from the conceptual framework of addiction than it is from violent crimes like rape and murder. But if we take seriously how addiction troubles a liberal account of agency and opens up the possibility for a more nuanced understanding of how we self-govern—how we, in fact, control and direct our desires and make choices—then we also have to address the consequences such a theory may hold for those situations in which our notions of justice and consent rely heavily on conventional understandings of intention, self-control, and desire. We might be willing to adjust our conception of agency for those who've experienced the violence of addiction, but not for those we understand as predators and not in terms of how we form rules around consent—ones which fail to acknowledge that consent is hardly ever straightforward or unconstrained.

Indeed, the final scene of *Nymphomaniac* challenges our ability to push past these exact limits. After Joe finally finishes her story, Seligman leaves her room so that she might sleep. After a few seconds, however, Seligman returns, holding his penis in his hands as he attempts to crawl into bed and have sex with Joe, who is startled and confused by his advance. After all, throughout the entire course of the film, Seligman has been portrayed as entirely divested of sexual interest. Even when he imagines Joe in his school girl fantasy, his response is laughter, not arousal. Still, it's unclear, as it so often is, whether his lack of desire is produced through self-restraint or exists as a matter of biology (as though it's ever either/or). At one point, Joe

even expresses dismay that Seligman isn't sexually aroused by her story, to which he can only offer an apology. In light of these facts, his sudden sexual advances are jarring and it seems unclear from where his sexual desire suddenly sprung. Was it that, after hearing Joe's story of sexual excess, he could no longer absolutely contain his own desire? Did she, in fact, induce his sexual awakening? As in the case with Joe's own sexual desire, Seligman's is also difficult to read in terms of a classic definition of agency. Are we to understand his sudden sexual desires as in or out of his control? If we understand him as inherently more in control of his desire than Joe (after all, he's neither a self-described "nymphomaniac," nor "sex addict") or hold him to a higher expectation of self-restraint than Joe, do we reinforce a misogynistic assumption about women's comparative incapacity for self-control?

Regardless of where his desire comes from, what is clear is that Joe does not want to have sex with him. Nowhere is Joe's agency less problematized than in this scene, where she actively and repeatedly refuses Seligman's advances. But what of Seligman's will? If we read his behavior according to a more dispersed, multiple, and nuanced account of agency, one where we accept that human beings are hardly in conscious control over their desires, what do we do with acts of rape? Because the act of rape is so vile and morally reprehensible, it can be incredibly difficult to talk of a rapist's rehabilitation or absolution. We want rapists, largely because of the power they exert over others, to be held accountable. When Harvey Weinstein, after being accused by more than 80 women of sexual assault, sexual abuse, and rape, for which he was charged, claimed he was a sex addict, the public response was marked by deep skepticism and outright dismissals. People figured he was trying to get out of taking responsibility for the vicious crimes he had committed and for which he should be punished. In "Don't Call Harvey Weinstein a Sex Addict," psychologist Joe Kort claimed that "cleverly, Weinstein has taken the easy path—rehab instead of prison—checking himself into expensive 'sex-addiction rehab'

programs for the foreseeable future...Harvey Weinstein is not a sex addict, he is someone engaging in non-consensual and exploitive behavior resulting in violating basic human and sexual rights of another person.”<sup>91</sup> But is rehab an easier path? And does being a sex addict necessarily negate the violations he committed? What does this say about how we understand addiction itself? What assumptions are being reinforced?

I don't argue these points or ask these questions to defend Weinstein or to argue that he is, in fact, a sex addict. I just want to point to the conceptual limits of being able to think about agency in more complex ways. Even in cases of pedophilia—which is defined as a psychological disorder often linked with sex addiction—it is hard for us to accept that pedophiles struggle to exert conscious control over their desires, that some part of their behavior is out of their conscious control. If we do accept that, we may have to treat them as something other than super villains who should be locked away for life. But why is holding people “accountable” better than rehabilitative approaches? What do we risk in taking up, for example, the model of confession and reconciliation I discussed earlier? What if we understood the agency of “predators” in more complex and nuanced ways? What are the material risks of that thinking? Do we fear that we may really have to give up the carceral state and share social responsibility for individual actions? Are we so overburdened by our own agency that the idea of sharing each other's sounds impossible?

In the face of Seligman's attempted rape, Joe is forced to make a final choice. Having attempted and failed to assert her agency by resisting his advances, Joe must now decide whether to acquiesce to his advances or fight back. As Seligman tries to pin her down, the screen goes black. We see nothing of the action on the screen, but only hear the struggle, until we hear a gunshot and then the sound of Joe scrambling to grab her things and leave. Whether Joe had no choice but to kill Seligman is uncertain, though it is an act that most audiences will accept—even

celebrate—in the face of being raped. We read such an act as an assertion of agency—as a moment in which we see a woman asserting her power and taking back control. Indeed, for the sake of self-preservation or self-defense, we are willing to reserve moral judgment of the inarguably greatest immoral act—killing another human being. And, after all, did Joe really have a choice?

---

1. O'Connor, "The Fallacy of the 'Hijacked Brain.'"

2. See the NIH's website for its definition of addiction; see my introduction for rates of incarceration among addicts.

3. Foddy and Savulescu, "A Liberal Account of Addiction," 2.

4. The NIH website's listing of addiction symptomology from the DSM.

5. Crittenden, 15. Here, Crittenden describes this formation through a reading of Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*.

6. Ibid., 16.

7. Taylor, 94; Crittenden, 15.

8. Frankfurt, 6.

9. For more on the science of choice and how it disproves rational theories of choice employed in economic and political theory, see McFadden, "The New Science of Pleasure." For Bourdieu's concept of how social actors make decisions based on their "feel for the game" and other fun sports metaphors, see *In Other Words*.

10. See Duhigg, *The Power of Habit* and Lewis, *The Biology of Desire* for more on the formation of habits and their relationship to addiction.

11. See Rasmussen, *The Autonomous Animal* on the relationship between Kant's account of moral autonomy and his avid self-regulation. See Duhigg on the formation of habits.

12. See my introduction for rates of addiction among prisoners.

- 
13. For the purposes of this chapter, I refer to the director's cut version of the film because it includes key scenes germane to my analysis of the film.
14. Berlant and Ngai, "Comedy Has Issues," 235.
15. Honig and Marso, 2.
16. Groneman, 175.
17. Ibid, 144.
18. Ibid., 174.
19. Wery et al, "Characteristics of self-identified sexual addicts."
20. Groneman, xvii.
21. Ibid.
22. Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect," 836.
23. Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 102.
24. Friedling, 3.
25. Ibid., 3.
26. Ibid., 3-5.
27. Ibid., 5.
28. Butler and Denny, *Lars Von Trier's Women*, 1.
29. See Butler and Denny for more on the debate over whether Lars von Trier is a misogynist or feminist. Indeed, almost everything written about his work is forced to take up this question.
30. Denby, "The Story of Joe."
31. Friedling, 3-12. Friedling offers numerous examples of such feminist readings.
32. Ibid., 11.
33. Schippert, "Implications," 78.

- 
34. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 23.
35. Elliot, "Suffering Agency," *Social Texts* (2013), 84.
36. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 121
37. Elliot, 84.
38. Berlant, 95.
39. *Ibid.*, 116.
40. *Ibid.*
41. See Schull, "Data for Life."
42. "parenthesis, n.," *OED Online*.
43. Groneman, 3.
- 44, *Ibid.*, 4-5.
45. "mania, n.," *OED Online*.
46. Groneman, xviii.
47. *Ibid.*, 6.
48. In *The Uses of Pleasure*, Foucault describes how moderation was one of the four great virtues of virility in Ancient Greece, where "moderation is a certain orderliness and mastery over certain pleasures and appetites" (64).
49. Groneman, xviii.
50. *Ibid.*, xix.
51. *Ibid.*
52. See Hall, "The rediscovery of 'ideology'." Here, I refer to Hall's theorization of representation as "the active labour of *making things mean*."
53. Greer, *The Madwoman's Underclothes*, 38.
54. Friedling, 3.

---

55. Judge, "Female as Flesh," 10-11.

56. Ibid.

57. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 18.

58. Foucault mostly focuses on how this moment produces a proliferation of ways to talk about sex but doesn't really unpack the further implications of how confession changed and why these changes were so crucial to how confessional procedures were adapted by secular forms of knowledge production. My discussion of this shift, therefore, elaborates on Foucault, explicating what I think are some of the even greater stakes of this historical moment vis a vis secularism and secular notions of the self.

59. Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Art. 4, Sec. 1422.

60. Ibid., Art. 4, Sec. 1423.

61. Curran, *The Development of Moral Theology*, 9.

62. See Curran for more on the historical development of penance.

63. Curran, 16.

64. Ibid., 17.

65. Ibid.

66. Foucault, 33.

67. Walton, *The Complete Angler*.

68. Thompson, *Quest for the Golden Trout*, 144.

69. Ibid., 145.

70. Ibid., 145-46.

71. Ibid., 146.

72. Ibid., 148.

73. Mathers, *Wonders of the Invisible World*, xi.

- 
74. Horton, *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, 8.
75. Ibid.
76. Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," 38.
77. Kozloff, 22.
78. Ibid., 102-03.
79. Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 158.
80. Ibid.
81. See Rasmussen, "Mature Subjects" in *The Autonomous Animal*, 23-59.
82. Ibid., 24
83. Rees, 8.
84. Ibid., 6.
85. Ibid., 7.
86. Ibid.
87. Ibid.
88. Ibid., 11.
89. La Masurier, "Resurrecting Germaine's theory of cuntpower," 28.
90. Kazin as qtd in Cook, *Alfred Kazin*, 20.
91. Kort, "Don't Call Harvey Weinstein a Sex Addict."

## Chapter 5. THE BRUJO

On the morning of Saturday, July 8, 2017, Nelsan Ellis was pronounced dead at Woodhull Hospital in Brooklyn, New York. The 39-year-old actor, celebrated for his portrayal of Lafayette Reynolds on the HBO television series, *True Blood*, died from complications due to alcohol withdrawal. A few days later, Ellis's manager released a statement on behalf of his family that read:

Nelsan's father has bravely agreed for me to share the circumstances of Nelsan's heart failure. Nelsan has suffered with drug and alcohol abuse for years. After many stints in rehab, Nelsan attempted to withdraw from alcohol on his own. According to his father, during his withdrawal from alcohol he had a blood infection, his kidneys shut down, his liver was swollen, his blood pressure plummeted, and his dear sweet heart raced out of control...Nelsan was a gentle, generous and kind soul. He was a father, a son, a grandson, a brother, a nephew, and a great friend to those that were lucky enough to know him. Nelsan was ashamed of his addiction and thus was reluctant to talk about it during his life. His family, however, believes that in death he would want his life to serve as a cautionary tale in an attempt to help others.<sup>1</sup>

The press release is a genre typically known for trafficking in generalizations that obscure more than they reveal, which makes this statement both peculiar and profound in how it so concretely describes Ellis's death and, through it, his life. It begins with the flesh and blood of Ellis's heart—not a metonym, nor metaphor, but the literal organ, failing alongside his kidneys and his liver—a vital network held together by the blood that flows through them. A network that shuts down not only through the mechanics of alcohol withdrawal, but also under the psychological and spiritual weight of alcoholism and addiction that sits heavy in his soul, “gentle, generous and kind.” In shifting from the language of the heart to the soul, Nelson becomes situated in yet another network—one that variously describes him as a father, son, grandson, brother, nephew and friend. These structures of kinship are rendered much like his body—yet another vital network that is sometimes held together through blood, too—and succinctly captures how the networks of the body are intimately enmeshed with those of the social. Like Ellis's physical

body, his social relations are severed by the effects of alcoholism and addiction, not only through death, but also before, through shame, which surfaces as a transformative affect that “alternates between introspection and sociability.”<sup>2</sup> But unlike the networks that make up our bodies, which decay and turn to dust, our kinship networks continue on past our death, carrying with them the memory of those like Ellis, whose stories need to be told—stories that coarsen like blood between us, sustaining and creating new networks of vitality. Stories that can serve “to help others.”

When I first read of Ellis’s death, I’d already started working on this project. I knew that my final chapter would focus on *True Blood*, largely because of how Ellis’s character, Lafayette, provided such a rich lens to re-view addiction, disentangling habitual drug use from its history of criminalization, pathologization, and racialization. I had no idea that Ellis, himself, lived with addiction. Interestingly, on the show, Lafayette is one of the few characters who doesn’t struggle with addiction himself, though it does affect those closest to him, including his aunt and his cousin. Lafayette often finds himself in the position of being their caretaker, exposing how addiction functions as a family dis-ease. But within the larger world of *True Blood*, Lafayette more crucially functions as what Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes as “the Signifying Monkey,” a powerful “trickster figure” from Yoruba mythology “who dwells in the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying ambiguities of language.”<sup>3</sup> Key to the Yoruba trickster’s performance is how he takes up “the master’s tropes” and simultaneously repeats and reverses them “in one deft, discursive act.”<sup>4</sup>

When we first meet Lafayette in “Strange Love,” the first episode of season one, he’s working as a line cook at Merlotte’s Bar, where he’s flipping burgers while sporting make-up, women’s earrings and an African headwrap alongside the masculine accoutrement of a G—namely a large gold watch. When Sookie Stackhouse, one of Merlotte’s waitresses and the show’s main character, comes to place an order for onion rings, Lafayette coos and comments

that her tan and lipstick make her “look like a porn star” and inquires whether she has a date. “No, when I wear make-up, I get bigger tips,” Sookie says, throwing Lafayette into a fit of laughter. “Yes girl, that’s it. These rednecks are suckers for packaging,” Lafayette says as he shimmies his shoulders and poses to emphasize his own masterful self-adornment. When Sookie gripes that she also has to act dumb—not only to get bigger tips, but also to ensure that customers aren’t “scared” of her—Lafayette answers, “they ain’t scared of you, honey child, they scared of what’s between your legs.” “Lafayette! That’s nasty talk and I won’t listen to that,” Sookie scolds him, as Pam, another Merlotte’s waitress asks, “do you even know what’s between a woman’s legs, Lafayette?” “I know every man, whether straight, gay or George motherfucking Bush is terrified of the PUSSY,” Lafayette retorts. When Pam comments that “not everyone is gay, ok. Not everyone wants to have sex with you,” he gives her a knowing look. “Oh, you would be surprised, Arlene. People you know. That’s all I’m saying.”

Through his queer enactment of the mammy archetype, Lafayette both reproduces and disrupts hegemonic notions of blackness, homosexuality, and gender. The joy he expresses is not due to his work cooking for white people but exists in spite of it. The wisdom he offers the white waitresses does not serve to protect their innocence and sexual purity but both schools and subverts it. And while the mammy’s “androgynous embodiment” is meant to mark her as an asexual figure with “no personal needs or desires,” Lafayette’s androgyny serves the exact opposite function, expressing how he revels in his sexuality, his beauty, and his queer desire.<sup>5</sup> In his various roles as a drug dealer, sex worker, road crew member, line cook, and, most significantly, as a conjurer, Lafayette functions as a “subversive Hoodoo trickster” who is driven by a mocking wit that “subverts white authority and destroys white illusions of superiority while simultaneously promoting numerous value-laden symbols of black culture.”<sup>6</sup>

While many characters on the show inhabit marginalized, racialized and/or queer identities, Lafayette is singular in how he revels in the intersections of his liminality. He not only resists the assimilative forces of liberal inclusion, but he provides alternative frameworks for living together. In fact, by season three, our hunch that there's something special about Lafayette is revealed as a fact when we learn that Lafayette comes from a long line of Voodoo conjurers and that he, too, is a powerful medium. In *Contradictory Omens*, Edward Kamau Brathwaite describes syncretic religions such as Voodoo and Santeria—sometimes referred to collectively as “diasporic religions”—as a process of “psychic maroonage,” a “syncretic vision of African patterns, terms, symbols and communicative cannons (modes of walking, eating, working, inter-relating; musical, artistic, and other practices) which the subordinate maintains in everyday life even in the course of submitting to large scale socio-economic pressures of dominance.”<sup>7</sup> In *Sacred Possessions*, Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert describe the “multilayeredness and polyphony” of these traditions as “the creative and innovative means of fending off oppressive and dehumanizing values.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it is Lafayette's deep connection with these traditions that makes *True Blood* such a necessary inclusion in this project. The inherent syncretism of these religions—a set of ever-evolving practices and beliefs that synthesize Catholic, African, and Indigenous religious traditions—extend and enrich my discussion of Mignolo's “decolonial thinking” in Chapter 1, while also effectively disrupting liberal antiracism's antinomy, the religious Other. Furthermore, the principle role given to the rite of possession within these traditions is also key to rethinking the boundaries between self and other and between volition and compulsion on which modern models of addiction are not only based, but also racialized. I argue that Lafayette's enactment of these traditions provides us with a queer of color reparative practice—one meant to compliment Roderick Ferguson's concept of queer of

color critique—through which dependence is depathologized and restorative networks of relation are constructed.

But how does one reconcile the imaginative and theoretical work that Lafayette's character does for rethinking addiction with the very real and horrific consequences of Ellis's death? What does it mean that Ellis was subsumed by an illness that his performance so beautifully illuminates? How do I attend to the painful way that Ellis died alongside the fullness of how Lafayette shows us we can live? To that end, I've been thinking a lot about what it means that Ellis's family "believes that in death he would want his life to serve as a cautionary tale in an attempt to help others." I often find such statements troubling, if not insulting, particularly when they concern people of color. What sort of cautionary tale does Ellis's death offer? That we (or "they," depending on your position) should "just say no?" When read from a certain perspective, this statement seems to suggest that addiction was an individual choice that Ellis made and that, if we simply don't choose addiction, we won't die. But what if, through a more generous and reparative lens, we were to read this statement as a cautionary tale not targeted at individuals (and, in particular, black men), but at how our society differently positions individual addicts according to U.S. racial formations? What if the tale meant to help people isn't about individual choices, but about our society's dominant approaches to addiction and recovery, particularly for people of color? And what if the answers and the help reside not in Ellis's death, but in his art? What if we try to understand the way Ellis died through the way Lafayette lives? To that end, I want to frame this chapter as a different kind of cautionary tale about addiction—one that allows us to critique those individuating and racialized cautionary tales that have come before it, and allows us, through Ellis's art, to find new ways of moving forward together.

## 5.1 THE IDEALLY SELF-GOVERNING VAMPIRE

*True Blood*, which originally aired between 2008 and 2014 and is based on Charlain Harris's book series, *Dead But Not Forgotten: Stories from the World of Sookie Stackhouse*, revolves around the friends and family of Sookie Stackhouse, a telepathic waitress who lives in the rural town of Bon Temps, Louisiana. The show begins just two years after "The Great Revelation," when vampires "came out of the coffin" and began to integrate into human society and demand equal rights. The Vampire Rights Movement purposefully parodies both the Civil Rights movement—which is visually referenced in the show's opening title sequence—and the fight for marriage equality. By imagining what the fight to include vampires might look like in terms of postwar liberalism's dominant modes of inclusion, *True Blood* tests the limits of these frameworks and exposes how "abstinence and assimilation," which are presented to vampires as the "only true paths to acceptance," do not enact inclusion or equality.<sup>9</sup> Instead, they "install a process that keeps wanting to efface a difference that is at the same time constantly affirmed."<sup>10</sup> In reaffirming the vampire's difference, these acts of assimilation ultimately work to maintain human supremacy and perpetuate deep-seated suspicion that the vampire, like the many racialized subjects to which the vampire refers, is inherently incapable of appropriate self-governance—a failure that becomes punishable by death.

Part of the catalyst for "The Great Revelation" is the invention of Tru Blood, a synthetic blood substitute drink developed and manufactured by Yakonomo, a multinational corporation with offices in Japan and Texas. A sort of methadone for vampires, Tru Blood has allowed vampires to integrate into human society largely because it promises that vampires no longer need to feed off humans. Over the course of the first five seasons, we watch as some vampires, including Bill Compton, the 173-year-old vampire who becomes the object of Sookie's affection, abstain from drinking human blood (at least publicly) and perform other "human"—i.e. white,

middle class, and heterosexual—norms. However, the efforts of Compton and other “mainstreamers” are met with resistance not only from conservatives and human supremacist groups who argue that vampires are fundamentally inhuman and, thus, undeserving of human rights, but also from vampire factions that rebel against what they see as the push to strip vampires of their “true” nature. As one vampire tells Bill, “not everyone wants to dress up and play human.”<sup>11</sup>

Alongside the assimilative demand to engage in “human” norms and abstain from the drinking of human blood, the American Vampire League (AVL), for which Bill becomes a spokesperson, also launches a public relations campaign to break stereotypes of and historical prejudices against vampires. It is also through this PR campaign that the viewer is introduced to the world of the show. In the very first scene, the camera pans across a convenient store before zooming in on a television set. On the screen, Nan Flanagan, an AVL spokeswoman and member of the Vampire Authority, is shown making an appearance on *Real Time with Bill Maher*, a liberal-leaning political talk show that airs on HBO. “We’re citizens, we pay taxes, we deserve basic civil rights, just like everyone else,” Nan tells Bill Maher and his viewers at home.

“I mean, com’on,” Maher scoffs. “Doesn’t your race have a rather sordid history of exploiting and feeding off innocent people—for *centuries*?”

“Three points,” Nan begins. “Number one: show me documentation. Doesn’t exist. Number two: doesn’t your race have a history of exploitation? We never owned slaves, Bill, or detonated nuclear weapons, and most importantly, point number three, now that the Japanese have perfected synthetic blood which satisfies all our nutritional needs, there’s no reason for anyone to fear us. I can assure you that every member of our community is now drinking synthetic blood. That’s why we decided to make our existence known. We just want to be part of mainstream society.”<sup>12</sup>

Whether on cable news, at tolerance rallies, or in townhall meetings, AVL spokespeople like Nan and Bill traffic in dominant American discourses of inclusion and tolerance in order to argue for the fair and equal treatment of vampires. In “Sparks Fly Out,” the fifth episode of season one, Bill, who was serving as a Confederate soldier when he was turned vampire, is invited by Sookie’s grandmother, Gran, to speak at a meeting for The Descendants of the Glorious Dead, a group Gran runs for Bon Temps’ descendants of Confederate soldiers. While the Descendants meetings are usually poorly attended, on the night of Bill’s talk, everyone from Bon Temps arrives at church not to listen to his stories of the Civil War, but to see the spectacle that is a real-life vampire. As people settle in, members of the group frantically drape an American flag over the altar’s crucifix, worried that if Bill sees it, he’ll “sizzle up like backfat bacon in front of everyone.” When Bill walks out for his speech, everyone gasps as he yanks the flag from the cross and watches, dumbfounded, as Bill dutifully rehangs the flag. “As a patriot of this great nation, I wouldn’t dream of putting myself before Old Glory,” Bill says before joking, “as you can see, I did not burst into flames.” The audience laughs awkwardly as Bill gives a big smile and continues, “we vampires are not minions of the devil. We can stand before a cross or a bible or in a church just as readily as any other creature of God. And I am honored to stand before you tonight. Vampires have traditionally been very private, perhaps to our detriment. But I believe if we reach out to one another, we can coexist and even thrive together.” Mindful of his audience, Bill provides visual evidence that he’s not the monster that Bram Stoker, Hans Erdmann, or even Anne Rice would have you believe he is. Instead, he makes appeals to both Christian Universalism and nationalist sentiments, and blames vampire self-segregation, rather than human supremacy, for the vampire’s previous marginalization—a marginalization he is now working to end by “reaching out” and sharing his story.

Moreover, the scene is also carefully constructed to reveal how Bill’s “reaching out”

across difference is a critical act of self-concealment that ultimately evinces the differences he seeks to hide. Before Bill's talk, Gran is handing out programs and greeting people as they arrive, when the mayor asks if she feels that they've "taken enough precautions...to make sure everybody's safe." Gran scoffs at what she reads as the mayor's ill-informed prejudice. "Sterling," she says sternly, "we don't have anything to be frightened of Mr. Compton, he's a perfect gentleman. Frankly, I am more worried about what we might do to him." As Gran attempts to humanize Bill, the camera cuts to a shot of Bill sitting in the church kitchen. The True Blood that Gran gave him stands untouched as he sits stoically, using his heightened vampiric hearing to listen in on what Gran is telling others about him. The image of Bill sitting motionless in the dark while listening in on private conversations offers a direct visual challenge to Gran's insistence that Bill is neither different nor threatening. When Gran introduces Bill, she again attempts to eradicate his otherness by reminding the audience that "our special guest, despite what you might have heard, is one of us. His family were among the first to settle in Bon Temps and he bravely fought for Louisiana in the war for Southern independence. Let us welcome one of the original sons of Bon Temps back to the town that he helped build."

During Bill's talk, yet another act of concealment is revealed to the viewer. When presented with an antebellum tintype of himself and his family, Bill grows emotional. "My human life ended before I had a chance to come back home," Bill tells the audience. While the camera shows Sookie and other members of the audience growing teary eyed at his confession, Bill grabs his handkerchief to wipe away his own tears. After quickly hiding the cloth behind his back, the camera zooms in to show that it is smeared with blood, signaling both Bill's abject difference (vampires cry tears of blood) and his attempts to conceal it. Later, after the talk, Bill is shown back at home, stoking a fire while reflecting on the past. As we see flashbacks of Bill's memories, we learn that Bill not only revised his story for public consumption, but he also

excluded that part of his tale which matters most *to him*—the story of how he became vampire and the last time he ever saw his family. As the flashbacks shift into the present, Bill is shown with blood gushing from his eyes and angrily thrashing at the fire with his poker, devastated not only by the loss of his family and his life as a human, but also by the seemingly incommensurate divide between himself and those with whom he cannot share his particular torment, because it would expose his monstrosity, and therefore undermine the assimilative goals of the mainstreaming movement, which feigns to bridge that very divide.

Indeed, most of what the AVL tells the public turns out to be a distortion. Despite Nan's claims that vampires have no history of exploitation, over the course of the show we learn that vampires—whether serving as Nazis, slave owners, or members of the Vatican leadership—have long been complicit in the very forms of exploitation and racial violence that Nan publicly disowns. And though Nan assures the public “that every member of our community is now drinking synthetic blood,” in fact, hardly any vampire abstains from feeding on humans. While some see these deceptions as proof of the vampire's truly evil nature, for the viewer, they echo the very discourses of exceptionalism in which marginalized groups are often forced to traffic. Access to equal rights has often relied on representations of minority groups not simply as equals, but as exceptional models of modern liberal subjecthood. By setting impossibly high standards, these narratives essentially set people up to fail. When people inevitably fall short of these unrealistic expectations, not only are they understood as flawed, but their “failures” serve to further reinforce the very prejudices these idealized images intend to counter and thus racialize otherwise cultural differences. It is for precisely this reason that the Yiddish saying “Shanda fur di goyim” was so popular amongst Ashkenazi Jews, whose model minority status has often depended on no Jew doing anything less than perfect *in front of the Gentiles*.

But also, few people buy these too-good-to-be-true stories in the first place. Even those sympathetic to the vampire's cause doubt the AVL's stories of ideally self-governing vampires. As Sam, the owner of Merlotte's Bar, asks skeptically, "Can you imagine passing up all of your favorite foods and spending the rest of your life drinking Slim Fast?"<sup>13</sup> And as Sookie later tells Bill, "I used to get so mad when people judged vampires just for being different. It's like they were judging me too. I told myself their fear was nothing but small-mindedness, but maybe that's just what I wanted to believe, because the more open my mind gets, the more evil I see."<sup>14</sup> And though the audience at Bill's talk does warm up to him by the end, they never quite buy that Bill is, as Gran says, "one of our own." In fact, during his talk, a child in the audience turns to his mother and exclaims, "Momma, he's so white!" to which she responds: "No, darlin', we're white. He's dead."

For all those vampiric differences that cannot be concealed, Bill resorts to the language of pathology. While breaking down the truths and misconceptions about vampires for Sookie, Bill strategically attributes his heightened senses to his "condition."<sup>15</sup> Thus, like the addict, the discourse of disease transforms the vampire from a devious threat into a sufferer deserving of care. By situating this pathologizing discourse within the framework of an equal rights movement, *True Blood* also tackles how the liberal expansion of rights to and social acceptance of historically marginalized groups is frequently predicated on reframing social differences as inherently involuntary. For example, liberal arguments for LGBT inclusion and equal rights have worked to counter articulations of homosexuality as an "immoral lifestyle choice" by arguing that sexual orientation is a biologically determined fact in which one has no choice. Similarly, though being transgender is no longer classified as a mental disorder, it is classified as "a sexual health condition" and is frequently articulated as "not a choice."<sup>16</sup> Articulating transgender as such has been strategic in order to help transgender people gain both better access to health care

and protection under the law. But such articulations also reinforce the very determinism that being transgender productively challenges, i.e. that gender is biologically determined. Still, as psychologist Jane Sheldon et al argue “research has shown that those who believe sexual orientation is inborn are more likely to have tolerant attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, whereas those who believe it is a choice have less tolerant attitudes.”<sup>17</sup> The same goes for the vampires on *True Blood*. When Sookie’s brother Jason says Bill doesn’t deserve her compassion because he’s “already dead,” Sookie shouts in his defense, “that’s not his fault!”<sup>18</sup> For Sookie, it’s not that vampires shouldn’t be marginalized for their difference. It’s that they shouldn’t be marginalized for differences that are *not their choice*.

While vampires are not expected to give up their dependence on blood—a factor that is “not a choice”—they are expected to reroute that dependence in a way that is commensurate with the norms of a modern capitalist society. This is precisely what *True Blood* allows them to do. By turning to *True Blood*, vampires stop leeching off the lifeforce of America’s workforce, and actively participate in capitalist consumption. Rather than feeding off people, vampires now feed the market. Indeed, becoming a benefit to global capitalist expansion via *True Blood* is what makes vampire integration possible in the first place. Moreover, the drinking of *True Blood* also becomes a crucial practice for enacting the boundaries of the modern liberal subject, who need not rely on human beings, but the market, for their well-being. Thus, in drinking *True Blood*, the vampire no longer poses a threat to the market, nor the individualist boundaries of modernity’s ideally buffered self. To this end, vampires are also discouraged from living in community and being too dependent on each other. After attending a vampire party with Bill, Sookie remarks that the vampires they encountered were particularly “evil”—menacing and blood hungry in all the ways we think of traditional vampires. “They are,” Bill concedes, before he explains that, “they share a nest and when vampires live in nests they become more cruel, more vicious, they

become laws unto themselves. Whereas vampires such as I, who live alone, are much more likely to hang on to some semblance of our former humanity.”<sup>19</sup>

But like all consumer goods we use to replace our lack of human connection under the alienating forces of capitalism, Tru Blood makes a poor substitute for the bonds that traditional forms of feeding create. While Tru Blood is capable of keeping vampires alive, it denies them the crucial intimacy and sense of fullness, in Charles Taylor’s sense of the term, that feeding directly off humans provides.<sup>20</sup> In episode nine of season one, “Plaisir d’amour,” Eric Northman, a 1,000-year-old vampire skeptical of the mainstreaming movement, asks Bill, “how do you stomach the stuff? Don’t you find it metallic and vile?” When Bill answers, “it’s sustenance, that’s all,” Eric laughs. “If you’re the poster boy for mainstreaming, the movement is in very deep trouble. Tru Blood: It keeps you alive, but it will bore you to death.”

Even Bill is forced to concede this fact. Unable to subsist on Tru Blood alone, he continues to feed off people, especially Sookie. When Bill does feed off Sookie, it’s almost exclusively in the context of sex, when Bill’s otherwise hidden fangs involuntarily appear. In their first sexual encounter, Bill, ashamed when his fangs materialize, hides his face, causing Sookie to ask if there’s something wrong.<sup>21</sup> When Bill looks up, Sookie instinctively gasps. As she continues to stare, her horror quickly turns to lust. “Do it, I want you to,” she instructs Bill as she elongates her neck and presents her carotid artery to him. Bill hesitates, weighing the consequences of such an act, before he sinks his fangs into her neck, causing her to moan not in pain, but in ecstasy just before the credits roll. By displacing vaginal intercourse as the central sex act, vampiric feeding is reframed as a heteronormative act and, thus, a socially acceptable behavior. It also acts as the predominant means through which the emotional bonds between Sookie and Bill are established, particularly when Sookie drinks Bill’s blood. Not only do the magical healing properties of vampire blood restore her to full health, but Bill’s blood also

psychically connects Sookie to him. After Sookie drinks his blood, Bill involuntarily and erotically enters her dreams and knows where she is and what she's feeling at all times, thus dissolving the boundaries between them—a dissolution only permissible within the bounds of a monogamous relationship. In contrast, when Sookie is later injured in season two, Eric offers her his blood as a cure. Sookie, near death, drinks it resentfully. When he begins to show up in her dreams, Eric's appearance is framed as a violation rather than an act of intimacy.<sup>22</sup>

While privately feeding within the confines of a monogamous, heteronormative relationship renders the vampire-human exchange of blood acceptable, all other forms of feeding continue to be described as deviant, from casual biting encounters to predatory forms of feeding, as well as the recreational human consumption of vampire blood. In essence, feeding off humans (and vice versa) is acceptable so long as it is done in the privacy of one's own home. But Bill doesn't keep his feeding confined to his relationship with Sookie. He not only continues to engage in predatory behavior—feeding off and killing enemies—but he also has the occasional casual encounter. Still, Bill is careful not to do so in public, and expects the same of his vampire kin, especially once he rises through the ranks of the Vampire Authority to become the King of Louisiana. Shortly after Bill is crowned King, an “undercover” YouTube video made by a vampire hate group surfaces online. In it, a young vampire is shown feeding off a woman behind a dumpster in a back alley. Bill has the vampire arrested and brought to his mansion. While the video shows the vampire engaging in the same consensual feeding that all vampires (including Bill) do, and while Bill acknowledges that the video is the product of obvious “entrapment” by a vampire hate group, Bill tells the suspect, “unfortunately for you, that is irrelevant. It is expressly forbidden by the Authority to be filmed feeding on a human. You broke the law, and now, you have to pay the price.”

“Which is?” the vampire suspect asks.

“The True Death,” Bill says, referring to the vampire version of the death penalty.

“That’s a little extreme, don’t you think?”

“It’s the only way I can see to guarantee that you won’t do this again.”

“So, now, I’m being punished for being what I am?”

“No,” Bill replies. “You’re being punished for being stupid.”<sup>23</sup>

This scene illustrates how appropriate vampire self-governance is not about abstaining from feeding, but rather it’s about effectively concealing one’s acts of feeding. As Bill states, the vampire’s crime is not that he fed, it’s that he was videotaped while feeding—a crime punishable by death. As humans become increasingly hostile to vampires, the True Death becomes a popular tool to punish those vampires that negatively impact public perception, and thus, efforts to mainstream. Whether one is caught in the act of a quick consensual feeding or brutally murdering a newscaster on live television—as Russell Edgington, the former King of Mississippi, does at the end of season three—is superfluous. What matters is how these acts inhibit the ability of vampires to access political power, which is entirely predicated not on the act of abstention, but on the act of concealment.

Because of their blind faith in liberalism’s promises, the Vampire Authority and the AVL fail to realize that, under the conditions of human supremacy, hatred towards vampires is hardly a matter of how well vampires behave in public and that, in fact, their assimilative acts work to reinforce rather than abate human hatred of the vampires. As Zygmunt Bauman observes, assimilation doesn’t eradicate the mainstream’s fear of the Other, but often transforms that fear into what he calls “proteophobia” or “the apprehension and vexation related not to something or someone disquieting through otherness and unfamiliarity, but to something or someone that does not fit the structure of the orderly world, does not fall easily into any of the established categories, emits therefore contradictory signals as to the proper conduct—and in the result blurs

the borderlines which ought to be watertight.”<sup>24</sup> In short, people don’t simply hate vampires because they are different, they hate vampires because, through their assimilative performances, their difference becomes less visibly finite, disturbing previously strict boundaries of identity.

Thus, no amount of Tru Blood or “Festivals of Tolerance” will achieve peaceful coexistence. The problem is not psychopaths like Edgington, nor chronic casual feeding, but the system into which vampires are trying to gain entrance—a system which depends on clear taxonomies of identity that are disrupted by the act of assimilation itself. Unable to acknowledge this fact, the Authority grows increasingly militaristic, defending itself against “terrorist organizations,” human and vampire alike, while it executes its own at startling rates. Of course, the True Death is hardly an effective deterrent or remedy. No vampire can subsist on Tru Blood alone, making every vampire vulnerable to prosecution, including Bill and Nan, who, through a series of mishaps and poor political calculations, are eventually served True Death sentences for their own public indiscretions of feeding and killing. While Nan dies, Bill manages to outwit the Authority. But it is only at the point of his political demise that Bill finally realizes the futility of the mainstreaming project.

After Bill parts ways with the AVL, a new crisis emerges, when an epidemic of the deadly Hep-V virus breaks out among vampires in season five. The AIDS-like virus, of which human beings are carriers, is blamed on the lack of self-restraint among vampires who are accused of engaging in risky and indiscriminate acts of feeding, as well as the human consumption of vampire blood. Only later is it revealed that, in fact, the virus was genetically engineered by scientists and then added to Tru Blood as part of a conspiracy between the U.S. government and Yakonomo to solve the vampire problem once and for all.<sup>25</sup> But, by that point, the damage has already been done. The vampire community now finds itself pathologized, criminalized, and in the throes of genocide.

## 5.2 VAMPS, SUPES, AND ADDICTS, OH MY!

On the show, it isn't simply that vampires feed on human blood that makes them a threat. In the world of *True Blood*, the most potent drug isn't fentanyl or crack, but vampire blood or "V," which offers a high like that of Ecstasy, is as addictive as meth, and includes heroin-like withdrawal symptoms. As an addictive substance in and of themselves, vampires have the capacity to turn humans not only into more vampires, but also into literal drug addicts. By bringing literal drug addicts and alcoholics into the space of a Southern Gothic vampire story, *True Blood* takes up "the linking of racism, sexism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism [that] is often unmistakable in the majority of [vampire] stories" and explicitly explores how these -isms have also been historically linked to the addict.<sup>26</sup>

In *Inventing the Addict*, Susan Zeiger observes that works such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Florence Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire*, both published in 1897, exploded in popularity at the same time that "medical and mainstream discourses began to represent inebriates and other addicts as social parasites, unproductively sapping life from the social body."<sup>27</sup> Zeiger asserts that "like its fictional analogue, compulsive and habituated dependency on the blood of others, addiction was newly generated through popular and medical discourses of degeneration."<sup>28</sup> Stories of vampirism, in particular, functioned as a powerful metaphor for both the "compulsive, degenerate, pathological habit" of addiction and the "ambivalent racialization of addiction and its imperial discontents."<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Christopher Frayling and Robert Wokler assert that "the relationship between the vampire and their prey" also functioned as an "extremely potent" nineteenth century symbol for the dependence "that bind individuals together in civilized society" more generally.<sup>30</sup>

But rather than merely refer to the addict through the figure of the vampire, *True Blood* also offers explicit representations of addicts alongside those of vampires and other "supes"

(short for “supernatural creatures”) in ways that call attention to how, throughout the twentieth century, the addict has been constructed as their own sort of racialized monster through what sociologist Drew Humphries calls “drug scare narratives”—those other sorts of cautionary tales that undergird both American drug policy and the simultaneous criminalization and pathologization of addicts.<sup>31</sup> Political scientist Naomi Murakawa asserts that “scholars almost universally agree that drug scares are constructed in the shadow of great racial scares.”<sup>32</sup> Murakawa points to the Chinese-focused opium scare of the 1890s, the “Negro Cocaine Madness” of the 1910s, the “Mexican-focused ‘refer madness’” of the 1930s, and the “Black-focused ‘crack babies’” and crack mothers of the 1980s as specific historical moments in which “drug scares entail specific diagnoses that collapse pharmacology into presumed racial characteristics.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, American drug policy generally and the War on Drugs specifically have been undergirded by these racialized drug scares.

Historians of American drug policy describe Harry Anslinger not only as a “founding figure” of the war on drugs, but also as the man who perfected both the construction and employment of these narratives.<sup>34</sup> From 1930 to 1962, Anslinger served as the first commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. Just as the prohibition of alcohol was winding down, Anslinger, whose bureau was threatened with obsolescence and severe budget cuts, began vigorously championing not only the prohibition of drugs, but also the criminalization of addicts, who he claimed were “psychopaths...created by infectious contact with persons already drug-conditioned.”<sup>35</sup> His success as a policymaker was largely predicated on his ability to spin sensational tales, including that of 21-year-old Victor Licata, who murdered his entire family with an axe in 1933.<sup>36</sup> Anslinger blamed it on cannabis. Same with the man who attempted to shoot his wife but accidentally killed his grandmother instead. Same with the 25-year-old man who pled insanity but received the death sentence after raping a 10-year-old girl. “You smoke a

joint and you're likely to kill your brother," Anslinger warned, despite the fact that 29 out of 30 doctors he consulted told him there was no link between marijuana and violence.<sup>37</sup>

His collection of stories came to be known as the "Gore Files," which he peddled in the press—particularly Hearst owned newspapers—stirring up a public frenzy over what anti-drug crusaders began to purposefully refer to by its Spanish name, "marijuana," in order to draw associations with Mexicans. Anslinger said that "reefer makes darkies think they're as good as white men," and argued that "there are 100,000 total marijuana smokers in the U.S., and most are Negroes, Hispanics, Filipinos and entertainers. Their Satanic music, jazz and swing result from marijuana use. This marijuana causes white women to seek sexual relations with Negroes, entertainers and any others."<sup>38</sup> He was obsessed with busting Billie Holiday for heroin, while he let Judy Garland, also a heroin addict, slide, and attributed the evils of opium, cocaine, and hashish to their foreign origins, claiming that they were being smuggled into the United States by Communists.<sup>39</sup> By feeding into the racism and xenophobia that had long fueled drug scare narratives, Anslinger managed to create strong support for both his agency and the passing of the 1937 Marijuana Tax Act.<sup>40</sup> When he finally published *The Traffic of Narcotics*, his treatise for "making war on the narcotic addict," in 1953, he wrote, quoting an anonymous Los Angeles Department police officer, "Every addict...knowing himself to be a moral and social outcast, delights in bringing others into the outcast fold...I feel that these people are in the same category as lepers, and that the only defense society has against them is segregation and isolation whenever possible."<sup>41</sup> When the American Medical Association and sociologists such as Alfred Lindesmith attempted to refute Anslinger's drug panic with research that argued addicts were victims in need of care, not criminals who should be punished, their message fell on deaf ears. Anslinger was telling a far more engrossing story, the affective charge of which mountains of data and appeals to reason could not subdue. Even then, Anslinger had their phones tapped and

accused his critics of being addicts and dealers themselves.<sup>42</sup>

Though Richard Nixon is credited with coining the phrase the “War on Drugs” in a speech he delivered in June 1971, it was Anslinger who started what was really a war on addicts, and particularly addicts of color, despite Nixon’s claims that drugs were “enemy number one.” In a 1994 interview, Nixon’s domestic policy chief John Ehrlichman said as much. “You want to know what this was really all about?” he asked his interviewer, before continuing:

The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I’m saying? We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.<sup>43</sup>

As the war raged on through the Reagan era, the same racialized drug scare narratives that Anslinger had so successfully wielded in the 30s, 40s, and 50s, were reanimated with new monsters, particularly the “she-devil” crack mother, who was represented as “the aggressively sexual black Jezebel who threatens the lives and safety of her born and unborn children and is responsible for an ‘epidemic’ of crack babies as well as ‘the poverty of values’ crippling the inner city.”<sup>44</sup> Thanks to such representations, which dominated the nightly news, Reagan signed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, creating mandatory minimums that severely punished first time offenders and led to the mass incarceration of black citizens, largely by way of the “100-to-1 rule.”<sup>45</sup>

None of these racist policies would have been made possible without the horror stories upon which they were built. Despite his insistence that these tales were not meant “to satisfy a desire for morbid sensationalism but as a basic description of the current situation,” Anslinger’s stories and the ones that followed were the stuff of penny dreadfuls, rendering addicts as real-life zombies and vampires via a medico-moral discourse that allowed Anslinger to claim that his

work was “an attempt to present the facts, to review, if you will, the evidence, and to reach some conclusions that may help in establishing sane, progressive, and healthy public attitudes and public action.”<sup>46</sup> Still, Anslinger’s language of contagion, parasitism and foreign invasion, and stories of seemingly “normal” people being possessed by a “demon drug” that deformed them into undead pools of profuse desire and bloodlust, which preyed on, above all, innocent white women, seemed to be pulled straight from the pages of *Dracula* or *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Thus, “the term ‘addiction’ refers not to a disease but to a despised kind of deviance. Hence the term ‘addict’ refers not to a bona fide patient but to a stigmatized identity, usually stamped on a person against his or her will. Addiction (or drug abuse) thus resembles mental illness and witchcraft, and the addict (or drug abuser) resembles the mental patient and witch, inasmuch as all of these names identify categories of deviance and their occupants.”<sup>47</sup>

The centrality that the figure of the “innocent white woman” plays within drug scares and vampire stories, as well as Southern Gothic literature, is something *True Blood* highlights and disrupts through the character of Sookie. Played by a bleached blond Anna Panquin, Sookie is a postfeminist, white liberal embodiment of the Southern Belle archetype—sexy, yet chaste, self-sufficient, yet always in need of rescuing, open-minded, yet fiercely dedicated to the rules of social propriety. In other words, she’s “vampire bait,” as Bill says—just the sort of innocent white woman targeted and corrupted by the vampire and the addict-violator he references. But it’s Sookie who first violates the boundaries between self and other as she listens in on people’s minds without their consent while demurely taking their orders as she works her waitressing shift at Merlotte’s. At one point, someone even tells Sookie to “stop trying to rape my brain.”

For the first three seasons, Sookie passes as human, though her telepathy marks her as ambiguously non-normative. At one point, a Merlotte’s patron asks her if she’s “retarded” because of the odd behavior she exhibits as she involuntarily reads their thoughts. It isn’t until

season three that we learn she's telepathic because she's half-fairy. Not only does her half-fey identity disrupt the function of the Southern Belle archetype, which is meant to protect racial purity and guard against miscegenation, but it also presents Sookie's telepathy as a force beyond her conscious control—it's part of her biology. While Sookie sometimes chooses to actively penetrate people's minds, she can't always keep her telepathy under control, particularly if she's overstressed or intoxicated. But her telepathy isn't simply marked as an inhuman trait, it's also understood as a supernatural power. Her telepathy allows her to discover people's true intentions, always lurking beneath the surface. She's often enlisted by humans, vampires, and supes, alike, to help them in pursuit of the truth that lies beneath social performances of propriety. Interestingly, the only minds she cannot penetrate are those of vampires, who remain unintelligible to her in ways that both attract and trouble her.

Like all the other supernatural species that populate the world of *True Blood*, Sookie's supernatural traits are also crucially defined by how they cross the boundary between self and other and enact a porous notion of self. From telepathic fairies and shapeshifters to vampires and witches, supernatural ability is represented on the show as a violation of the buffered self—a violation that also troubles the dichotomy of volition and compulsion. Vampires can't always control their desire to drink human blood, which connects them psychically to their prey. Witches enact rites of possession to instrumentalize the power of the dead as often as they find themselves unwitting mediums instrumentalized by spirits. Shape shifters and werewolves transform, sometimes against their will, into the bodies of other beings, human and non-human. And fairies penetrate the inner lives of everyone (except vampires) both voluntarily and compulsively, depending on context.

While these traits are attributed to the biology of supes, the fact that a supe's ability to control their powers is dependent on various combinations of other factors, both social and

natural, suggests that this biological attribution is not deterministic, but probabilistic. This distinction is crucial because it addresses the role that biology plays in the formation and enactment of identity, while it avoids replicating the racial hierarchies and determinism of the eugenics movement. As Nikolas Rose argues, “to deem something biological is not to assert destiny or fatalism, but opportunity.” Thus, this probabilistic view of biology, “construes vital properties as emergent, and living organisms as dynamic and complex systems, located in a dimension of temporality and development, and constitutively open to their milieu—a milieu that ranges in scale from the intracellular to psychological, biographical, social and cultural.”<sup>48</sup> By attending to how each character’s various milieus influence the enactment of their powers, *True Blood* allows us to consider the “possibilities and constraints that flow from [the reality of our fleshy nature].”<sup>49</sup>

However, within the framework of liberal politics on the show, supernatural traits are often read by human characters and supes alike not only as dangerously inhuman and strange aberrations, but more crucially as threats to human norms that must be contained and/or annihilated. Thus, supernatural beings—represented as the principle minority groups on the show—are forced to hide their threatening abilities from others so as not to risk annihilation or social exclusion. Furthermore, they’re also told to resist their nature in order to gain access to human rights and social inclusion. However, as I show in the previous section, these acts of concealment do not result in equality. Instead, they serve to maintain human supremacy by suppressing those supe traits which threaten liberal ideals most. Thus, acts of assimilation, passing, and code-switching aren’t simply an attempt to gain equal rights under the law, but necessary acts of survival in a society hostile to non-humans. The social demands of assimilation and abstention also make the building of coalitions across different supes and against human supremacy nearly impossible. While various supernatural characters band together to defeat

some collective threat, their coalitions often become untenable, largely because of how supes take up liberal norms as the lens through which they understand each other. Vampires are despised by werewolves, witches, and fairies for all the same reasons that humans hate their race. Even Sookie, who is frequently accused of being a “Fangbanger” and a “race traitor” too sympathetic to vampires, traffics in liberal notions of decency in order to weed out the “good” vampires from the “bad” ones.

In fact, Sookie is initially attracted to vampires because their otherness makes her feel “normal”—not only because it normalizes her own difference, but also because it literally eradicates it. At first, Sookie likes vampires because she *can't* read their minds. In the company of vampires, she's buffered from the constant noise of other people's thoughts, as well as the tyranny of constant self-restraint. When Bill wanders into Merlotte's in the first episode, Sookie is immediately enchanted not only by how tall, dark, and handsome he is, but also by the silence that surrounds him. She's also ecstatic because he's her “first vampire.” Sookie turns to her boss, Sam Merlotte, and says as much, giddily announcing, “I've been waiting for this to happen ever since they came out of the coffin two years ago.” Neither Sam, nor Merlotte's patrons share Sookie's enthusiasm, which skirts the line between fetishism and, in light of the Vampire Rights Movement, progressive open-mindedness. For most everyone else in the bar, vampire Bill is someone to be feared—a creature that has, for all but the last two years, been lurking in the shadows and preying on humans. For most people, the myth of the vampire—rendered on the show as a mix of objective history and misinformation purposefully spread by vampires themselves—is one that can't be so easily upended by a few bottles of Tru Blood and liberal calls for tolerance.

After Sookie heads to Bill's booth and takes his order for Tru Blood, Bill is joined by Denise and Mack Rattray, addicts and drug dealers that Sookie refers to as “low rent” and

“trash.” In characterizing the Rattrays as “white trash” drug addicts, *True Blood* takes up more recent drug scares, which have been characterized as distinctly white, including the “meth epidemic” of the 2000s and the current “opioid crisis.” In fact, while Sookie is taking people’s orders, she hears a customer thinking to herself, “I feel like I’m trapped in some hillbilly’s Oxycontin nightmare, man I can’t wait to get the hell out of this Podunk town,” to which Sookie replies, “well make sure you do, because every year you wait, you just get more and more stuck here. Believe me, I know.” While addicts and alcoholics of color are represented on the show—including the women in Lafayette’s family—V addiction, itself, is represented as a white problem. Not only are the Rattrays “white trash” V addicts and dealers, but V addiction most directly plagues the show’s community of werepanthers, an endangered supe species that has resorted to incest in order to keep from going extinct. All werepanthers are part of the Norris clan, a family deeply ravaged by poverty and inbreeding, to which their V addictions are attributed.

As historian Nancy Isenberg and sociologist Matt Wray have argued, “white trash” is not only a marker of class, but also of race, where “trash” marks whites of a certain class as part of a distinct and inferior race—“incurable, irreparable ‘breeds.’”<sup>50</sup> Both Isenberg and Wray describe how concepts of a lesser race-class of whites—referred to as “lubbers,” “rubbish,” “clay-eaters,” and “crackers”—were imported to the colonies from England and then reinforced in arguments over slavery. While abolitionists argued that “the social and economic environment of the slave south was responsible for turning otherwise respectable whites into the degraded and dishonorable poor white trash,” proslavery secessionists argued that poor whites were poor because “they were suffering from genetic defects.”<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, the debate over whether poverty is inherently a moral or biological problem echoes those long waged over the etiology of addiction. Like addiction, the belief that white poverty was biological eventually played out in

the American eugenics movement, which argued that white poverty and its observed traits—including “alcoholism”—were the result of genetics. Such arguments also led to State-imposed sterilization programs upheld by the Supreme Court in 1926.<sup>52</sup> Today, “white trash” has practically become synonymous with meth and opioid addiction. As Wray said of “white trash” in a 2018 interview with National Public Radio, “nowadays, the connotation is that they're probably crack or meth addicts or opioid addicts.”<sup>53</sup>

In “Toothless,” political scientist Naomi Murakawa examines how the concept of “white trash” has been mobilized in the construction of white drug scare narratives, and how this usage both reproduces and revises the racial construction of previous drug scares. Murakawa looks specifically at the “meth epidemic” and the formal diagnosis of “meth mouth,” which attributes tooth decay to the heavy use of methamphetamines. Like the drug scares that have come before, the “meth epidemic” isn’t based in “demographic trends and medical research,” but is created by political, racial, and cultural forces.<sup>54</sup> Murakawa points to representations of meth as a specifically “white trash” drug used in predominantly poor, white rural areas—places similar to Bon Temps. As Wray suggests, and as Murakawa shows, “white trash’s” connotations of a racial degeneracy and biological inferiority are, in fact, maintained through its direct linkage to meth addiction. In particular, Murakawa describes how the formal diagnosis and visual representation of “meth mouth”—often included in diversion literature—extends the biological racialization of “white trash” to the addict. Murakawa argues that, despite there being no direct correlation between tooth decay and meth use, meth addicts are frequently represented with “decaying, missing and crooked teeth,” which have long been linked to “white trash” not only through social class, but also through biological explanations of degeneracy.<sup>55</sup> “Meth mouth” also significantly marks the white body, which is, in the framework of American racial formation and white supremacy, represented as racially “unmarked.”

But framing meth as a “white trash” drug epidemic “is not only descriptive of poor white users, it is also predictive” of white middle-class decline. Murakawa contends that white drug scares like the “meth epidemic,” are based not only in the fear of “white trash” but also in “the fear of decaying White status.”<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, Murakawa points out that, in the mid-twentieth century, amphetamine use—like powdered cocaine in the 1980s—actually tracked the rise of white American achievement and exceptionalism.<sup>57</sup> “From soldiers staying alert with Benzedrine during World War II, to housewives keeping peppy and thin with Dexedrine, to children maintaining focus on Ritalin, amphetamine derivatives of the last half century were marketed as drugs of speedy achievement, offering freedom from fatigue, depression, unwanted weight and gender malaise, and short attention spans,” Murakawa writes.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, people on *True Blood* seek out V because it gives them superhuman strength, heightens their senses, makes sex more intense, and causes hallucinatory experiences that allow them to escape the mundanity and/or precarity of their daily lives. Jason Stackhouse, Sookie’s full-human brother, uses V because he hears it’ll make him better at sex, while his girlfriend, who we learn is from an economically privileged background, uses V to escape her bourgeois boredom. And Andy Bellefleur, the Sheriff of Renard Parish, uses it to make him a stronger, sharper Sheriff capable of putting in more hours.

However, the construction of the “meth epidemic” over the course of the early twenty-first century speaks to a new trajectory—one informed less by rates of meth addiction and more by economic forces that finds people working more for less in highly precarious positions. Methamphetamines are no longer just a supplement that can keep one in the running for socioeconomic status, but also a threat that can knock one—or keep one—out of it. In this way, the correlation of meth use with poverty is also used to obscure and reinforce the forces of global capitalist expansion. But while the twenty-first century’s heightened economic precarity is true

for most people, and, in fact, affects people of color to a greater extent, it is “only White economic decline” that is “catastrophized through the meth epidemic.”<sup>59</sup> For example, during the height of the “meth epidemic,” the story of “middle-class Whites relying on meth to stay productive before the inevitable fall” became a popular narrative formula for major newspapers and magazines, particularly when writing about white female addicts. Murakawa points to several stories in the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and *Newsweek* about middle class women trying to keep up with the demands of modern motherhood only to find themselves in the throes of meth addiction. For example, a 2005 *Newsweek* cover story, “America’s Most Dangerous Drug,” begins with “the cautionary tale of Kimberly Fields,” a mother of two sons “and a Volvo in the driveway” of her Chicago home. “But somewhere along the way,” the story continues, “this blond mother with a college degree and a \$100,000-a-year job as a sales rep for Apria Healthcare found something that mattered more: methamphetamine.”<sup>60</sup> Ultimately, white drug scare narratives are used to stoke fears about white decline in the post-Civil Rights era and, in so doing, also maintain a certain white privilege.<sup>61</sup> While drug scares focused on people of color have been used to terrorize minoritized communities through mass incarceration and deportation, white drug epidemics “often grant users a more contextualized victim status, emphasizing not only fear *of* White drug users, but also fear *for* White drug users.”<sup>62</sup>

In *True Blood*, who is feared and who is feared *for* not only depends on whether their behavior is understood as a choice, but also on their perceived racial identity. Compared to most people’s extreme suspicion and weariness of vampires, the Rattrays’ effusive friendliness toward Bill, as well as their history as “white trash” drug users and dealers, strikes Sookie as suspect. It isn’t just that Sookie fails to extend the same compassion she has for Bill to the Rattrays, it’s also that the Rattrays behave in all the sinister ways the “white trash” drug scare narrative anticipates, thus violating Sookie’s sense of white liberal propriety, which she uses as a universal metric to

determine one's humanity and thus, whether one is deserving of care or punishment. The vampire, in this instance, is worthy of compassion because he's a Southern gentleman named Bill who says please when he orders his Tru Blood. The Rattrays, in Sookie's mobilization of the same logic used to interpret her and Bill as "abnormal," are simply "white trash." The Rattrays, thus, emerge as the monsters we should *actually* fear. The addict-violator is monstrous all on their own, their bloodlust literalized. The Rattrays's performance as the addict-violator in the context of what is ostensibly a vampire story, rather than a drug scare narrative, also calls attention to the sensational construction of this archetype. Just as this scene reproduces the figure of the addict-violator, it deploys this figure not in the space of the evening news, but in the context of a campy horror-fantasy show, drawing our attention to how the stories we've received about addicts and upon which much of America's drug policy has been based, are as much a mythology as the story of the vampire itself.

But, again, it's Sookie who engages in the first act of violation, choosing to read their minds for the ulterior motives beneath their genial facade. She discovers Denise calculating how much blood is inside Bill ("almost 200 ounces") and how much money she can get for selling it ("\$10,000"). Despite Sookie's warnings to stay put, Bill soon disappears with the Rattrays, who take him out to the woods behind the bar, bind him with silver chains and begin draining his blood. As the transfusion pouches slowly fill up, Mack paces anxiously. "I just need some V juice and I need it bad," he tells Denise. "My body's starting to hurt and I just need to get it in me." "God damn it, Mack, You're a fucking drug addict," Denise retorts. Eventually, Sookie and Bill combine their supernatural abilities to overpower the Rattrays, who are killed off by a vengeful and calculating Bill in the following episode. In his cold-blooded killing of the Rattrays, Bill draws suspicion back to his own act of Southern gentility.

### 5.3 DEALERS AND HEALERS

While the Rattrays embody the monstrosity of Anslinger's addict-violator, the story of Lafayette and his family effectively disrupt this violent racialization, offering in its place a syncretic queer of color reparative lens through which to re-see both the addict and the dealer not as diseased criminals and social parasites, but as living beings normatively vulnerable to forces beyond their control. Aside from working at Merlotte's bar as a line cook—a role in which Lafayette's queer performance of the mammy figure resists the assimilative forces of liberal norms—Lafayette also works as a drug dealer and a prostitute, largely because he's unable to pay the bills with his legal jobs as both a line cook *and* a member of Bon Temps road crew. Later, we also learn that Lafayette uses a good portion of his earnings to pay for his schizophrenic mother's care in a mental institution. As Lafayette says, "You know how much it cost to keep her here? More than two legal jobs' worth, that's how much."<sup>63</sup> The fact that Lafayette holds multiple jobs, while people like Sookie seem to do just fine on waitressing alone, not only speaks to the unequal effects that the forces of late capitalism have on people of color, but it also troubles how criminalized activity like sex work and drug dealing are described under liberalism as an individual choice punishable by law. How Lafayette performs his work as a drug dealer and prostitute, alongside his work at Merlotte's, also challenges notions that these roles are inherently harmful or any different from other transactions under capitalism. As Lafayette says, "don't get it twisted, Honeycomb, I'm a survivor first, a capitalist second, and a whole bunch of other shit after that, but a hooker dead last."<sup>64</sup>

But it also isn't that Lafayette is simply a victim of global capitalist expansion either. He excels at and seems to genuinely enjoy the work he otherwise has no choice in doing. In the same way that he finds joy not in cooking for white people, but in spite of it, Lafayette also finds a way to make his drug dealing and sex work outlets for his identities as a healer and subversive

“Hoodoo trickster.” By taking up and playing with various stereotypes of queerness and blackness, Lafayette adopts “the oppressor’s parody” of himself—a role in which he “appears to accept the roles demanded by white authority only to reverse them through disguised mockery.”<sup>65</sup> Ultimately, Lafayette’s performance “ends in the masked comic rebellion of the hoodoo trickster,” which says “while you’re laughing at us...we’re laughing with you but the joke’s on you.”<sup>66</sup> This is particularly evident in “Mine,” the third episode of season one, when Sookie’s brother Jason shows up at Lafayette’s house hoping to score some Viagra. From the moment we meet Jason, he’s depicted as a sex god whose good looks barely make up for his lack of critical thinking. Beloved by Bon Temps for once being its all-star quarterback—a role he still benefits from though he’s now barely employed on the road crew—Jason isn’t held to the same standards as his racialized counterparts. While the sex lives of vampires are both pathologized and criminalized, Jason’s hyperactive sex life is accepted, if not celebrated by the citizens of Bon Temps.

This dichotomy plays out in complex ways when the viewer is introduced to Jason’s character while he’s having casual sex with Maudette Pickens, a Merlotte’s waitress.<sup>67</sup> The couple is shown post-coitus when Jason becomes agitated after noticing vampire fang marks on Maudette’s inner thigh. “You had sex with a vampire?” he asks her, disgusted. At first, Maudette tries to claim the marks are mosquito bites, before she admits to hooking up with a vampire at Fangtasia, the seedy vampire bar in Shreveport run by Eric Northman. “Look, I was broke, and he paid me a lot of money,” Maudette says, hoping that framing her sex with a vampire as an act of prostitution rather than an act of sexual desire will make it less suspect. But it doesn’t. Not only is Jason threatened by her sex with a vampire, but he becomes doubly threatened by the suggestion that he just had sex with a prostitute. “You a hooker, Maudette?” Jason asks, before saying “Because I don’t pay for it, never have, never will.” “Well I don’t charge for it neither,”

Maudette says defensively, claiming that the vampire had offered her \$1000. “What was I supposed to do, say no to a thousand bucks?” Jason thinks for a minute before asking “what was it like?” Quickly, the couple’s repudiation of prostitution and vampire sex turns into sexual arousal. As Maudette describes the sex—which she claims she didn’t like because it was “too rough,” though she concedes she does “like it rough”—Jason gets turned on. The couple then proceeds to watch vampire porn together. Maudette goes down on Jason while he watches the video with a mixture of pleasure and disgust, particularly when the camera zooms in on the male vampire, who turns his head toward it, giving Jason the impression that the vampire is watching him as much as he is watching the vampire. As the vampire begins to climax, his appearance grows more demonic—his eyes turn red as he bears his fangs and howls. While Jason looks on in horror, he begins to climax too, his face equal parts confusion and concupiscence, before the camera cuts away to another scene. When we return to Jason and Maudette’s storyline, they’re shown acting out the vampire porn they just watched. Jason playfully chokes Maudette as he says, “too bad I don’t have fangs, otherwise I’d rip your throat out,” before the camera quickly cuts away again.

As Jonathan Dollimore writes in “Sexual Disgust,” disgust “both in its subjective experience and its social expression, is dense with cultural signification.”<sup>68</sup> Not only does disgust work to maintain the boundaries of cultural norms and taboos, but it does so “in ways which indicate their vulnerability to disruption.” Similarly, disgust can also be a “reaction which consolidates individual identity, or a disavowal of what threatens it; it can be a symptom of repressed or ambivalent desire for something with the potential to liberate or threaten the self, or liberate and threaten it almost indistinguishably.”<sup>69</sup> As Eugenie Brinkema observes in *The forms of the affects*, disgust also originates not in objects of disgust—such as vomit or a corpse, or a vampire, as in this case—but in the proximity of the subject’s relationship to that which

threatens/liberates its boundaries.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, disgust is often defined by the excess to which it responds—the feeling of being too-full of, too-in-need-of, or too-close to objects of desire. Thus, disgust’s excessive theorization and expression becomes indicative of the excess that disgust typically disavows. But disgust, like its twin concept desire, also implies a lack of agency, largely in how it is experienced as a precognitive bodily affect—one that Winfried Menninghaus argues, “implies, not just an ability to say no, but even more a compulsion to say no, an inability *not* to say no. As this quasi-automatic (‘instinctive’) form of nay saying, disgust stands on the boundary between conscious patterns of conduct and unconscious impulses.”<sup>71</sup> Therefore, Jason’s disgust-lust registers not simply as a repressed Freudian desire for the abject male vampire body. Instead, his disgust-lust results from his proximity to the excessive sexual prowess of the male vampire—a sexual potency that threatens the predominance of Jason’s own white male heterosexuality and, in that threat, also motivates his desire for that potency. In short, Jason wants what the vampire has and hates the vampire for having it, because being a sex monster is the core of Jason’s identity—an identity threatened by both the vampire and the prostitute.

Such is made clear when Jason shows up at Lafayette’s, looking for Viagra in hopes that he can sexually outperform the vampires he publicly claims to despise. Lafayette laughs and tells Jason Viagra’s not only legal, but he can even buy it at the drugstore. “Yeah, but I need it now,” Jason says. “Got anything else?” That’s when Lafayette mentions that he sells V, which, at \$600 a quarter ounce, will give Jason exactly what he’s looking for. At first, Jason balks and questions Lafayette about his source. Lafayette smiles coyly and responds, “let’s just say I have an arrangement with a certain life challenged individual who appreciates my multifaceted talents.” “Is there anyone not fucking vampires these days?” Jason asks, a mixture of both disappointment and judgement in his voice. “Listen, do you want to get it up and keep it up and

have the best sex you've ever had?" Lafayette asks. Jason agrees, before Lafayette gives him strict instructions to only use one or two drops, otherwise "things might get a little intense and I don't mean in a good way."

Not only does this exchange reveal exactly how Jason's hatred of vampires is motivated by his desire for their sexual potency, but it also disrupts and subverts a number of conventional tropes. On the one hand, in coming to Lafayette, a drug dealer, for sexual enhancement drugs, Jason's sexual excess—which, according to the contours of white heteromascularity, is described as normative—is aligned with the addict, thus exposing how the excess of the addict's desire is largely determined by race, gender and sexuality, rather than any objective measure. On the other hand, the normativity of Jason's desire, as well as his request for Viagra, also reframes Lafayette's role as a drug dealer. Rather than representing him as a deviant parasite feeding off the pain of addicts, Lafayette is portrayed more like a medical doctor, the conventional supplier of drugs such as Viagra and opioids. Beyond collapsing the cultural distinction between a drug dealer and a medical doctor, Lafayette's role as a Voodoo healer and conjurer also collapses the historical distinction between Western medical doctors and the marginalized witch doctor, who has also historically served as the dispenser of drugs eventually synthesized, secularized, and placed under the control of Western medicine.

Like all medical practitioners, Lafayette also expects to get paid. "Ain't nothing free in my world," Lafayette tells Jason after he tries to leave without paying him. When Jason promises to pay him later, Lafayette asserts, "Motherfucker, I don't know who you think I am, but I don't run a payment program and won't institute one." The camera then cuts to the image of Jason standing in his underwear in front of a video camera set up in Lafayette's living room. "Do you know how much you could make if you had your own website? Queens all over this world would pay good money just to watch you jack off," Lafayette tells Jason while adjusting his video

camera, the perspective of which frames the scene, thus placing the viewer in the point of view of Lafayette, who is no longer the object of the camera's gaze, but its authoritative subject. When Jason gets upset about the idea of men masturbating to a video of him dancing, all Lafayette has to do is ask "do you want the V or not," before Jason acquiesces. The scene then ends with Lafayette directing and cat-calling Jason as he dances around, wearing nothing but his Hanes and a mask of Laura Bush to hide his face. In one quick transaction, it's Jason, not Lafayette, who is transformed into the caricature of the queer male prostitute selling his body to score. Thus, the Hoodoo Trickster works his magic, repeating and reversing the "master's tropes" in a way that upends Jason's performance of white male superiority, heteronormativity, and bourgeois propriety, as well as the pathologization and criminalization of both the addict and the dealer.

That Lafayette uses his role as a drug dealer to enact his role not only as a trickster figure, but also as a mystical healer is reinforced throughout the show. Unlike the Rattrays, Lafayette does not harvest V through force. Instead, he has an arrangement with a lonely gay vampire, Eddie Fourier, with whom Lafayette trades sex for blood. Not only is their trade consensual and mutually-beneficial, but it's also presented as tender and nurturing. While Lafayette abates Eddie's profound loneliness by offering him affection and human kindness, Eddie happily provides Lafayette with the blood that allows him to make ends meet—something he's unable to do working as both a line cook *and* on a road crew. Furthermore, how Lafayette deals/prescribes V to customers/patients expresses how V is not only a highly addictive drug, but also a powerful medicine, able to bring someone near death back to perfect health. Like most substances marked as particularly "addictive," it's not always the case that taking V will turn human beings into full-blown addicts. As Lafayette later tells his boyfriend, V affects everyone differently. Lafayette reveals how V's outcomes are probabilistic, based on a variety of factors, including: where a person takes V; with whom a person takes V; how and when a person takes V; one's

mental, biological, and spiritual state at the time of taking V. Even the history of the vampire from whom the V came has a profound effect on the user. V's immense power for both good and ill are also why Lafayette treats it with such care—much like indigenous shamans and practitioners of Brujeria regard sacred substances like ayahuasca and peyote.

Lafayette tells Jason as much after Jason, who ignores Lafayette's advice to only use one or two drops, ends up in the hospital with terrifying hallucinations and a painful, non-stop erection. Rather than taking ownership of his misuse, Jason shows up at Lafayette's to blame him for his visit to the emergency room. "Listen, you got to stop selling V, man. It fucks people up," Jason tells Lafayette. "Listen, don't blame the Ferrari just because your ass can't drive. You gonna have to learn how to ride the high, boyfriend," Lafayette replies. Again, Jason passes the blame back: "Fuck that, I am done with V, fuck some other people up with that shit, you broke me." Lafayette then offers to show Jason how to do V correctly. After Jason agrees, Lafayette delicately pulls out of a vile and presents it to Jason: "this," he says slowly, "is the life force of a vampire." As he ceremoniously fills a dropper and then dabs small drops onto pieces of paper, he tells Jason, "Our blood sustains life. This blood is life. One drop, that's all you need, can't be greedy. Billions of molecules of 24 Karat life. You take this in and you take in a piece of the vampire it came from, the trick is, you gotta let it take you deep, soak it in." As Lafayette takes a drop into his mouth and shuts his eyes, Jason becomes intrigued. "What kind of vampire is that?" Jason asks. Lafayette smiles, responding in a near whisper, "he's new, so the blood is still a little wild. But I can feel him in my muscles making me strong. But you might get another side of him, the same V could affect you in a whole other way. But I guarantee you'll see the world with new eyes."<sup>72</sup>

The ritualized, communion-like nature of Lafayette's V ceremony resituates drug use within a sacralized context that redefines substances like V not as either illicit, addictive

substances or an acceptable mode of individual enhancement, but as a means through which interdependent networks allow for a holistically felt experience of fullness. Indeed, this is what Jason experiences. Shortly after leaving Lafayette's, Jason is shown walking through Bon Temps' streets at night, mesmerized by the beauty he'd long taken for granted. As he stares up at a Magnolia tree, his eyes grow wide with amazement as the flowers light up like sparklers and the sound of Lafayette's voice echoes in the over voice narration. When he encounters friends he usually takes for granted, Jason embraces them and showers them with gratitude and gestures of love, apologizing for his neglect. However, most people respond with skepticism and concern over his behavior, revealing how effusive expressions of love and kindness are not only generally marked as suspicious, but also often attributed to being under the influence of either substances or, in many cases, religious feeling—both of which are marked as inauthentic experiences through the reasoning gaze of sober secular thought. When Jason comes down from his high, he finds the alienation and individuation of liberal social propriety too painful to bear—a pain which ultimately leads him toward his habitual use of V. Thus, the etiology of addiction lies neither in the substance, nor the user, but in the forced estrangement of liberal and secular social norms themselves.

#### 5.4 SYNCRETIC VISIONS

While Lafayette clearly understands the various powers that V holds, it's not until he meets Jesus Velasquez in "Beautifully Broken," episode two of season three, that the full force of V's potency, as well as his own powers as a conjurer, becomes clear to him. Lafayette first meets Jesus when he goes to visit his mother, Ruby Jean Reynolds, a schizophrenic who has been living in a mental hospital, where Jesus works as her nurse. Part of the reason for Lafayette's visit is he wants to offer his mother as a cautionary tale to his cousin, Tara Thornton, who, earlier in the episode, attempted suicide. While Lafayette's mother has been locked away in

a mental hospital, Tara's mother has struggled with severe alcoholism. With incapacitated mothers and absentee fathers, Tara and Lafayette have largely relied on each other to survive. "There's some darkness in this family, Tara," Lafayette says. "My mama, your mama, they ain't strong enough to beat it, but we are. We've been fucking fighting tooth and nail to survive this bullshit our whole life and I ain't letting you give up now."

For both Tara and Lafayette, their mothers are figures of abjection as well as promises of the future that awaits them both. Tara understands her mother's alcoholism not only as an individual failure and form of self-centeredness, but, because of alcoholism's depiction as a genetically-inherited disease, she also sees her mother as a prognosis for her own life. Similarly, for Lafayette, his mother is entirely a tragic figure—a woman whose life has been devastated not only by the degradation of structural racism, but also by mental illness. Ruby is everything that Lafayette is afraid of becoming—crazy, destitute, institutionalized, and alone. Throughout the show, both women's abjection is also tied to their seemingly irrational and backwards religious views. While Tara's mother insists that her alcoholism stems from the fact that she's possessed by a demon, Lafayette's mother is constantly spouting off racist and homophobic remarks. When Lafayette walks through the door of her hospital room, he almost looks ashamed when she shouts toward Jesus, "That's my son, Lafayette!" "You told me your son is dead," Jesus responds. "He is! God killed him because he's a faggot. But he keeps coming back," Ruby says before turning to Lafayette to introduce Jesus, whose name she mispronounces as GEE-zus, rather than HEY-sus. "He's a Mexican, but he ain't raped me yet," she says. Ruby's introduction makes Lafayette wince with embarrassment, before he turns to Jesus to apologize. But Jesus seems unphased, expressing joy that Ruby finally has some visitors.

It is eventually through his relationship with Jesus that Lafayette learns to re-see his mother not as the devastating guarantee of biological determinism, but as the vitally creative

source of his own powers of observation and intuition. “She’s schizophrenic, but it doesn’t mean that she’s not perceptive,” Jesus tells Lafayette, who eventually understands that his mother’s schizophrenia is also linked to her pathologized gifts as a shaman.<sup>73</sup> Jesus’s ability to see Ruby beyond the medical definition of her diagnosis arises from the fact that Jesus is not only a nurse, but, as he later reveals, he’s also a brujo. Brujeria, which means “witchcraft” in Spanish, is often used as an umbrella term for indigenous medicine and shamanism throughout Latin America. What “Brujeria” refers to exactly depends on local contexts, ranging from Mapuche and Aymara traditions in Chile to Aztec and Mayan knowledges in Mexico. Brujeria is different from Voodoo and Santeria in the sense that Voodoo (which consists of two branches: Louisiana Vodoun and Haitian Vodou) and Santeria are syncretic religions that emerge from African religious systems—Voodoo from Fon and Ewe beliefs and Santeria from Yoruba beliefs. However, Brujeria is often also syncretic, absorbing aspects of Catholicism into Native practices and vice versa. Furthermore, in places such as Puerto Rico and Cuba, where Santeria is practiced, the terms “Brujeria” and “Santeria,” which means “way of the saints” are often used interchangeably. It’s also the case that the borders between these various “diasporic religions” are extremely porous, absorbing beliefs and practices in their contact with each other and from the various contexts in which they are practiced. For that reason, Santeria practiced by Puerto Rican-Americans in New York City is distinct from the Santeria practiced in San Juan. The same is true not only of Brujeria practiced by Chicanos and Mexicanos, but also among different regions in Mexico. While these syncretic religions are global, they are also highly local, and most importantly, incredibly capacious and adaptable.

“Brujeria” is also sometimes seen as a pejorative term, because it is a colonialist term meant to mark non-Christian religious practices as evil. In *Witchcraft and Welfare*, Raquel Romberg writes that, “because witchcraft and magic were perceived to epitomize the dangers of

‘passions,’” more so than other knowledge systems, “erasing them symbolized, in great measure, one of the quests of modernity.”<sup>74</sup> Romberg also notes that, while unsuccessful in its endeavor to rid the world of these practices, “the Enlightenment has nonetheless left a still-pervasive legacy of an imagined modern world opposed to an equally imagined traditional world”—a premodern world “of irrationality” of which “witchcraft and magic have been easily cast as the villains in narratives of progress and development, in particular, vis-à-vis rational moneymaking systems.”<sup>75</sup> As Mary Ann Clark writes in *Santeria*, diasporic religions such as Santeria and Voodoo are also referred to as forms of “witchcraft,” which “refers both to the purported African underpinnings and to a way of distinguishing between this and so-called ‘white’ or good witchcraft. In the common understanding, ‘black’ magic is malevolent and self-concerned, caught up in wickedness and death. The generalized term for this doubly black magic is “voodoo,” the form of sorcery brought from Africa and practiced by unsavory characters. This usage leads both the police and the media to describe any unusual or ritualistic crimes as involving “voodoo or Santería.”<sup>76</sup>

In line with Romberg’s and Clark’s histories, Thomas Szasz argues in *Ceremonial Chemistry* that the negative depiction of indigenous, black and female medical practitioners as “witches” has long sat at the heart of subjugating minoritized groups not only as backwards, but also as dangerous, including the substances these groups have traditionally used in their rites of healing. Not only has the Western concept of “witchcraft” been used as a tool of subjugation, but it has also been used to consolidate the power of Western medicine, as well as its control over “dangerous” substances and understandings of the human body. Thus, Szasz argues, the “modern wars against drugcraft” is best understood in its links to the various wars launched against “witchcraft.”<sup>77</sup> Szasz explains:

In each of these contests we witness a ritualized dramatization of the defiance and defense of the dominant social ethic; a concealed conflict between indigenous or illicit

healers and their accredited or professionalized competitors...Our contemporary drug problems thus cannot be understood without paying proper attention to the subtle and powerful tensions between accredited and unaccredited healers, physicians, and quacks, licit and illicit drugs, scientific medicine and folk medicine—tensions that have profound emotional as well as economic ramifications.<sup>78</sup>

Thus, the criminalization of addictive substances, addicts, and dealers has been historically linked to the secularization of society, in which both the addict and the religious Other become the ultimate antimonies of the modern liberal subject.

It is exactly this process of secularization that Jesus and Lafayette disrupt over the course of their relationship and through their communal enactment of diasporic religious traditions. The fact that Lafayette's powers are actualized in community also speaks to how Santeria and other syncretic traditions cannot be practiced alone. They are inherently community making activities, where "deities are instrumental in facilitating a formation of community. Indeed, their presence is not thought to be an act for the benefit of the individual mounted, but for the benefit of all present."<sup>79</sup> As Julio, a Santero interviewed by anthropologist Salvador Vidal-Ortiz in his study of gay Santeros, says, "there is no way anybody can practice Santería properly by yourself. . . it takes a number of people to hold an initiation, you can't do it by yourself."<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, the fact that Jesus and Lafayette engage their practice in the context of a homosexual relationship also reflects both how gay Santeros are pillars of the Santeria community, as well as how Santeria has been a crucial practice in the formation of the gay Puerto Rican community in New York City. In *Gay Religion*, Vidal-Ortiz writes about how gay Santeros have become pillars of the Santeria community in the United States and how Santeria communities, particularly in New York, functioned as crucial support networks for queer men of color living with AIDS in the 80s and 90s. Vidal-Ortiz writes that:

One of the ways this happens is through stereotypes about gay male Santeros' capacities: decorating altars, adorning thrones, cooking, doing bead work, making garments, and throwing the cowry shells. All these characteristics made gay Santeros "really good" Santeros, according to some participants. At the same time, the break provided by these

seemingly stereotypical aspects of labor participation in Santería forms a unique space and gives a strong sense of power to gay Santeros. It facilitates ownership of the religion, its traditions, and its history. Gay Santeros are visible, and are actively creating, Santería—and they have for several decades.<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, part of why gay men are considered particularly good Santeros is because of the belief that they are more “passive,” which is a necessary attribute because the most crucial role of any Santero/a is to act as a medium for the spirits. Thus, like the Hoodoo Trickster, gay Santeros subversively inhabit stereotypes as sources of resistance and relief.

Though Lafayette’s connection to the spiritual world has been evident throughout the series, it’s also not until he meets Jesus, well versed in the history of diasporic religions, that he begins to materially understand the history of that power. Shortly after meeting Jesus in his mother’s hospital room, Lafayette invites Jesus over for their first date. That’s when Jesus notices Lafayette’s makeshift altar. “That’s my girl, Tonantzin,” Jesus says, pointing at a statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe, who is referred to by mestizos and indigenous people as Tonantzin, which is the Aztec Earth Mother. “No, that’s the Virgin Mary,” Lafayette says. In fact, in syncretic religions such as Santeria or Brujeria, Our Lady of Gaudalupe is both Tonantzin *and* the Virgin Mary. As Rosemary Ruether writes, though the “history of Spanish-native relations in sixteenth-century Mexico has been portrayed as complete devastation of the indigenous peoples” and their cultures, in fact, “the deeper structures of Nahua social organization and culture continued under a surface appearance of Chrisitanization and Hispanicization.”<sup>82</sup> Many traditional religious practices—including “the burning of copal incense, dancing and singing, marching in processions, offering flowers and ears of corn, engaging in divination and healing, and pricking with thorns to draw blood.”<sup>83</sup> In evangelizing indigenous peoples, many of the missionaries translated Christians concepts into the Nahua language, and thus, the Nahua

worldview. Thus, through Christianity, many mestizo and indigenous Mexicans maintained Nahua traditions and beliefs.

Jesus then gestures to two more statues of black male figures. “Eleggua and Chango,” Jesus says. “These guys are pretty fucking hardcore dude. What do you offer them?” “Huh?” Lafayette asks, confused. Up to this point, Lafayette’s “juju” has largely been a commodified form of spirituality. He likes the look of mysticism, but never takes it too seriously. That’s why he doesn’t seem to know that Eleggua and Chango are powerful orishas, or spirits. Eleggua, in particular, is also sometimes referred to as “Eshu” or “Esu,” and is one of the most powerful orisha figures, as well as the primary “Signifying Monkey” trickster figure that Lafayette ultimately embodies. Of Eshu or “Esu,” Gates writes:

The versions of Esu are all messengers of the gods: he interprets the will of the gods to man; he carries the desires of man to the gods. He is known as the divine linguist... The closest Western relative of Esu is Hermes, of course; and, just as Hermes' role as interpreter lent his name to "hermeneutics," the study of the process of interpretation, so too the figure of Esu can stand, for the critic of comparative black literature, as our metaphor for the act of interpretation itself.<sup>84</sup>

In educating Lafayette on the histories behind the traditions in which he has only heretofore intuitively engaged, Jesus is setting him up for a deeper form of practice—one through which the two of them together will ultimately recover their ancestral histories, too.

On their second date, the two decide to take V together.<sup>85</sup> Though Jesus is initially weary of V, when he sees it magically restore a near-death man to health, he becomes intrigued by its healing properties. He tells Lafayette that he wants to try it, even though he knows it’s powerful. “It’s more than powerful, it’s unpredictable, it affects everybody differently,” Lafayette warns him. Jesus asks how it affects Lafayette, who says it depends on context—where he is, who he’s with. “Most folks use this for sex, but it can take you much, much deeper,” Lafayette says. “I get that,” Jesus says. “It helps you connect even more to whatever magic you’re already hooked up to.” “How do you know that?” Lafayette asks. “Because I care for people who live in a different

reality. That takes mad intuition.” “So, you more like a shaman in a Sunday hat,” Lafayette says, referring to the time he called Jesus “Satan in a Sunday Hat.” Shortly after the two take V, they experience carnivalesque hallucinations. The statues on Lafayette’s shrine start dancing, when they find themselves on a rollercoaster, before walking into Lafayette’s kitchen, which throws them into a different dimension. Suddenly, they find themselves in Mexico, some time in the distant past. “Mi bisabuela!” Jesus says of the old woman in the corner grinding spices. “She could undo very powerful spells. With those oils, she saved many people from evil.” As they turn around, Jesus and Lafayette suddenly find themselves in a new setting—a colonial style Mexican courtyard where Jesus sees his *tia* cracking an egg over a woman’s stomach. “Women from all over Mexico came to her for fertility,” Jesus says, though his words appear to coming out of Lafayette’s mouth. “How did you do that?!” Lafayette asks. “We’re connected, bro!” shouts Jesus. Suddenly, the pair find themselves in a cavernous basement, where an older woman and a young girl are shown sprinkling salt and spices around a bed. As the camera zooms in, both of them look toward Lafayette, acknowledging his presence, unsettling Lafayette. “Your great-great-great-grandma Mae and her girl, Winnie,” Jesus says. “Never had to share their bed with their master because of that powder.” “That’s my great-great-grandma Winnie?” Lafayette asks, amazed. “Yes, sir. Mae was a conjurer. Passed that right down to Winnie.” “How come I never knew that?” Lafayette asks. “You know now,” Jesus answers.

Through their ingestion of V in the context of a syncretic religious ritual, I argue that Jesus and Lafayette enact a form of reparative remembrance akin to Walter Benjamin’s concept of Messianic remembrance, particularly in how Benjamin describes messianism as a way to restore to the future the “magic” that has been “stripped” from it by “the soothsayers for enlightenment.”<sup>86</sup> As Ronald Beiner points out, “according to Benjamin’s friend Gershom Scholem, the ‘Theses’ ...mark Benjamin’s decisive break with historical materialism and a return

to the metaphysical-theological concerns of his early thought.”<sup>87</sup> Greatly influenced by the esoteric thought of Jewish mysticism (about which Scholem dedicated his book to Benjamin), Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” argues that, specifically in its ties to Western empiricism, historicism is a destructive force that misrepresents the past as a continuous, well ordered, and universal master narrative described by “homogenous, empty time.”<sup>88</sup> It is this distinctly secularized abridgement of the past via historicism’s progress narrative that destroys our ability to remember those aspects of the past (“the oppressed past”), which Benjamin argues are the necessary driving force behind revolutionary change. As Benjamin argues, “only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments.” The problem is that historicism makes the fullness of mankind’s past inaccessible via its discrete historical constructions. To this end, official (secular) histories—which he contrasts with those told in the Torah specifically—also deny mankind its redemption, since, as Benjamin warns, “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.” In order to disrupt these immobilizing histories, Benjamin writes that we must not work to recognize the past as “it really was,” but we must, as Messianic figures ourselves, “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at the moment of danger” in order “to make the continuum of history explode.”<sup>89</sup>

Indeed, the ancestral memories revealed to Lafayette through his syncretic visions allow him to see his ancestral inheritance not as a genetic curse, but as a spiritual gift—one shared across ancestral lineages and family histories. In allowing the past to “flash up,” these vital memories also produce dramatic changes in how Lafayette experiences the world, particularly as Lafayette finds himself transformed in a more porous subject, one opening up and becoming more vulnerable to spirits and other supernatural forces. While in the kitchen at Merlotte’s the next day, Lafayette begins seeing spirits, which cause him to have a panic attack, when he calls

Jesus for help. “What the fuck is happening to me Jesus? My first memory is of my momma talking to motherfuckers who wasn’t there. Is—Is that what’s happening to me?” he asks, worried that these new experiences are expressive of his genetic predisposition to schizophrenia, rather than evidence of his inherited powers as a conjurer. “I don’t think so, I really don’t,” Jesus says. “I think you just opened up something inside you. You’re just much more sensitive now.” But Jesus’s words of comfort don’t work. “I don’t want to be sensitive, I want it as far away from me as it can be,” Lafayette responds. “Listen to me,” Jesus says, “when my Tio Luca started teaching me magic, I was in a sweat lodge for three days and the earth started talking to me, literally with multiple faces, afterwards I started seeing things, things that people wanted to hide. But it wore off. Or I just got used to it, I don’t know.”

“Wait, you said somebody taught you magic?” Lafayette asks.

“Yeah. You kind of need to be taught.”

“What are you, huh?”

“I’m a brujo. A witch,” Jesus tells Lafayette.

“You’re a witch? You’re a witch who’s a nurse who’s a dude. Oh, well, shit, I guess I lucked out then, huh?”

Shortly after Lafayette begins seeing ghosts, he soon finds himself possessed by one—a Creole woman who was murdered, along with her child, by her white lover in the 1930s. Desperate to be reconnected with her child, the woman has been haunting the living ever since, when she takes over Lafayette’s body and attempts to kidnap a living child she mistakes for her own. However, with Jesus’s help, Lafayette is ultimately able to help the female spirit find the body of her child and, ultimately, peace largely because, as a medium, he’s able to recover and tell her story—a story that had been otherwise lost to history. Indeed, possession functions as a

cornerstone of all diasporic religions, particularly in Vodou, where possession is understood as a form of service to one's community, both living and dead. As Joseph Murphy writes:

Diasporan ceremonies are thus services for the spirit, actions of sacrifice and praise to please the spirit. And they are services of the spirit, actions undertaken by the spirits to inspire the congregation. Thus the reciprocity of diasporan spirituality is affirmed: service to the spirit is service to the community; and service to the community is service to the spirit. Service is revealed to be the central value of communal life. Service shows the spirit, in ceremony, but also whenever one member serves another. It is 'service,' in all its elegant multiple meanings, that shows the active quality of the spirituality of the African diaspora.<sup>90</sup>

Thus, the ideally buffered self of liberalism becomes displaced by the ideally porous self of the Voodoo conjurer. Still, this self does not exist without its own consequences. Being open to outside forces means being open to both benevolent and malevolent forces alike. Lafayette's fear of possession is justified, particularly in season four, when he finds himself the unwitting medium for the spirit of a malevolent witch seeking vengeance on vampires, who, in the twelfth century, hid as Spanish priests and burnt witches at the stake. Though Lafayette and Jesus combine their powers to thwart the vengeful witch's plans, Jesus is tragically murdered as a result of their efforts, largely because, as mediums, they can't control the intentions of those forces which take over.

However, in Jesus's death, he does not become a cautionary tale of what happens to people who engage in witchcraft. His death is not understood as the outcome of his failings as an individual. Rather, in the context of the subjugated knowledges that he and Lafayette recover, his death—like that of Ellis—is better understood as the normative outcome of being vulnerable to outside forces, natural, social, and supernatural alike, both good and bad. Thus, the lesson of Jesus's story is not one geared toward liberal notions of responsibility and agency. Rather, it's a reminder to all of us to attend to our shared vulnerability and create networks that sustain life.

---

1. Parker, "Nelsan Ellis."

---

2. See Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, “Shame, Theatricality and Queer Performativity” in *Touching Feeling*, specifically pages 35-37, on how shame works both intrapersonally and interpersonally.

3. Gates, “Blackness of Blackness,” 686.

4. Ibid.

5. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 72.

6. Lindroth, “Images of Subversion,” 185.

7. Brathwaite as qtd in Fernandez Olmos and Patavisini-Gebert, 4.

8. Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 4.

9. Anyiwo, “The True Monstrosity,” 91.

10. Jansen, *Secularism, Assimilation and the Crisis of Multiculturalism*, 47.

11. “Mine,” Season 1, Episode 3.

12. “Strange Love,” Season 1, Episode 1.

13. Ibid.

14. “Scratches,” Season 2, Episode 3

15. “Cold Ground,” Season 1, Episode 6.

16. See Urquhart, “Being Transgender is a Condition, Not a Choice.”

17. Sheldon, Jane P et al, 111.

18. “Strange Love,” Season 1, Episode 1.

19. “Mine,” Season 2, Episode 3.

20. See Chapter 2 for more on Charles Taylor and the concept of “fullness.”

21. Ibid.

22. “Frenzy,” Season 2, Episode 11.

23. “If You Love Me, Then Why Am I Dyin’,” Season 4, Episode 3.

- 
24. Bauman, “Allosemitism,” 144.
  25. “You’re No Good,” Season 6, Episode 3.
  26. Winnubst, “Vampires, Anxieties, and Dreams,” 7.
  27. Zeiger, 25.
  28. Ibid., 200.
  29. Ibid, 26.
  30. Frayling and Wokler, “From the orang-utan to the vampire: towards an anthropology of Rousseau,” 118.
  31. Humphries, *Crack Mothers*.
  32. Murakawa, 219.
  33. Ibid.
  34. Hari, *Chasing the Scream*, Kindle Locations 103-104.
  35. Anslinger and Tompkins, *The Traffic in Narcotics*, 223.
  36. Hari, *Chasing the Scream*, Kindle Locations 287-291.
  37. Ibid.
  38. Qtd. in Gerber, “Legalizing Marijuana,” 9.
  39. See Hari for more on Anslinger’s different approaches to Garland and Holiday, who were both heroin addicts. Hari writes, “One day, Harry Anslinger was told that there were also white women, just as famous as Billie, who had drug problems—but he responded to them rather differently. He called Judy Garland, another heroin addict, in to see him. They had a friendly chat, in which he advised her to take longer vacations between pictures, and he wrote to her studio, assuring them she didn’t have a drug problem at all,” Kindle Locations 533-536. For more on Anslinger’s description of drugs as a foreign and Communist threat see Anslinger and Thompson (10).

---

40. Hari, Kindle Location 104.

41. Anslinger and Tompkins, 272.

42. Hari, Kindle Location 324.

43. Baum, “Legalize it All.”

44. Meyers, “Crack Mothers,” 194.

45. The “100-to-1 rule” was a federal law which mandated a 10-year prison sentence for anyone caught with 50 grams of crack or 5,000 grams of cocaine. The disparity is inherently racist because the crucial differences between crack and cocaine are not to be found in the substances, but in their respective users. Because of its expense and how and where it’s circulated, cocaine users tend to be wealthy and white, while crack users tend to be impoverished and black. This sentencing disparity was reduced when President Barack Obama signed the Fair Sentencing Act into law in 2010.

46. Anslinger and Tompkins, text from book blurb.

47. Szasz, *Ceremonial Chemistry*, xvii.

48. Rose, “The Human Sciences in a Biological Age,” 5.

49. *Ibid.*, 4.

50. See Isenberg’s *White Trash* (2016) and Matt Wray’s *Not Quite White* (Duke 2006).

51. Wray, 18.

52. Wray, 19.

53. Donnella, “Why It’s Time to Retire the Disparaging Term ‘White Trash.’”

54. *Ibid.*, 224. Murakawa observes that “evidence for the epidemic and the diagnosis are weak: survey data show that meth use has been stable among adults and declining among high school seniors since 1999; dental research for ‘meth mouth’ is thin at best, revealing no

---

confirmed distinction between dental damage from meth, all amphetamines, and all other drug addiction” (220).

55. Murakawa analyzes forty dental-journal articles on amphetamine-induced dental damage published between 1981 and 2009 and found that “the overarching finding was that meth users are dentally indistinguishable from non-meth drug users in terms of total number of teeth, total fillings, total decayed surfaces, and self-reported oral health.” Furthermore, no distinct etiology for “meth mouth” has been suggested. Still, “the concept of ‘Meth mouth’ spread despite four evidentiary and logical challenges to its basis as a distinct diagnosis” (222).

56. Ibid.

57. The same can be said of powder cocaine use in the 1980s, which, because of its association with Wall Street and white wealth, wasn’t criminalized and demonized in the same way that crack, associated with poor black users, was. Cocaine was a marker of achievement, rather than decline.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid. 225.

60. As qtd in Murakawa, 223.

61. Murakawa, 225.

62. Murakawa, 220.

63. “Beautifully Broken,” Season 3, Episode 2.

64. “Keep the Party Going,” Season 2, Episode 2.

65. Lindroth, “Images of Subversion,” 185.

66. Ibid.

67. “Strange Love,” Season 1, Episode 1.

68. Dollimore, 47.

- 
69. Ibid.
  70. Brinkema, 141.
  71. Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 2.
  72. “Sparks Fly Out,” Season 1, Episode 5.
  73. “Beautifully Broken,” Season 3, Episode 2.
  74. Ibid.
  75. Ibid.
  76. Clark, *Santeria*, 6-7.
  77. Szasz, 61.
  78. Ibid.
  79. Ibid., 118.
  80. Ibid., 121.
  81. Vidal-Ortiz, 129.
  82. Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine*, 185.
  83. Ibid., 186.
  84. Gates, “The Blackness of Blackness,” 687-688.
  85. “I Smell a Rat,” Season 3, Episode 10.
  86. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 264.
  87. Beiner, “Walter Benjamin,” 423.
  88. Benjamin, 261.
  89. Ibid., 255.
  90. Murphy, *Working the Spirit*, 6-7.

## Chapter 6. EPILOGUE: ME, TOO

The Senate Judiciary Committee’s hearings on Brett Kavanaugh’s Supreme Court nomination were all but done when, on September 12, *The Intercept* reported that a woman had claimed Kavanaugh and a friend sexually assaulted her when they were in high school.<sup>1</sup> According to *The Intercept*, Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) was refusing to circulate the letter that alleged the assault because its source had requested it remain confidential. Under intense public pressure, Christine Blasey Ford eventually came forward as the letter’s author and agreed to testify before the Committee. Two weeks later, Ford recounted the 1982 assault before the committee and more than 20 million livestream viewers.<sup>2</sup> As the world watched, she said “indelible in the hippocampus” was the laughter shared between Kavanaugh and his friend, Mark Judge, as they smothered her screams and attempted to rape her.<sup>3</sup>

Even more than the assault’s traumatic effects on Ford, many homed in on how she described both Kavanaugh and Judge as “extremely inebriated” and “stumbling drunk” during the attack.<sup>4</sup> As more women, including a Yale classmate, came forward with allegations of sexual misconduct and rape against Kavanaugh, the issue of how much the judge drank during high school and college became an intense focal point of the hearings and media coverage. People decoded his high school yearbook, analyzed sworn affidavits, and skimmed his co-assailant’s 1997 memoir of alcoholism and recovery, *Wasted*, looking for evidence of Kavanaugh’s alcohol abuse, which had become explicitly linked to the sexual assault. During the hearing itself, the word “beer” came up 52 times and the word “drinking,” 43, while Kavanaugh was also asked if he’d ever blacked out from too much drinking.<sup>5</sup> Later, a Yale classmate told the press that Kavanaugh, who vehemently denied that he ever abused alcohol, had blatantly mischaracterized his drinking under oath.<sup>6</sup>

The Kavanaugh hearings, including their media coverage, are what I'd describe as an "anti-recovery narrative": that is, the substantive and functional antithesis of the stories my dissertation transmits. While conservatives angrily dismissed the accusations as little more than a leftwing conspiracy set on destroying Kavanaugh's otherwise pristine reputation, liberal calls for the withdrawal of his nomination pointed to his history of alcohol abuse as evidence that Kavanaugh was incapable of serving on the Supreme Court precisely because he was incapable of governing himself appropriately. In doing so, liberal arguments reasserted the validity and socio-political privileging of the ideally self-governing subject. They did so by characterizing alcohol abuse and sexual assault not as practices that emerge from dominant social structures, but as the behavioral evidence of a fundamentally deviant individual—one exceptionally incapable of appropriate self-governance. Though some did reference the toxic masculinity, rape culture, and extreme privilege in which Kavanaugh had been raised, arguments for his dismissal cast his behavior—including the emotionality of his testimony—as a unique violation rather than a normative outcome of ideal American selfhood. Ultimately, the hearings worked to maintain the myth that alcohol abuse and sexual assault are the products of individuals who, for medical or moral reasons, simply lack self-discipline and, therefore, have no right to govern themselves or others. This is exactly the myth that the narratives in my dissertation resist.

Indeed, there was nothing particularly special, unusual, or newsworthy about suggesting that Kavanaugh binge drank in high school or college. After all, among the 60 percent of eighteen-year-olds who reportedly drink alcohol, 90 percent of that drinking comes in the form of binge drinking, according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.<sup>7</sup> And these percentages were arguably higher in the 1980s, when Kavanaugh was a student and when many states raised the legal drinking age in an attempt to combat the pervasiveness of underage alcohol abuse and drunk driving at the time.<sup>8</sup> When one also considers that Kavanaugh was a

football player at Georgetown Prep—an elite all-boys Jesuit high school where his yearbook listed him as a member of the “100 Kegs or Bust” club—saying Kavanaugh binge drank is like saying water is wet.<sup>9</sup> Elite institutions like Georgetown Prep have long served as breeding grounds for the type of alcohol and drug abuse that also defines the University Greek System, of which Kavanaugh was also apart at Yale. In fact, America’s highest rates of binge drinking are typically found on college campuses and military bases—institutions most commonly associated with the cultivation of ideal self-discipline. Frances Harding et al observe that not only is there a correlation between increased rates of alcohol abuse and the density of bars and liquor stores near college campuses and military bases, but also “studies have identified associations between outlet density in college communities with campus rape offense rates and public disturbances related to alcohol.”<sup>10</sup> That Kavanaugh’s binge drinking likely coincided with acts of sexual assault is also hardly a shock, especially in light of the #MeToo movement, as well as Kavanaugh’s upbringing. While grooming America’s most privileged men for the country’s most prestigious positions of power, institutions like Georgetown Prep also incubate the toxic masculinity and rape culture that these men take with them to universities and then into the courtrooms and boardrooms to which they are told they are entitled. Heavy drinking and sexual assault serve as rituals and technologies of self-cultivation through which these young men assert their power and privilege. As Anemona Hartocollis and Dana Goldstein write, “this strain of masculinity is an entrenched part of American life, prized by employers from Wall Street to Silicon Valley, romanticized by Hollywood, handed down from fathers to sons, and shared by many who become respected leaders in society.”<sup>11</sup> This is nothing new. Everyone knows this.

What was new about the Kavanaugh hearings was that a man like Kavanaugh, “the fullest expression of elitism blended with misogyny that is cultivated and groomed at private, all-male institutions like Georgetown Prep,” was being held accountable for these things.<sup>12</sup> And it was

exactly at that accountability—so alien to men like Kavanaugh—that he and his cadre of enraged Republican Senators lashed out. Not only did Kavanaugh vehemently deny that he sexually assaulted women, abused alcohol or drank to the point of blacking out, but he also expressed abhorrence that someone would publicly claim that he did. He positioned *himself* as the victim of well-funded “left-wing opposition groups” seeking “revenge on behalf of the Clintons” and out to destroy “my family and my good name.”<sup>13</sup> Kavanaugh’s anger did not speak to a man falsely accused of attempted rape or alcohol abuse. Instead, it spoke to a man who had never been subjected to such a line of questioning in his life. After all, what had Kavanaugh done that those before him hadn’t? He’d simply followed a well-worn script—the one that was supposed to end with a lifetime appointment to the Supreme Court.

Up to that point, Kavanaugh had spent the better part of his hearings performing all the key qualities of white heteromascularity he’d been trained to exhibit. His audition for the Supreme Court became hinged not on his professional performance as a judge, but on his image as a dedicated father and son, a devout Catholic, and a self-made man full of restraint. He repeatedly deflected questions about the rationale for his past decisions as an Appeals Court judge and seemed exasperated when asked how he might make decisions on the Supreme Court. Instead, he wanted to talk about coaching a high school girls’ basketball team, members of which he brought to the first day of hearings. He grounded his aptitude for civility, independence, stoicism, and political neutrality—all the ennobled traits of a judge—not in his record on the bench, but in his role as a benevolent patriarch who volunteered in soup kitchens and hired female law clerks, who he equated with his daughters.<sup>14</sup> He claimed he got into Yale Law School not because he was a legacy student, but because of his tireless work ethic and self-discipline.<sup>15</sup> Even his display of

Catholic devotion was downright Protestant—he quoted directly from the Bible and confined his examples of religiosity to issues of family and charity.

But now, that exact performance—the one he was promised would deliver him *his* rightful seat on the Supreme Court—was being called out as the charade we *all* already knew it was. For conservatives, the accusations against Kavanaugh weren't simply a threat to his highly constructed image as the upstanding patriarch—the same construct they all use to win votes. These accusations were a threat to the very performance through which white male supremacy has long maintained its power. These accusations were a challenge to white supremacy and patriarchy itself. Like Kavanaugh, conservatives weren't angry because an innocent man was being falsely accused. They were angry because the white heteromascularity upon which their power resides was being so directly questioned. This was made clear by Senate Republicans' equivocating statements of Kavanaugh's "innocence." As Roger Sollenberger observes in *Paste*, "GOP officials and surrogates scramble to assemble rickety scaffolds of excuses for this objectively hideous nominee. Their ouroboros defense goes like this: It didn't happen. But why bring it up now? And she doesn't remember it correctly. And even if he did it, he was young and drunk. And so was she. And it actually wasn't that bad. And it was a long time ago. He's a good guy now. So it doesn't matter."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, a NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist poll claimed that 54 percent of Republicans "think Kavanaugh should be confirmed regardless of whether Ford's allegations are true."<sup>17</sup> The issue for conservatives wasn't whether Kavanaugh was innocent or not, it was that Kavanaugh—a model of white patriarchal privilege—was being scrutinized at all.

Many Kavanaugh apologists also adopted the "boys will be boys" argument. They claimed that *if* Kavanaugh did get black out drunk and sexually assault a girl, he only did so because that is what teenage boys do. And like most teenage boys, Kavanaugh grew out of it, they claimed. As education professor Jonathan Zimmerman wrote in *USA Today*, "of course

[Kavanaugh] was different then; he was a third of the age he is now. And teens do stupid, dangerous and destructive things.”<sup>18</sup> The notion that teenagers are particularly non-autonomous in their actions—that they have a natural inability to control their impulses and desires—is not simply used to deny teenagers full rights and responsibility under the law, but it is also used to reinforce the myth that people eventually develop a natural or normal capacity to self-govern. Of course, rates of sexual assault and alcohol abuse among adults show that this is hardly true.<sup>19</sup> Like dominant discourses of addiction, Claire Rasmussen argues that “the discourses that circulate around kids, especially adolescents about to enter into adulthood, demonstrate the conclusion that autonomy is a discourse of exclusion, sorting out who does and does not constitute a subject.”<sup>20</sup> In emphasizing that Kavanaugh was a teen when the drunken assaults took place, conservatives work to absolve Kavanaugh of responsibility since teenagers are understood as pathologically incapable of self-governance. More crucially, their argument also suggests that, thanks to the biological processes of maturation, Kavanaugh is now a fully-formed, self-governing adult. Thus, Kavanaugh’s alleged sexual misconduct as a teen does not undermine but becomes evidence of his appropriate self-governance as an adult.

Liberal opposition to Kavanaugh also trafficked in this discourse. When asked if Kavanaugh’s age at the time of the event was “any possible excuse” for his assault, law journalist Emily Bazelon told *Vox* that she believed Kavanaugh’s age did matter and mitigated his responsibility, because “we know the adolescent brain is still developing, and teenagers on average aren’t super good at impulse control.”<sup>21</sup> The problem for Bazelon was not the assault itself, but whether Kavanaugh, now a fully self-governing adult, was telling the truth and thus “taking responsibility for what he did.” By demanding that Kavanaugh take “responsibility for what he did,” liberals positioned themselves as antiracist and feminist crusaders who were now holding powerful white men accountable for their misogynistic behavior and in a way that their

race and class privilege no longer protected them from. However, in holding Kavanaugh accountable, liberals were not addressing the larger structural issues from which Kavanaugh's alleged sexual assault and alcohol abuse emerged, nor how the standards of conduct they were using to evaluate Kavanaugh have been most frequently mobilized to subjugate women and people of color. Instead, they framed Kavanaugh's behavior as an individual failure of appropriate self-governance, teenager or not. This was made clear in the comparisons drawn between Kavanaugh and Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch, who also attended Georgetown Prep, but who hadn't been accused of sexual assault or alcohol abuse.<sup>22</sup>

Liberal criticisms of Kavanaugh also cited the unrestrained, highly emotional and partisan nature of his testimony as evidence of his inability to appropriately self-govern and, thus, govern generally. As Greg Weiner opined in *The New York Times*, "the most revealing element of Thursday's hearing was not Judge Kavanaugh's response to sexual assault allegations — his denial was already well known — but rather his manner of delivery...A judicial temperament ideally includes maintaining one's composure. Judge Kavanaugh showed himself to be up to fighting when attacked, but less so to judging dispassionately."<sup>23</sup> In short: Kavanaugh shouldn't be a Supreme Court Justice because Kavanaugh cannot control his emotions. It was a criticism that even Kavanaugh conceded in his *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, where he wrote, "I was very emotional last Thursday, more so than I have ever been. I might have been too emotional at times. I know that my tone was sharp, and I said a few things I should not have said. I hope everyone can understand that I was there as a son, husband and dad."<sup>24</sup>

The shared investment of liberals and conservatives in the myth of the ideally self-governing subject was particularly visible in Senator Amy Klobuchar's (D-MN) questioning of Kavanaugh. When Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) asked Kavanaugh if he ever drank so much

“you couldn’t remember what happened, or part of what happened, the night before,” he replied, “No. I remember,” before snapping back:

I think you’ve probably had beers, Senator, and — and so I...It’s — you’re asking about, you know, blackout. I don’t know. Have *you*?

Refusing to engage his hostility, Klobuchar asked Kavanaugh to clarify if he denied ever blacking out:

KAVANAUGH: Yeah, and I’m curious if you have.

KLOBUCHAR: I have no drinking problem, Judge.

KAVANAUGH: Yeah, nor do I.<sup>25</sup>

Kavanaugh’s tone and hostility was palpable if only because it was incommensurate with the banality of Klobuchar’s question. Though Klobuchar’s question insinuated that Kavanaugh may have forgotten the assault, because he was black out drunk, Klobuchar did not ask Kavanaugh if he had ever sexually assaulted anyone. She simply asked if he’d ever drunk to the point of blacking out. When you consider that “a 2002 survey conducted by researchers at Duke University found that approximately 50 percent of college drinkers reported having at least one blackout, though adults are no less prone,” Klobuchar’s question is hardly unreasonable—especially in light of Kavanaugh’s background, and particularly in relation to the insinuating line of questions Ford endured.<sup>26</sup>

In expressing disgust at the suggestion that he may have abused alcohol and in her suggestion that only people with a “drinking problem” black out (which is not the case), Kavanaugh and Klobuchar both reinforced the belief that there is something exceptional and/or deeply wrong with people who abuse substances.<sup>27</sup> Rather than representing alcohol abuse and blacking out as prevalent behaviors—especially for someone raised in a culture like that of Georgetown Prep—Kavanaugh and Klobuchar’s exchange framed alcohol abuse as the aberrant behavior of a social deviant. This abjection is exactly what reproduces the stigma and shame that

keeps people from coming forward and seeking help for harmful behaviors, thus reproducing rather than abating the frequency of both alcohol abuse and sexual assault.

That Kavanaugh is the rule rather than the exception has been made clear by the very social movement that paved the way for Ford to come forward in the first place. The #MeToo or “me, too” Movement was first started in 2006 by Tarana Burke, a civil rights activist who is also the founder and director of the Philadelphia-based non-profit, Just Be Inc. and, more recently, the New York-based Girls for Gender Equality. Just Be Inc.’s website describes it as “a youth organization focused on the health, well-being and wholeness of young women of color.”<sup>28</sup> Central to Just Be’s mission has been offering a support network to young women of color who are survivors of sexual assault and rape. Burke first got the idea for “me, too” in 1997, when, employed as a social worker, she was listening to Heaven, a 13-year-old girl, describe how her mother’s boyfriend sexually abused her. “I was horrified by her words, the emotions welling inside of me ran the gamut, and I listened until I literally could not take it anymore,” Burke remembers. As a survivor of rape and sexual assault herself, Burke felt so triggered and overwhelmed by Heaven’s story that she stopped her and told her she’d find her someone else to talk to—someone who could “help her better.” Burke recalls:

I watched her walk away from me as she tried to recapture her secrets and tuck them back into their hiding place. I watched her put her mask back on and go back into the world like she was all alone...I couldn't help her release her shame or impress upon her that nothing that happened to her was her fault...I could not find the strength to say out loud the words that were ringing in my head over and over again as she tried to tell me what she had endured.<sup>29</sup>

Burke says those words were “me, too”—words she has spent the past two decades wishing she had uttered that day. In Heaven, and herself, Burke saw how the abjection and shame of being a sexual assault survivor kept people from sharing their stories. Not only does this self-silencing

result in the underreporting of sexual assault, but it also forces survivors into a profound state of isolation that exacerbates trauma and often leads to self-harm, including substance abuse.

Burke believed that communal support was necessary for healing not only because the research said so, but also because of her personal experience.<sup>30</sup> Burke says that, as a child coping with sexual abuse, she often found reprieve in reading the stories of others, which reminded her that she was not alone, nor responsible for what had happened to her. “The first glimpses of healing and understanding what had been happening to me as a child, came from the literature that I read,” she told *The Guardian*. “So, I had this ‘out’ that I saw the girls I worked with did not have.”<sup>31</sup> Still, Burke knew how difficult it was for survivors to share their stories. For that reason, she settled on the phrase that had echoed in her mind while listening to Heaven: “me, too.” In just two simple words, Burke believed survivors of sexual assault and rape could finally transmit their unutterable stories while simultaneously building connections that could collectively eradicate their shame and loneliness. “Me, too” expressed sexual violence as not as the outcome of aberrant individuals, but as a widely shared social phenomenon. The phrase was also vague enough to accommodate the differences of people’s experiences, while building solidarity across those differences. “Me, too” became a crucial starting point for dismantling the shame and isolation that had long kept sexual assault survivors circumscribed and locked into their individual pain. By identifying rape and sexual abuse as wide-reaching social phenomena that shape individual lives, “me, too” effectively allowed for the formation of a communally-based and interdependent network of care among survivors.

Then, on October 15, 2017—more than a decade after Burke started “me, too”—actress Alyssa Milano tweeted “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.”<sup>32</sup> Milano had been one of a dozen Hollywood actresses who’d recently come forward with accusations of sexual assault and rape against Harvey Weinstein. Within 24 hours

of her tweet, #MeToo became the number one trending hashtag on Twitter and was shared in more than 12 million Facebook posts.<sup>33</sup> Millions of women across the world used #MeToo—along with #BalanceTonPorc, #YoTambien, #Ana\_kaman and others—to signal just how pervasive rape culture is. No longer was it shameful to state in public that you had been the victim of sexual harassment, assault, or rape. The visibility and universality of “me, too” made it clear that rape was not an individual problem, but a social one. Soon after #MeToo began trending, rates of sexual assault reporting also spiked, and the day after Ford gave her testimony, it spiked again, including a doubling in the volume of calls to the National Sexual Assault Hotline.<sup>34</sup> In Washington State, the King County sexual-assault hotline experienced a tripling in volume. “We always get calls saying, ‘I never told anyone about this’,” Executive Director Mary Ellen Stone told *The Seattle Times*. “Those are the calls dominating our line now. And they are mostly women in their 60s and 70s. We had a call from someone in their 80s.”<sup>35</sup>

While the mass deployment of #MeToo was a powerful display of rape culture’s reach that also served to destigmatize survivors and allowed them to come forward with their stories—some of which were decades old—its mobilization wasn’t without problems. Many women of color took to Twitter to address the fact that Burke had gone unrecognized as the founder of “me, too” and worried that how it had been coopted by white Hollywood actresses served to further erase rather than support women of color who’ve experienced harassment and abuse.<sup>36</sup> Burke agreed. “Initially I panicked,” she told *The New York Times*. “I felt a sense of dread, because something that was part of my life’s work was going to be co-opted and taken from me and used for a purpose that I hadn’t originally intended.”<sup>37</sup> Burke says that her purpose for creating “me, too” was to center and support survivors on their path of recovery, rather than to seek out and punish perpetrators. “And so this iteration in social media has placed a larger focus on perpetrators being called out and held accountable for their actions. But the actual ‘me too’

Movement is about supporting sexual assault survivors. So that's where it's different," Burke told *YES! Magazine*.<sup>38</sup>

In fact, the punishment of individuals facilitates rather than deters violence, sexual or otherwise. As Amy Clark writes, "In the case of sexual violence...imprisonment functions as a substitute for substantive and transformative social change. Rather than provide long-term solutions to social ills, mass incarceration (and the extensive systems of surveillance that accompany it) has become a catch-all solution for containing society's undesirables and a quick way for policymakers to gain political capital, despite evidence that punitive measures do not keep communities safe from sexual violence."<sup>39</sup> Not only are more than 80 percent of incarcerated women and girls the victims of sexual assault, resulting in what experts call a "sexual abuse to prison pipeline," but the prevalence of sexual assault within prisons among both men and women further perpetuates this cycle.<sup>40</sup> As Lovisa Stannow and David Kaiser argue, the fact that most people suffer some form of sexual assault while in prison—whether at the hands of guards or fellow prisoners—"shows that there is a human rights crisis in our own country. The people raped in our prisons are our fellow citizens, family members, and neighbors. And when they're released, as 95 percent of them will be eventually, they bring their trauma home with them, back to our communities."<sup>41</sup>

What made the "me, too" movement so effective and radically different in its response to the problem of sexual assault and rape was the emphasis it placed not on holding individuals accountable for their actions, but on the communal recovery of survivors. It figured the public act of confession not as an individuating and disciplinary technology, but as a collectivized ritual of self-reflection, where, in communion with each other—made possible by the chorus of "me, too"—we could work to understand how our individual behaviors and experiences emerge from our social structures and then work collectively to create new, life-affirming social practices that

enact both individual and communal well-being. That this communal and reparative enactment was displaced through calls for carceral responses to individualized action is not surprising, however, it does leave one to imagine: what would a continued response to violence that centers collective recovery rather than individualized retribution look like and what would it take to enact and sustain such an approach? It is my hope that this project can help towards those imaginative ends.

- 
1. Grimm, “Dianne Feinstein Withholding Brett Kavanaugh Document.”
  2. Rodriguez, “Since the Kavanaugh hearing.”
  3. Bloomberg Government, “Kavanaugh Hearing: Transcript.”
  4. Saletan, “What Kavanaugh’s Drinking Tells Us About His Credibility.”
  5. Belluz, “Blackout Drinking, Explained For Brett Kavanaugh.”
  6. See Shear and Pogrebin, “Yale classmate accuses Brett Kavanaugh of ‘blatant mischaracterization’ of his drinking.”
  7. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, “Underage Drinking.”
  8. See National Institute of Health, “Underage Drinking.” According to the NIH, “The prevalence of underage alcohol use, daily alcohol use, and binge drinking also declined since 1982.”
  9. See Saletan.
  10. Harding et al, “Underage Drinking,” 150.
  11. Hartocollis and Goldstein, “Schools are Tackling Bro Culture.”
  12. Menarndt, “I Went to Kavanaugh’s Alma Mater.”
  13. Bloomberg Government, “Kavanaugh Hearing: Transcript.”
  14. Higgins, “Brett Kavanaugh’s Full Opening Remarks.”
  15. Lemon, “Kavanaugh said he had no connections to Yale.”

- 
16. Sollenberger, “Nine Worst.”
  17. Montanaro, “New Poll.”
  18. See Zimmerman, “Is Brett Kavanaugh a Nice Guy?”
  19. See Akpan “In Kavanaugh debate, ‘boys will be boys’ is an unscientific excuse for assault,” for more rates of sexual assault among teens versus adults. The rates are only slightly higher for men under the age of 18.
  20. Rasmussen, *Autonomous Animal*, 25.
  21. *Vox*, “What the Letter Said.”
  22. See Pramuk, “Sen. Harris asks Kavanaugh why he alleges a Democratic smear campaign — when Gorsuch faced no sexual misconduct claims.”
  23. Weiner, “Judge Kavanaugh is One Angry Man.”
  24. Kavanaugh, “I am an Independent, Impartial Judge.”
  25. *Ibid.*
  26. Hepola, “Kavanaugh And The Blackout Theory.”
  27. See Hepola for more on the science of black outs and their relation to alcohol consumption.
  28. Burke, “About Us.”
  29. Burke, “The ‘me, too’ movement.”
  30. See Bensimon, “Victimization” for more on how “communal compassion can maximize victims’ rehabilitation and recovery.”
  31. Brockes, “Me Too Founder.”
  32. @Alyssa\_Milano, “If you’ve been sexually harassed.”
  33. Garcia, “The Woman Who Created #MeToo.”
  34. Rodriguez, “Since the Kavanaugh Hearing.”

---

35. Ibid.

36. Garcia.

37. Ibid.

38. Jeffries, “Me Too Creator.”

39. Clark, “Thinking Through Incarceration and Sexual Violence.”

40. Saar, Malika Saada, et al, “The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline.”

41. Stannow and Kaiser, “Prison Rape and the Government.”

## WORKS CITED

- Abrams, M. H. *Natural Supernaturalism; Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. Norton, 1971.
- Acker, Caroline Jean, and Tracy, Sarah W. *Altering American Consciousness: The History of Alcohol and Drug Use in the United States, 1800-2000*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2004.
- Akpan, Nsikan. "In Kavanaugh Debate, 'Boys Will Be Boys' Is an Unscientific Excuse For Assault," *PBS NewsHour*, 20 September 2018.  
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/why-boys-will-be-boys-is-an-unscientific-excuse-for-assault>.
- Alcoholics Anonymous*. New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 2001.
- Allen, Paula Gunn. *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Beacon Press, 1986.
- Anslinger, H. J., et al. *The Traffic in Narcotics*. Funk & Wagnalls, 1953.
- Anyiwo, U. Melissa. "The true monstrosity of monsters: uncovering the solution to otherness in True blood and Blade." *Race in the Vampire Narrative*, edited by Melissa U. Anyiwo. Sense Publishers, 2015.
- Badiou, Alain. *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Ball, Alan, creator. *True Blood*. HBO, 2008-2014.
- Barthes, Roland., and Heath, Stephen. *Image, Music, Text*. Hill and Wang, 1977.
- Baum, Dan. "Legalize It All, By Dan Baum," *Harper's Magazine*, April 2016,  
<https://harpers.org/archive/2016/04/legalize-it-all/>.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. "Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern," *Modernity, Culture and 'the Jew'*. Ed. Cheyette, Bryan., et al. Polity Press, 1998, pp. 143-156.

- Baumeister, Roy F., and Tierney, John. *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*. Penguin Press, 2011.
- Beiner, Ronald. "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History." *Political Theory*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1984, pp. 423–434.
- Beluz, Julia. "Blackout Drinking, Explained For Brett Kavanaugh." *Vox*, 3 October 2018. <https://www.vox.com/2018/10/3/17928698/brett-kavanaugh-blackout-drinking-alcohol>.
- Benjamin, Walter, and Arendt, Hannah. *Illuminations*. Schocken Books, 1969.
- Bensimon, Moshe. "Victimization in Light Of Self-Compassion: Development Towards Communal Compassion." *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 35 (2017): 44-51.
- Berlant, Lauren, and Sianne Ngai. "Comedy Has Issues." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2017, pp. 233–249.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2011.
- Bird, Gloria. "The Exaggeration of Despair in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*." *Wicazo Sa Review*, Fall 1995, pp. 47–52.
- Bivins, Jason C. "Religion and Politics." *The Columbia Guide to Religion in American History*, Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. The Columbia Guide to Religion in American History, Chapter 7.
- Bloomberg Government, "Kavanaugh Hearing: Transcript," *Washington Post*, 27 September 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/national/wp/2018/09/27/kavanaugh-hearing-transcript/?utm\\_term=.43ab70ae0f70](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/national/wp/2018/09/27/kavanaugh-hearing-transcript/?utm_term=.43ab70ae0f70).
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *In Other Words*. Stanford University Press, 1990.
- Breslaw, Anna. "A Chat with Gabrielle Glaser," *Jezebel*. 20 July 2013. <https://tinyurl.com/y7a4tknu>.
- Brinkema, Eugenie. *The Forms of the Affects*. Duke University Press, 2014.

- Brockes, Emma. "Me Too Founder Tarana Burke: 'You Have to Use Your Privilege To Serve Other People'," *The Guardian*, 15 January 2018.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/15/me-too-founder-tarana-burke-women-sexual-assault>.
- Brugge, David M. *Navajo Pottery and Ethnohistory*. Navajo Tribal Museum, 1963.
- Burke, Tarana. *Just Be Inc*. <http://justbeinc.wixsite.com/justbeinc/home>.
- Burrus, Virginia. *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.
- Butler, Rex, and Denny, David. *Lars Von Trier's Women*. Bloomsbury Academic, an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 2017.
- Cajete, Gregory. *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. 1st ed., Clear Light Publishers, 2000.
- Calhoun, Craig, et al. "Introduction," *Rethinking Secularism*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Cannon, Eoin. *The Saloon and the Mission*. University of Massachusetts, 2013.
- Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012.
- Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA). *Shoveling Up II: The Impact of Substance Abuse on Federal, State and Local Budgets*. May 2009.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). "Mortality," *National Vital Statistics Reports*. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2017
- Chavkin, Allan. *Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony: A Casebook*. Oxford UP.
- Clark, Amy. "Thinking Through Incarceration And Sexual Violence," *States Of Incarceration*, n.d., <https://statesofincarceration.org/story/thinking-through-incarceration-and-sexual-violence>.

- Clark, Mary Ann. *Santería: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering the Realities of a Growing Religion*. Praeger Publishers, 2007.
- Cook, Richard M. *Alfred Kazin: a Biography*. Yale University Press, 2007.
- Cook-Lynn, Elizabeth. "American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story." *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians*. Ed. Devon A. Mihesua. University of Nebraska Press, 1998, pp. 111–38.
- Crittenden, Jack. *Beyond Individualism Reconstituting the Liberal Self*. Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Crocq, Marc-Antoine MD. "Historical and cultural aspects of addiction." *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* vol. 9 no. 4, 2007, pp. 355-361.
- Curran, Charles E. *The Development of Moral Theology: Five Strands*. Georgetown University Press, 2013.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Duke University Press, 2012.
- De Becker, Gavin. *The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals That Protect Us from Violence*. First ed., Little Brown, 1997.
- De Quincey, Thomas. *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings*. Penguin, 2003.
- Deloria, Vine. *God Is Red*. Dell Pub. Co., 1978.
- Denby, David. "The Story of Joe," *The New Yorker*. 24 March 2004.  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/03/24/the-story-of-joe>.
- Detweiler, Robert. *Breaking the Fall: Religious Readings of Contemporary Fiction*. Macmillan, 1989.
- Dodes, Lance M., and Dodes, Zachary. *The Sober Truth: Debunking the Bad Science behind 12 Step Programs and the Rehab Industry*. Beacon Press, 2014.

- Dollimore, Jonathan. "Sexual Disgust (Freud)." *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 20, no. 1-2, 1998, pp. 47–77.
- Donnella, Leah. "Why It's Time to Retire the Disparaging Term 'White Trash.'" *Morning Edition*, NPR, July 30, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/30/633891473/why-its-time-to-retire-the-disparaging-term-white-trash>.
- Duhigg, Charles. *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*. 1st ed., Random House, 2012.
- Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne and Gilio-Whitaker, Dina. "What's Behind the Myth," *Pacific Standard Magazine*, 10 October 2016. <https://psmag.com/news/whats-behind-the-myth-of-native-american-alcoholism>.
- Eliot, T. S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *Perspecta*, vol. 19, 1982, pp. 36–42.
- Elliott, Jane. "Suffering Agency: Imagining Neoliberal Personhood in North America and Britain." *Social Text*, vol. 31, no. 2 [115], 2013, pp. 83–101.
- Evans, Stephen F. "'Open Containers': Sherman Alexie's Drunken Indians." *The American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2001, pp. 46–72.
- Felski, Rita. "After Suspicion." *Profession*, 2009, pp. 28–35.
- Fernández Olmos, Margarite., and Paravisini-Gebert, Lizabeth. *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean*. Rutgers University Press, 1997.
- Fessenden, Tracy. *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*. Princeton UP, 2011.
- , "The Problem of the Postsecular." *American Literary History*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2014, pp. 154–167.
- Foddy, Bennett and Julian Savulescu. "A Liberal Account of Addiction." *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1-22.

- Foucault, Michel. *The Care of the Self*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1986. Print.
- *The History of Sexuality*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage-Random House, 1978. Print.
- *The Uses of Pleasure*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1990. Print.
- "Society Must Be Defended." *Lectures at the College of France, 1975-76*. Trans. David Macey. New York: Picador, 2003. Print.
- Frankfurt, Harry G. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person." *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 68, no. 1, 1971, pp. 5–20.
- Friedling, Melissa Pearl. *Recovering Women: Feminisms and the Representation of Addiction*. Westview Press, 2000.
- Franklin, Benjamin. "From Benjamin Franklin to the Abbé Morellet (1779)," *National Archive Founders Online*, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-30-02-0034>.
- *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. Dover, 1996.
- Frayling and Wokler, "From the orang-utan to the vampire: towards an anthropology of Rousseau," *Rousseau After 200 Years*. Ed. R.A. Leigh, Cambridge University Press, pp. 109-24.
- Garcia, Sandra. "The Woman Who Created #Metoo Long Before Hashtags," *The New York Times*, 20 October 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html>.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "The 'Blackness of Blackness': A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1983, pp. 685–723.
- Glaser, Gabrielle. "The Irrationality of Alcoholics Anonymous," *The Atlantic*. April 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/zwmwymg>.

- Grollmus, Denise. "An Anthology Held Together by Earnestness: A Conversation with Leslie Jamison." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. 30 Apr 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/yb3rxceo>.
- Golden, Stephanie. *Slaying the Mermaid: Women and the Culture of Sacrifice*. New York: Harmony, 1998.
- Greer, Germaine. *The Madwoman's Underclothes: Essays and Occasional Writings*. 1st American ed., Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987.
- Grim, Ryan. "Dianne Feinstein Withholding Brett Kavanaugh Document from Fellow Judiciary Committee Democrats." *The Intercept*, 12 September 2018. <https://theintercept.com/2018/09/12/brett-kavanaugh-confirmation-dianne-feinstein/>.
- Groneman, Carol. *Nymphomania: A History*. WW Norton & Company, 2000.
- Gerber, Rudolph J. *Legalizing Marijuana: Drug Policy Reform and Prohibition Politics*. Praeger, 2004.
- Habermas, Jurgen. *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*. New York: Polity, 2010.
- Hailey, David E., Jr. "The Visual Elegance of Ts'its'tsi'nako and the Other Invisible Characters in Ceremony;" *Wicazo Sa Review*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1990, pp. 1–6.
- Hall, Stuart. "The rediscovery of 'ideology': return of the repressed in media studies." *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, edited by John Storey. Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2006.
- Harding, Frances M. et al. "Underage Drinking: A Review of Trends and Prevention Strategies." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2016, pp. 148-157.
- Harris-Perry, Melissa V. *Sister Citizen Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*. Yale University Press, 2011.

- Hartocollis, Anemona, and Dana Goldstein. "Schools Are Tackling 'Bro' Culture. The Kavanaugh Case Shows Why That's Hard To Do." *The New York Times*, 28 September 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/28/us/kavanaugh-fraternities-prep-school.html>.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Hepola, Sarah. "Kavanaugh And the Blackout Theory." *The New York Times*, 29 September 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/29/opinion/sunday/brett-kavanaugh-drinking-blackouts.html>.
- Higgins, Tucker. "Read Brett Kavanaugh's Full Opening Remarks In His Supreme Court Confirmation Hearing," *CNBC*, 4 September 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/09/04/read-brett-kavanaughs-full-remarks-to-the-senate-judiciary-committee.html>.
- Holyoake, George Jacob. "The Reasoner." *The Reasoner*, 1855, pp. c.1 v.18 1855.
- Honig, Bonnie., and Lori Jo. Marso. "Introduction: Lars Von Trier and the 'Clichés of Our Times,'" *Theory & Event*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2015, pp. Theory & Event, 2015, Vol.18(2).
- Horton, Andrew, and American Council of Learned Societies. *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*. University of California Press, 1991.
- Howe, Daniel Walker., and Frank Virginia Williams Collection of Lincolniana. *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Humphries, Drew. *Crack Mothers: Pregnancy, Drugs, and the Media*. Ohio State University Press, 1999.
- Hungerford, Amy. *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960*. Princeton University Press, 2010.

- “intuition, n.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, July 2018,  
[www.oed.com/view/Entry/98794](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/98794). Accessed 20 October 2018.
- Irvine, Leslie. *Codependent Forevermore: The Invention of Self in a Twelve Step Group*.  
University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Iseke, Judy. “Spirituality as decolonizing: Elders Albert Desjarlais, George McDermott, and  
Tom McCallum share understandings of life in healing practices,” *Decolonization:  
Indigeneity, Education & Society* vol. 2, no. 1, 2013, pp. 35-54.
- Jansen, Yolande, and Meijer, Eva. *Secularism, Assimilation and the Crisis of Multiculturalism:  
French Modernist Legacies*. Amsterdam University Press, 2013.
- Jefferson, Thomas, et al. “Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Appleton (1816).” *The Papers of  
Thomas Jefferson*. Princeton University Press, 1950.
- Jefferson, Thomas, et al. “Extract from Thomas Jefferson to Jean Guillaume Hyde de Neuville  
(1818).” *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*. Princeton University Press, 1950.
- Jeffries, Zenobia. “Me Too Creator Tarana Burke Reminds Us This Is About Black And Brown  
Survivors,” *YES! Magazine*, 4 January 2018. [https://www.yesmagazine.org/people-  
power/me-too-creator-tarana-burke-reminds-us-this-is-about-black-and-brown-survivors-  
20180104](https://www.yesmagazine.org/people-power/me-too-creator-tarana-burke-reminds-us-this-is-about-black-and-brown-survivors-20180104).
- Hari, Johann. *Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs*. Kindle  
Edition, Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Isenberg, Nancy. *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*. Viking, 2016.
- Judge, Jennifer. “Female as Flesh in the Later Middle Ages and the 'Bodily Knowing' of Angela  
of Foligno.” *The Catholic Church and Unruly Women Writers: Critical Essays*, Palgrave  
Macmillan, 2007, pp. 9–23.

- Kaminer, Wendy. *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional: the Recovery Movement and Other Self-Help Fashions*. Addison-Wesley, 1992.
- Karr, Mary. *Lit: A Memoir*. HarperCollins, 2009.
- Kenen, Joanne. "Surgeon general ramps up addiction battle," *Politico*, 17 November 2016.  
<https://tinyurl.com/yc832mln>.
- Kelly, John and Beresin, Gene. "In Defense of the 12 Steps," *WBUR Common Health*, 7 April 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/yaqvzwhl>.
- Kluckhohn, Clyde. *Navaho Witchcraft*. Beacon Press, 1962.
- Knapp, Caroline. *Appetites: Why Women Want*. Counterpoint, 2002.
- . *Drinking: A Love Story*. Dial Press, 1996.
- Kopelson, Karen. "Radical Indulgence: Excess, Desire, and Female Indulgence." *Postmodern Culture*, 2006. <http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.906/17.1kopelson.html>.
- Kort, Joe. "Don't Call Harvey Weinstein a Sex Addict: What We Label Things Matters," *Psychology Today*, 18 October 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/y8fy5drm>.
- Kozloff, Sarah. *Invisible Storytellers*. University of California Press, 1989.
- Le Masurier, Megan. "Resurrecting Germaine's Theory of Cuntpower." *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 31, no. 87, 2016, pp. 28–42.
- Lemon, Jason. "Kavanaugh said he had 'no connections' to Yale. He was, in fact, a legacy student," *Newsweek*, 30 September 2018.  
<https://www.newsweek.com/kavanaugh-said-he-had-no-connections-yale-he-was-legacy-student-1145286>.
- Lewis, Marc. *The Biology of Desire*. New York: Public Affairs, 2015. Print.
- . *Memoirs of an Addicted Brain: A Neuroscientist Examines His Former Life on Drugs*. Public Affairs, 2011.

- Lindroth, James. "Images of Subversion: Ishmael Reed and the Hoodoo Trickster." *African American Review*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1996, pp. 185–96.
- Lundquist, Suzanne. *Native American Literatures: An Introduction*. Continuum, 2004.
- Luther, Martin, et al. *Christian Liberty*. Fortress Press, 1957.
- Mahmood, Saba. *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. Print.
- , "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?" *Critical Inquiry* vol. 35, no. 4, 2009, pp. 836-862.
- "mania, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, July 2018, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/113459](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/113459). Accessed 20 October 2018.
- "Mary Karr: Prayer, Poetry and the Catholic Faith." *Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly*, 13 Dec 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUrz6tWfBxY>.
- Mather, Cotton and Smolinski, Reiner, Editor, "The Wonders of the Invisible World. Observations as Well Historical as Theological, upon the Nature, the Number, and the Operations of the Devils (1693)." *Electronic Texts in American Studies*, 19. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/19>.
- McFadden, Daniel L. "The New Science of Pleasure." *The New Science of Pleasure*, 2013.
- Menarndt, Will. "I Went To Kavanaugh's Alma Mater, Georgetown Prep, And It Was A Case Study In Misogyny." *The Establishment*, 28 September 2018. <https://theestablishment.co/i-went-to-kavanaughs-alma-mater-georgetown-prep-and-it-was-a-case-study-in-misogyny/>.
- Menninghaus, Winfried. *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*. State University of New York Press, 2003.

- Meyers, Marian. "Crack Mothers in the News: A Narrative of Paternalistic Racism." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2004, pp. 194–216.
- Mignolo, Walter D. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. Print.
- , "Looking for the Meaning of Decolonial Gesture," *emisférica*, v. 11, no. 1, 2014.  
<http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/emisferica-111-decolonial-gesture/mignolo>.
- Milligan, Barry. "Morphine-Addicted Doctors, the English Opium-Eater, and Embattled Medical Authority." *Victorian Literature and Culture* vol. 33, no. 2, 2005, pp. 541-553.
- Molotsky, Irvin. *The Flag, the Poet, and the Song: The Story of the Star-Spangled Banner*. Dutton, 2001.
- Montanaro, Domenico. "New Poll Finds Americans Deeply Divided by Gender On Kavanaugh Nomination," *National Public Radio*, 26 September 2018.  
<https://www.npr.org/2018/09/26/651647131/poll-nearly-6-in-10-to-closely-watch-kavanaugh-ford-hearing-many-undecided-on-tr>.
- Monti, Paolo. "Postsecular Awareness and the Depth of Pluralism." *Democracy, Law and Religious Pluralism in Europe: Secularism and Post-Secularism*, Taylor and Francis Inc., 2014, pp. 86–105.
- Mulford, Carla J. *Benjamin Franklin and the Ends of Empire*. Oxford UP, 2015.
- Murakawa, Naomi. "Toothless." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2011, pp. 219–228.
- Murphy, Joseph M. *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora*. Beacon Press, 1994.
- Nelson, Robert M. *Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony: The Recovery of Tradition*. Peter Lang, 2008.

- , "The Kaupata Motif in Silko's Ceremony: A Study of Literary Homology." *Studies in American Indian Literatures: The Journal of the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1999, pp. 2–21.
- O'Connor, Peg. "The Fallacy of the 'Hijacked Brain.'" *The New York Times*, 10 June 2012.  
<https://tinyurl.com/yb3aef33>.
- O'Reilly, Edmund B. *Sobering Tales: Narratives of Alcoholism and Recovery*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1997.
- Paine, Thomas. *The Age of Reason*. Cosimo Classics, 2008.
- "parenthesis, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, July 2018,  
[www.oed.com/view/Entry/137834](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/137834). Accessed 20 October 2018.
- Parker, Ryan. "Nelsan Ellis' Family Shares Circumstances of 'True Blood' Actor's Death," *Hollywood Reporter*, 10 July 2017, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/true-blood-actor-nelsan-ellis-died-due-alcohol-withdrawal-complications-family-says-1019634>.
- Puar, Jasbir K. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Duke University Press, 2007.
- Purley, Anthony F. "Keres Pueblo Concepts of Deity." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, vol. 01, no. 1, 1974, pp. 29–32.
- Rasmussen, Claire Elaine. *The Autonomous Animal: Self-Governance and the Modern Subject*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
- Redfield, Marc and Janet Farrell Brodie. *High Anxieties: Cultural Studies in Addiction*. University of California Press, 2002.
- Rockwell, Susan L. "Writing the Oral Tradition: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*." *Explorations in Ethnic Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1994, pp. 195-206.

- Rodriguez, Hannah. "Since the Kavanaugh Hearing, Calls to King County Sexual-Assault Hotline Have Tripled," *The Seattle Times*, 28 September 2018.  
<https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/since-the-kavanaugh-hearing-calls-to-king-county-sexual-assault-hotline-have-tripled/>.
- Rose, Nikolas. "The Human Sciences in a Biological Age." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2013, pp. 3–34.
- Rubin, Gayle. "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality." *Deviations: a Gayle Rubin Reader*. Duke University Press, 2011, pp. 137-181.
- Ruether, Rosemary. *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine A Western Religious History*. University of California Press, 2005.
- Ruiz, Rebecca. "Twelve Step Dogma," *Aeon*, 6 Aug 2014. <https://tinyurl.com/y8sd45t4>.
- Rush, Benjamin. *An Inquiry into the Effects of Ardent Spirits upon the Human Body and Mind: with an Account of the Means of Preventing, and of the Remedies for Curing Them*. Published by James Loring, 1823.
- Saar, Malika Saada, et al. "The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline: The Girls' Story," Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2015.
- Saint Augustine. *The Confessions*. Penguin, 1961.
- Saletan, William. "What Kavanaugh's Drinking Tells Us About His Credibility." *Slate Magazine*, 2 October 2018. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/10/kavanaugh-drinking-credibility.html>.
- Schippert, Claudia. "Implications of Queer Theory for the Study of Religion and Gender: Entering the Third Decade." *Religion and Gender*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2011, pp. 66–84.
- Schüll, Natasha Dow. "Data for Life: Wearable Technology and the Design of Self Care." *BioSocieties*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 317–333.

- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Tendencies*. Duke University Press, 1993.
- . *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke University Press, 2003.
- Selinger, Bernard. "The Navajo, Psychosis, Lacan, and Derrida." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2007, pp. 64–100.
- Senier, Siobhan, and Barker, Clare. "Special Issue: Disability and Indigeneity." *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2013, pp. 123–229.
- Shea, Daniel B. *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America*. Princeton University Press, 1968.
- Shear, Michael and Pogrebin, Robin. "Yale Friend Says Brett Kavanaugh Was A Heavy Drinker," *The Boston Globe*, 1 September 2018, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/politics/2018/09/30/yale-friend-says-brett-kavanaugh-was-heavy-drinker/pR2dryAc0s1LrOLbd0sAHJ/story.html>.
- Sheldon, Jane et al. "Beliefs about the Etiology of Homosexuality and about the Ramifications of Discovering Its Possible Genetic Origin," *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 52, no. 0, 2007, pp. 111-150.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. Penguin Books, 2006.
- Smith, Sidonie., and Watson, Julia. *Reading Autobiography: a Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2<sup>nd</sup>ed., University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Sollenberger, Roger. "The Nine Worst Republican Excuses For Brett Kavanaugh," *Paste Magazine*, 21 September 2018. <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2018/09/the-nine-worst-republican-excuses-for-brett-kavana.html>.
- Stannow, Lovisa, and David Kaiser. "Prison Rape And The Government," *The New York Review of Books*, 24 March 2011. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/03/24/prison-rape-and-government/?pagination=false>.

- Szalavitz, Maia. "After 75 years of Alcoholics Anonymous, It's Time to Admit We Have. Problem" *Pacific Standard*, 10 Feb 2014. <https://tinyurl.com/y7xlm8je>.
- Szasz, Thomas. *Ceremonial Chemistry: The Ritual Persecution of Drugs, Addicts, and Pushers*. Anchor Press, 1974.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Harvard University Press, 2007.
- . *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Harvard University Press, 1989.
- The Holy Bible, King James Version. New York: American Bible Society: 1999; Bartleby.com, 2000.
- Thompson, Douglas M. *The Quest for the Golden Trout: Environmental Loss and America's Iconic Fish*. University Press of New England, 2013.
- Todd, Jude. "Knotted Bellies and Fragile Webs: Untangling and Re-Spinning in Tayo's Healing Journey." *The American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1995, p. 155.
- Topper, Martin. "The Traditional Navajo Medicine Man: Therapist, Counselor, and Community Leader." *The Journal of Psychoanalytic Anthropology*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1987, pp. 217–249.
- Travis, Trysh. *The Language of the Heart a Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey*. University of North Carolina Press, 2009.
- Trenk, Marin. "'Drunkness and Dreams': Inebriation and the Dream Quest Among North American Indians," *ANTROPológicas* no. 4, 2000.
- U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Office of the Surgeon General. *Facing Addiction in America: The Surgeon General's Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health*, 2016. Rockville, MD: DHSS, 2016.  
<https://addiction.surgeongeneral.gov/>.

- United States, Congress, Senate, Committee of Indian Affairs. *The problem of methamphetamine in Indian country*. United States Senate, One Hundred Ninth Congress, second session, April 5, 2006, Washington, DC.
- Urquhart, “Being Transgender is a Condition, Not a Choice,” *Slate*, 25 October 2018, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2018/10/transgender-memo-ideology-condition-choice.html>.
- Von Trier, Lars, director. *Nymph()maniac*. Zentropa, 2014.
- Vox, “What the Letter Said,” *Today, Explained*, 17 September 2018, <https://art19.com/shows/today-explained/episodes/29d28815-9a41-43af-9430-1d102f3f5920>.
- Wade, Lisa. “U.S. Schools are Teaching Our Children that Native Americans are History,” *Pacific Standard Magazine*, 3 December 2014. <https://tinyurl.com/yadw8eht>.
- Walton, Izaak, and Le Gallienne, Richard. *The Complete Angler: or, The Contemplative Man's Recreation*. Elliot Stock, 1897.
- Warhol, Robyn R., and Michie, Helena. “Twelve-Step Teleology: Narratives of Recovery/Recovery as Narrative.” *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, pp. 327–350.
- Weiner, Greg. “Judge Kavanaugh Is One Angry Man,” *New York Times*, 1 October 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/01/opinion/kavanaugh-supreme-court-senate-hearing.html>.
- Wery, Aline, et al. “Characteristics of Self-Identified Sexual Addicts in a Behavioral Addiction Outpatient Clinic.” *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2016, pp. 623–630.
- Wilson, Elizabeth A. *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body*. Duke University Press, 2004.

Winnubst, Shannon. "Vampires, Anxieties, and Dreams: Race and Sex in the Contemporary United States." *Hypatia*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2003, pp. 1–20.

Wray, Matt. *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness*. Duke University Press, 2006.

Wulfhorst, Ellen, "Fueled by drugs, sex trafficking reaches 'crisis' on Native American reservations," *Reuters*, 17 May 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-trafficking-nativeamericans-drugs-idUSKCN0Y818L>.

Zeiger, Susan M. *Inventing the Addict: Drugs, Race, and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2008.

## VITA

Denise Grollmus is a writer, scholar, and teacher. She holds a PhD in English Literature and Language from the University of Washington (2018), an MFA in Creative Writing from Pennsylvania State University (2012), and a BA in English from Oberlin College (2003).