

NARRATIVITY, EMPLOTMENT, AND VOICE IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL AND  
CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF “MENTALLY ILL” WOMEN, 1942-2003

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the  
GRADUATE INTERDISCIPLINARY PROGRAM IN  
COMPARATIVE CULTURAL AND LITERARY STUDIES

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In the Graduate College

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2005

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA  
GRADUATE COLLEGE

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Narrativity, Emplotment, and Voice in Autobiographical and Cinematic Representations of “Mentally Ill” Women, 1942-2003

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## Acknowledgments

My deepest appreciation goes to my Dissertation Committee: Barbara Babcock, Susan White, Mark Nichter, David Robinson, and Beverly Seckinger, who saw me through. I am grateful to Ana Ortiz, Yvonne Reineke, Susan Philips, and Rudi Gaudio, who served on my Comprehensive Examination Committee.

My heartfelt and abiding gratitude is conveyed to Kathleen Powers, who shared conversations with me about countless aspects of this layered project, and without whose input and assistance I could not have crafted my ideas into their present form.

Liz Kennedy, Miranda Joseph, Caryl Flinn, Janet Jakobsen, Laura Briggs, and Susan Craddock helped me fine tune theories and methodologies both inside and outside of classrooms, in the context of independent studies, and during private interactions. A special thank you is extended to my undergraduate mentor, Barbara Munson Goff, of Rutgers University's Cook College, credited with being the first person within an academic setting to encourage me to become a rigorous interdisciplinarian. Thanks to Adele Barker, Jerry Hogle, and Annette Kolodny for their investments in the Graduate Program in Comparative Cultural and Literary Studies at the University of Arizona.

Thanks to my mother and stepfather, Joan and Leonard Brikman, and to my aunt and uncle, Joan and Jerry Fallert, for keeping my mind and heart engaged. Thanks to Lane Van Ham, who read my work and provided extensive feedback. Thanks to Kathleen Powers, Clark Pomerleau, Jess Weinberg, Lane Van Ham, Lori McAllester Schultz, John Schultz, Mo Bobrovnick, Liz Socolow, Max Beck, Tamara Beck, Anne McDonnell, Beth Harrison, Ericha Scott, Judd Ruggill, Abby Clouse, Gary Gibson, Sharon Parker, Amy Harrington, and David Rubin, who joined me in screening films, helped me think through a variety of arguments, and encouraged me to have fun and feel good in my life.

Thank you to the Women's Studies Department at the University of Arizona for allowing me to teach "Women and 'Madness' in American Film" during the summer of 2002. The students in this class were among the first to help me engage the theoretical stances presented herein. I thank them, and all of my present and former students.

I thank my readers for bearing witness as I continue to critically examine my roles as a social services practitioner, scholar, and educator, in negotiating the fraught terrain of late capitalism in the United States. Considering the lives and stories of the many mental health consumers and psychiatric survivors I have served over the years helps me to advocate for ethical and equitable "care." This dissertation is offered to these individuals, with my admiration, gratitude, and respect. It is also offered to the social workers and staff members with whom I have labored in agencies, union halls, and elsewhere, and to the antipsychiatric feminist activists who strive for a just world.

## Dedication

“We can never entirely recover what has been forgotten. And this is perhaps a good thing. The shock of repossession would be so devastating that we would immediately cease to understand our longing. But we do understand it; and the more deeply what has been forgotten lies buried within us, the better we understand this longing. Just as the lost word that was on the tip of our tongue would have triggered flights of eloquence worthy of Demosthenes, so what is forgotten seems to us laden with all the lived life it promises us.”

– Walter Benjamin, “The Reading Box” (“Berlin Childhood around 1900” [395])

“Survival is a matter of avowing the trace of loss that inaugurates one’s own emergence.”

– Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (1995)

“A circle, a circle, a circle, a circle. A circle, my family. My family is a circle and it goes around and around.”

– Miles Arthur Holmes, the author’s cousin (comments verbalized at age 5)

“This is the time. And this is the record of the time.”

– Laurie Anderson, “From the Air”

**This dissertation is dedicated to the ones I love,  
and is in memory of my father, Martin Jay Wiener (1930-1980)**

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation presents an historical overview of the interdependent representations of gender, class, ethnicity, race, nationality, sexuality, and (dis)ability in a selection of films and first-person written autobiographical texts from the 1940s to the early twenty-first century. Cinematic and written autobiographical representations of “mental illness” reflect and shape various models of psychological trauma and wellness. I explore the ways that these two genres of representation underscore, exert influence upon, and interrogate socio-cultural understandings and interpretations of deviance and normalcy, madness and sanity, and pathology and health. Some models of health and illness carry more ideological weight than others, and thus differentially contour public policy formation and the materiality of people’s daily lives. My project is distinct from other kinds of scholarship on the subject of women’s “madness.” Whereas scholarship has been written on “madness” and cinema, and on “madness” and autobiography, this related academic work has not consistently drawn linkages between multiple genres or utilized interdisciplinary methodologies to critically explore texts. Feminist scholars who address the interconnections between autobiographies and cinematic representations often pay only limited attention to psychiatric survivors. I draw parallels and distinctions between these genres, based upon my training in social work, cultural studies, film and autobiography theory, medical and linguistic anthropology, and disability studies. My perspective hinges upon my longstanding involvement with and commitment to the subject of women’s “madness” in both personal and professional arenas.

## CHAPTER 1

### **“You May Be Right, I May Be Crazy”<sup>1</sup>: Introduction and Discussion of Interdisciplinary Methodology**

#### **Introduction**<sup>2</sup>

“A work of art provides us with symbols whose meaning we shall never finish developing.”

– Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Indirect Language” (*The Prose of the World*, 90).

“No life as lived has the congruence of the well-told tale.”

– Cheryl Mattingly, cited in Garro and Mattingly, “Narrative Turns” (268).

“A prominent concern in much recent work on life writing has been who gets a life and who doesn’t: whose stories get told, why, by whom, and how.”

– G. Thomas Couser, “Human Conditions – Illness, Disability, and Life Writing” (Introduction to *Recovering Bodies*, 4).

Prosaic Western ethnomedical configurations of women with “mental illness” evoke a wide range of hotly contested scholarly opinions and a vast scope of personal stances. Constructionists, especially certain poststructuralistists, typically contend that

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<sup>1</sup> The quotation in the chapter title is borrowed from Billy Joel’s song “You May Be Right.”

<sup>2</sup> The ideas and analyses presented in this dissertation have percolated and continue to emerge in response to a splendid array of written and cinematic works. I realize that some of the progenitors of and current practitioners from the fields whose works I am using might call into question the bringing together of these texts and practices, my interpretations, stances, and strategic choices as a writer, and the particular ways that this dissertation is structured. My respectful reply to these potential interlocutors is to say that this project may in part be interpreted as a “defense” of American cultural studies. Sometimes, theoreticians are unaware of scholarly overlaps, and so in these cases the retention of protective and rigid disciplinary boundedness and attendant intellectual genealogies is unintentional and even perhaps accidental. Yet, as many cultural studies practitioners have pointed out, at other times hidebound disciplinarity is quite intentional. My approach is motivated by a strong commitment to questioning insular disciplinarity, and a philosophical belief in the efficacy and utility of forging interdisciplinary ties between epistemological arenas that often overlap but frequently do not cohabit. As I will show in this chapter, Paul Ricoeur’s work, for example, has been employed with a great deal of disciplinary crossover, as many anthropologists, autobiography scholars, and cultural critics have adopted his scholarship for their own purposes. Even in the wake of successful interdisciplinary projects, and perhaps in some ways because of them (or because of what explicit deployments of cultural studies are sometimes seen to represent), this kind of crossover or disciplinary “disruption” is still considered “impure” or less than acceptable in certain scholarly circles.

“madness” is not biological, but is a culturally specific ideological invention, a non-transhistorical instantiation of human suffering that is predicated upon communal and personal beliefs in its existence due to internal and external processes of meaning-making.<sup>3</sup> Proponents of science and psychiatry often insist that “madness” is primarily biological and secondarily environmental, and frequently invoke genetics as a means of explanation. Many viewpoints lie in between these extremes of a longstanding array of debates, including those that challenge the absolutes or even overlap them with complex consequences. Women who have endured profound emotional anguish hold opinions that fall at different points on the spectrum, and our beliefs about our own ordeals may shift and change over time.

This dissertation presents an historical overview of the interdependent representations of gender, class, ethnicity, race, nationality, sexuality, and (dis)ability (specifically, emotional “dis-ease”) in a selection of films and first-person written autobiographical texts from the 1940s to the early twenty-first century. Cinematic and written autobiographical representations of “mental illness” reflect and shape various models of psychological trauma and wellness. In the dissertation, I explore the ways that these two genres of representation underscore, exert influence upon, and interrogate socio-cultural understandings and interpretations of deviance and normalcy, madness and sanity, and pathology and health. Some models of health and illness carry more

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to remember that there is no singular poststructuralist stance, but a variety of stances. As Judith Butler (2004) remarks, “Poststructuralism is not a monolith; it is not a unitary event or set of texts, but a wide range of works that emerged in the aftermath of Ferdinand de Saussure, the French Hegel, existentialism, phenomenology, and various forms of linguistic formalism” (195). Thanks to Kathleen Powers for advising me of this citation.

ideological weight than others, and thus differentially contour public policy formation and the materiality of people's daily lives. These concerns are therefore very relevant to a wide range of individuals, including social work educators, community activists, and clinicians.

My project is distinct from other kinds of scholarship on the subject of women's "madness." Whereas scholarship has been written on "madness" and cinema, and on "madness" and autobiography, academic work on this subject has not consistently drawn linkages between multiple genres or utilized interdisciplinary methodologies to critically explore texts. Feminist scholars who do address the interconnections between autobiographies and cinematic representations often pay only limited attention to psychiatric survivors. I draw parallels and distinctions between these genres by employing a metacritical stance based upon my training in social work, cultural studies, feminist film and autobiography theory, medical and linguistic anthropology, and disability studies. My perspective hinges upon my longstanding involvement with and commitment to the subject of women's "madness" in both personal and professional arenas.

Numerous politically significant subjects arise in the context of this project, especially: stereotyping and discourses of pathology; Western ethnopsychology and theories of psychological and bodily difference or variance; the cultural construction of diagnostic categories; voice in relation to emplotment and narrativity; and disability rights. The primary guiding questions that informed the writing of this dissertation are:

- 1 How do self-identified and/or diagnostically labeled "mentally ill" women's self-

- representations in written autobiographical texts challenge and echo mainstream movie images of “mentally ill” women?
- 2 How do these two genres generate narratives that are both different from and similar to emotionally disabled women’s material and corporeal experiences in everyday life?
  - 3 What are some critical approaches to considering how cinematic and written representations of “madness” could or do affect social formations and public policy, and vice versa?
  - 4 How does late capitalism shape the discursive production of “ill” and “deviant” identities?
  - 5 How is political economy operationalized and disputed by textual lenses?
  - 6 Why is it important to consider representational politics, especially in terms of extradiegesis, intertextuality, and audience reception?
  - 7 What do these textual artifacts say about the times during which they were produced, the times preceding them and after them, and the future?
  - 8 How does the present speak to the past through representations and stories? How does the past speak to the present and future through representations and stories?

A variety of scholarly schools and trajectories interface in my thinking and are conveyed within the context of the dissertation, including, among others: the symbolic interactionist movement; the ethnography of communication; the “Kleinman school”; the phenomenology of perception; hermeneutics; feminist responses to psychoanalysis; semiotics; the Frankfurt School of critical theory; postmodernist and poststructuralist thought; the antipsychiatry and c/s/x (consumer/survivor/expatient) social justice movements; and disability studies. I owe my overall commitment to the utility of interdisciplinary work to my teachers and colleagues who are likewise committed to cultural studies as a continuously important field of inquiry. My scholarly work has been

especially influenced by my training in the cultural studies approaches forwarded by Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and other members of the Birmingham School (tragically, its center shut down as I neared completion of this project).

Ruth Benedict's work has also been an important influence on this dissertation project. I have found that Benedict's concepts of pathology and deviance, part of her critique of "Western" psychiatry in *Patterns of Culture* (1934/1959), are rarely cited in the cultural studies and disability studies literature. While *Patterns of Culture* is famous for the usage of three case studies to delineate how cultures "are oriented as wholes in different directions" (223), the motivation and desire to create a "valid comparative psychiatry" is clearly part of the book's stated purpose (258). In her preface to *Patterns of Culture*, Margaret Mead notes, "Because [Benedict] asked the question about the relationship between cultures and abnormality, she opened the way for inquiries by students who were interested in the way in which mental disease differed from one culture to another" (ix).

Benedict (1934/1959) offers an ethnopsychological vantage point when she says, "Most ethnologists have . . . recogni[zed] that the persons who are put outside the pale of society with contempt are not those who would be placed there by another culture" (259). Benedict sees those labeled deviant as "disoriented persons who have failed to adapt themselves adequately to their cultures" (258), but goes on to address the "usefulness of 'abnormal' types" within each culture (267). Importantly, she seems to call for public policy changes, and predicts the self-help and patients' rights movements, when she

advocates for societal tolerance to accompany “self-education of the patient” (273). Her act of putting quotation marks around the word “abnormal” throughout the text is a commentary on the cultural specificity of deviance and wellness models.

Although *Patterns of Culture* begins with Benedict’s dated and problematic assertion that only “simple” cultures ought to be examined as anthropologists’ “laboratories,” because “modern society has grown too complex for adequate analysis” (17), Benedict’s critique of psychiatry is likewise a critique of the “modern” society that produced and produces it. The way she addresses what (as a clinician) I would call ego-syntonic versus ego-dystonic<sup>4</sup> forms of “mental illness” (272) suggests that sociocentric prototypes of health and pathology ought to be considered alongside egocentric ones. Given the timing of *Patterns of Culture*’s publication, Benedict’s attitude can be interpreted as having been informed by the “great debates” surrounding psychoanalysis during the 1920s and 1930s. Benedict also advises that some societies are more tolerant of deviance than others (273).

In the *Patterns of Culture* preface, Mead also describes how Benedict’s work toward “. . . widening . . . cultural definitions might enrich our culture and lighten the load of rejection under which the cultural deviant now labors” (ix). Disability studies, cultural studies, and critical medical anthropological understandings of the ethnopsychologically distinct constructions of diagnostic categories within specific

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<sup>4</sup> Briefly put, “ego-syntonic” usually refers to a characterological, affective, or behavioral feature that is supportive of and/or that colludes with a positive experience of “self,” while “ego-dystonic” refers to similar features that are unsupportive or undermining of a positive experience of “self.” I have found that so-called “libidinal economies,” and related themes of pleasure and pain are often indexed by psychoanalytically inclined parties while discussing syntonic versus dystonic experiences and frameworks.

cultures, at specific times and in specific places, are surely informed by Benedict's scholarship. While I would not employ the term "mental disease," I maintain that Benedict's work ought to be cited more often than it is, and I believe that the scholarly fields to which I have referred would be well-served by turning to Benedict for further inspiration.

Having presented an overview of some of my scholarly influences, I now turn my attention to a necessary discussion of terminology. At times in this dissertation I will adopt the term "autopathography," coined by disability studies practitioner G. Thomas Couser (1997), to describe a first-person life narrative created by a person with a disability – a "PWD." I believe "autopathography" can be employed to refer to various types of first-person narratives, including autoethnographic documentary films, autobiographical essays, lengthy autobiographical works, autobiographical novels, and memoirs. I will discuss Couser's work and the term "autopathography" in more detail in the second section of this chapter.

At certain times, I use the term "c/s/x" or consumer/survivor/expatient, sometimes summarized by me as "psychiatric survivor." Noting the "contestation" around the term c/s/x, its users, and the people to whom it can be said to refer (but who may not use it), Sue Estroff (2004) remarks, "There are ongoing debates among people who have been diagnosed with and treated for schizophrenia about what to call themselves, as well as controversy with some others about these designations" (300, n. 1). Here, Estroff references her 1997 editorial "What's in a Name? Plenty," in which she addresses an

audience of mental health researchers and clinicians. She is aware, as I am, that “schizophrenia” is of course not the only clinical designation associated with individuals who may self-label as c/s/x. Estroff (1997) queries, “On what basis does one challenge that individuals are entitled to name and to describe themselves and to have those designations recognized by and respected by others?” (175). Estroff wants researchers and clinicians to ask themselves questions like: “Why indeed might an individual describe himself or herself as a survivor? What can I learn from the individual’s use of this term? What does this tell us about his or her experiences with treatment or confinement?” (Ibid.)

I choose to use the term “consumer/survivor/expatient,” the acronym “c/s/x,” and the related moniker “psychiatric survivor” because these are designations that are becoming increasingly widespread among individuals who self-identify as “mentally ill” in various ways, and among those who choose to identify as mental health and psychiatric consumers, survivors, and/or ex-patients but who may not adopt or accept (and, in contrast, who may instead refuse) the label “mentally ill.” I use the term c/s/x because I believe that individuals are indeed “entitled to name and to describe themselves and to have those designations recognized by and respected by others.”

More than a thoughtful choice, the term c/s/x is used to negotiate within a complicated political landscape and its histories, and, as such, the term summons a special kind of spatiality with its own elaborate referents. Within the term’s performative linguistic space, the identity rubrics of psychiatric “consumer,” “survivor,” and “ex-

patient” are simultaneously indexed as separate(d) and distinct and as overlapping and unified (or coalitional), thereby demonstrating the disparities and convergences that exist between these identities and labels in a variety of contexts, and highlighting the importance of ex-patients, consumers, and survivors varying needs and goals both separately and collectively. The patients’ rights movement and the larger antipsychiatry movement are of central concern to me as an activist, and both will therefore be discussed at various points in the dissertation; the latter in relation to the former will receive sustained attention in chapter 4.

I will not attempt here to offer a summative discussion of the extensive and complex history of the psychiatrization of women in the United States, and the myriad feminist responses to and theories of psychoanalysis, as an enormous array of resources is available for readers’ consideration.<sup>5</sup> There is also a plethora of historical and recent scholarship in the fields of first-person narrativity and feminist autobiography studies, media studies on emotional disability and representation, disability studies, and medical anthropology (especially on mental health and identity) to which I am indebted in this writing endeavor.<sup>6</sup> Having addressed the scholarly schools and trajectories, the

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<sup>5</sup> Some of my favorite works in these arenas include: Showalter (1987), Bernheimer and Kahane (1990), Decker (1991/1992), Geller and Harris (1994), Rose (1989), Walker (1993), Ussher (1991), Chesler (1972), Irigaray (1977/1988, 1974/1994), Moi (1986), Grosz (1990), and Jardine (1986).

<sup>6</sup> In the sea of materials available, I find works by Smith and Watson (1998, 2001), Gilmore (1994), and Cosslett, Lury, and Summerfield (2000) to be especially useful in my studies of feminism and autobiography. Caminero-Santangelo (1998) and Hubert (2002) have been indispensable to my dissertation. Although her work is not directly related to “madness,” Kosta (1994) provides an intriguing comparative perspective on autobiography in relation to film studies. Winick (1978), Wahl (1995), Gabbard and Gabbard (1999), and the *Journal of Popular Film & Television*’s special issue on “Psychoanalysis and Cinema” (Spring 1990) are helpful introductions to the vast subject of psychiatry and media

theoretical approaches, the guiding questions, the key terminology, and the foundational historical and recent scholarship that inform this project, I now turn my attention to a discussion of methodology that blends certain ideas in order to read the primary texts under consideration. I envision my approach as more of a method set than as a singular methodology. In the subsequent chapters, the primary texts that I use are critically examined using an amalgam of techniques and perspectives from feminist film and autobiography theory, medical and linguistic anthropology, and disability studies. These techniques and perspectives are filtered through the lenses of Smith and Watson's (2001) "tool kit" for "reading autobiography."

Smith and Watson (2001) refer to the twenty question clusters they have created in their tool kit as "strategies for reading life narratives" (165). I have chosen to adapt this useful tool kit to analyze my selection of films and written first-person accounts. Those films that are fashioned from memoirs and are based on other kinds of written autobiographical texts will be discussed in terms of their special particularities. Although many of the major strategic threads that Smith and Watson present in their tool kit will be

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representations. See: Benedict (1934/1959), Schutz (1978), Garfinkel (1967/1987), Goffman (1961), Gaines (1992), and Barrett (1988) for classic and contemporary works on culture and constructions of deviance; Frisch (1990), Passerini (1996), Portelli (2001), Mattingly (1994), Hill (1995), Labov (1972), Linde (1993), Ricoeur (1983/1984, 1984/1985, 1985/1990, 1992, 1997, 2004), Becker (1997), Carr (1991), Boyarin (1994), and Crapanzano (1996) for crucial studies of time, narrative, and history in relation to life stories, oral history, coherence, difference, and identity formation; and Jackson (1994/2000), Young (1995/1997), Antze and Lambek (1996), and Kleinman, Das, and Lock (1997) regarding trauma, memory, pain, and social suffering. An important and critical introduction to the emerging field of disability studies can be found in Linton's *Claiming Disability* (1998). For an excellent summary of recent and classic scholarship on the history of "madness" in America, see Hubert (2002). While he has been critiqued for not paying adequate attention to women and to issues of race and ethnicity, Foucault's works, especially *Madness and Civilization* (1965/1988), still help me to deepen my thinking about the cultural constructions of "mental illness."

utilized in my dissertation, identifying and repeating each of them throughout the work would likely prove to be unwieldy. Instead, I have chosen to combine and adapt their numerous categories to retain three topics that I find particularly instructive and helpful: narrativity, voice, and emplotment. These topics may also be seen as analytical interventions or frameworks, since each of them is of course more than merely “topical.”

Keeping these overarching topics in mind throughout the project, I aim to read the primary texts with sensitivity, in order to talk about themes that I find relevant to representations of and by women with “mental illness.” The critical themes that are of particular interest to me are: (in)coherence, authority, embodiment, and agency; medicalization, psychiatrization, institutionalization, and identity formation; and alliances between family, medical providers, and the “self.”

Throughout the dissertation, the primary texts I use are seen as artifacts<sup>7</sup> that comment upon the relationship between time, narrative, and history. The four chapters that follow are temporally and thematically structured. In Chapter 2, I address a selection of cinematic and written autobiographical texts from between 1942 and 1964, and pay special attention to the centrality of melodrama and the legacy of psychoanalysis in literary and film criticism. In Chapter 3 I engage with numerous kinds of texts and discourses revolving around Hollywood actress Frances Farmer. The materials I address about Farmer date from during her lifetime into the present day, and include her own

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<sup>7</sup> I have found that interdisciplinary scholars often think of their primary sources as “artifacts.” For example, Lisa Diedrich (2001) reads memoirs “not only as literary artifacts, but also as cultural artifacts.” She aims “to look beyond the texts themselves to critical and popular responses in reviews in particular and

memoir, published two years after her death, in 1972. I consider Farmer's strong posthumous "presence" during the 1970s and 1980s a metonym for that time period. In Chapter 4, I address a selection of cinematic and written autobiographical texts from the 1990s to the present. In my analysis, I pay sustained attention to the antipsychiatry movement, and its historical and present relationship to feminism and feminist scholarship. In Chapter 5, I begin by discussing emergent forms of autoethnographic representation, including collected written first-person works, cinematic autobiography, and Internet self-representation projects. I conclude the dissertation by discussing ideas for applying my study to academic curriculum development, therapeutic practice, and mental health activism, and describe some of my scholarly plans.

In the discussion that follows, I will highlight specific features of some of the literatures and theories noted in this introduction and expand upon them in order to further explicate my perspective. I will also offer a theory of narrative (in)coherence that informs the entire project. It is my hope that the ways I apply my innovative interdisciplinary methodology and theory of narrative (in)coherence to the texts will simultaneously show respect for women psychiatric survivors and help foster a discussion of the representational politics of "women's madness" in cinematic and written narrative production and consumption, and within the spheres of social work education, clinical and community practice, and mental health activism.

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other media in general," and refers to her "method for reading illness narratives" as "*treatments*" (dissertation abstract, original emphasis).

### **Narrativity, Voice, and Emplotment**

“Peregrination and narration are grounded in time’s approximation of eternity, which, far from abolishing their difference, never stops contributing to it.”

– Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1 (29).

“Autobiographical works address the fraught engagement between subject and writing and the illusion of drawing the contingencies of existence into a configuration that suggests stability over time.”

– Patrick Crowley, “Paul Ricoeur: The Concept of Narrative Identity, the Trace of Autobiography” (9).

“The emplotment of autobiographical narratives . . . can be described as a dense and multilayered intersection of the temporal and the geographic. By teasing out the complex ways in which life narratives are organized, readers may discover the cultural, or historic, or generic specificities of these emplotments.”

– Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, “Autobiographical Acts” (*Reading Autobiography*, 74).

Narrative is the vehicle through which individual and collective voices, identities, and enactments of agency are emplotted – or not. The theories of culture, difference, embodiment, subjectivity, and literary and cinematic representation employed throughout the dissertation may be considered forms of narration, just as culture, difference, bodily reality, subject position, and literary and film forms themselves may be described as narratives. Depending upon who is speaking, with whom one is speaking, and about what, “narrative” is a discourse, is discursive, is a genre, and crosses genres. Identity constituting “pathographies”<sup>8</sup> – or, as Arthur Kleinman (1988) famously named them, “illness narratives” – have long held the interest of medical and linguistic

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<sup>8</sup> Per Hawkins (1999), “By writing pathographies, patients not only restore the experiential dimension to illness and treatment but also place the ill person at the very center of that experience” (127). My stance on what constitutes an “ill person” is admittedly different from Hawkins’, but I find her overview of “pathographies” otherwise useful. See: Jones’s (1997) and McLellan’s (1997) introductions to the subject.

anthropologists. The study of “narratology” and “narrativity” has a vibrant past and receives sustained attention today among literary and cinematic scholars.

In the “West,” unmarked or coded-as-normal human identity is often existentially imagined and corporeally realized in the form of an internalized, unified self that is simultaneously multi-faceted or variegated. A self’s existence, continuation, plausible whole or partial changes, and, potentially, utter dissolution are constantly predicated upon the creative, processual emergence of a self-narrative, a story we tell about ourselves. The idea of a “narrative construction of the self” therefore necessarily points to processuality and emergence. This constructive act carries a particular weight in the case of illness narratives. As Vincent Crapanzano (1996) puts it,

Narratives of the self are more than a story, a chronology, a history of the self (however defined); they are taken to be a means of knowing the self. As such, at least in our medicalized era, they have, among others, a therapeutic intention (however masked) that has replaced or, more accurately, come to dominate other intentions – the confessional, the pedagogical, indeed the exorcistic – that prevailed in other ages. For us they describe self-discovery and facilitate “personal growth” (108-9).

The question of how identities, stories, and film images are realized and could be said to realize themselves through narrative acts is central to my discussion of narrative.

In cinema scholarship, narration is often understood “as the discursive activity responsible for representing or recounting the events or situations of the story” (Stam, Burgoyne, and Flitterman-Lewis [1992], 95). The layers of narrative within films and film studies are vast and go well beyond the “story” that a given film conveys to its viewers. Character narration, production narration, and audience narration are among the

many foci of attention in film studies. Film narration has been called a “metalanguage” (Bordwell [1985], 18), and the richly elaborated study of film narration could be considered a meta-metalanguage. Put differently, within film and autobiographical studies today, the scholarly exploration of narrative and its machinations has become a colossal – and, alas, sometimes elitist – cultural industry.

Within this burgeoning theoretical universe, feminist film and media scholars have long contested the “gaze” and “voice” in narrative cinema and otherwise challenged what they see as masculinist narratological enterprises, while many feminist autobiography scholars have sought to deconstruct the significance of a unified “I” or consolidated “self” that they see as more artificial and imaginary than real. For example, in “The Universal Subject, Female Embodiment, and the Consolidation of Autobiography,” Sidonie Smith (1993/1997) says, “I want to . . . probe the ways in which specific writers, through specific autobiographical engagements, reveal their troubles with the old ‘I’ at the same time that they make trouble with that generic ‘I,’ in both senses of the word” (4-5). As a sampling of the numerous feminist stances that have come about in response to every conceivable cinematic narrative genre, the works of film theorists Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, Tania Modleski, Teresa de Lauretis, and Patricia White may be viewed as existing on a continuum of feminist film theory.

Mulvey’s (1988) call to dismantle traditional narrative cinema, while surely radical as a goal, is accomplished by her infuriated confiscation of a conservative

psychoanalytic model. For Mulvey, film as an Althusserian ideological state apparatus<sup>9</sup> provides no space for a female gaze. Postcolonial studies scholar Gayatri Spivak (1988) has historically been concerned with what she terms “epistemic violence,” which is made possible in part by the “silencing” of subaltern women’s voices by men in postcolonial India and by Western hegemonic feminists looking at and judging India and Indian-ness from the “outside.” Mulvey is concerned with a very different type of gendered silencing that could also be called “epistemic violence”: she is committed to showing that women within – or as portrayed “inside” of – films, and female spectators watching films from the “outside,” cannot really look; they can only be truly seen by men, or by women who masculinize themselves by holding a definitionally male gaze.

Doane’s (1987) early work complicates Mulvey’s formulation of female subjectivity. Doane says that women cannot have or hold “the gaze” because women aren’t castrated. Women can only identify pleasure through male identification. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Patricia White (1999) powerfully argues for the existence of a variety of female gazes (most notably a lesbian one), and criticizes Doane not only for her inability to imagine women who can and do “look,” but for refusing to consider that women can and do “look” with desire and longing at other women. Modleski’s (1988/1989) adoption of a “female Oedipal narrative” to read Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* (1940) is more radical than Doane and less radical than de Lauretis (1984), who asks how female desire behaves concomitantly with narrativity (defined by de Lauretis as a film narrative’s work and effects, not merely its structure [105]).

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<sup>9</sup> See: Louis Althusser’s famous essay in *Lenin and Philosophy* (1971).

As I noted above, narrative acts are the means by which individual and collective voices, identities, and enactments of agency are emplotted (or not). The term “emplotment” was made famous by hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur<sup>10</sup> and has been adapted by numerous writers from a range of disciplines to describe the processes by which subjects are repeatedly placed, place themselves, and may resist placement in relation to specific identities, stories, images, histories, events, meanings, and so on. In addition to its obvious reference to literary and cinematic plots, and to the ways that a life is like a literary or filmic world that is variously molded by oneself and others, emplotment can be metaphorically considered in terms of plots of land, plots on a graph, plots of time, or any related process of creating schemes, negotiating spaces, and making plans that may or may not be hard to alter. Anthropologist Paul Antze (1996) describes emplotment as “a perpetual weaving and reweaving of past and present events into characters, motives, situations, actions” (6) and says that “In effect we are characters in a story that we keep revising as our lives unfold” (Ibid.).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> As Ricoeur explains in *Time and Narrative* Vol. 1, his usage of emplotment is an extension of Aristotle’s concept *muthos* as described in *Poetics*. While Ricoeur says that he “borrows” the concept from Aristotle, he also expands it in new directions (31). After unpacking Aristotle’s usage of *muthos*, Ricoeur explains, “Aristotle, we have seen, ignored the temporal aspects of emplotment. I propose to disentangle them from the act of textual configuration and to show the mediating role of the time of emplotment between the temporal aspects prefigured in the practical field and the refiguration of our temporal experience by this constructed time. *We are following therefore the destiny of a prefigured time that becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time*” (*Time and Narrative* Vol. 1, 54, original emphasis). In the introduction to *Time and Narrative* Vol. 2, Ricoeur notes that “the notion of emplotment” is “handed down by the Aristotelian tradition,” and he says explicitly that he has “broaden[ed] the notion of emplotment” since “the Aristotelian *muthos* has the capacity to be transformed without thereby losing its identity” (4).

<sup>11</sup> Ricoeur scholar Maria Villela Petit (1989) notes that, for Ricoeur, emplotment is “the operation which bestows on the narrative its power of temporal configuration” (36). She quotes Ricoeur, who remarks (in *Time and Narrative* Volume 1, 52), “Time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence” (Ibid.). For Ricoeur, per Petit, narrative is “the keeper of human time” (37). Along these lines, I have been

Medical anthropologist Gay Becker (1997) discusses “the importance of time and process in narrative” (27). Quoting Ricoeur, she states,

Emplotment is the process that unifies the chronological with the nonchronological: “reading the end in the beginning and the beginning in the end, we also learn to read time itself backward.” This conception of narrative time draws on Heidegger’s notion of being-in-time (or within-timeness) and is not reducible to the portrayal of linear time. A biography tends to reorder the significance of a life, reading that life backward and using past events as explanations for the current state of affairs (27).<sup>12</sup>

An individual does not necessarily enact Emplotment. Narratives and their construction often involve multiple parties. On the subject of co-construction, linguists Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps (1996) remark, “Narratives are tales that tellers and listeners map onto tellings of personal experience. In this sense, even the most silent of listeners is an author of an emergent narrative” (21). Medical anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly (1994) describes what she refers to as the process of “therapeutic emplotment” – a collaborative effort to constitute a recovering patient’s story – and while she sees the rehabilitative potential of such co-constructed stories, she acknowledges the uneven power differentials that exist between a therapeutic practitioner and a patient in these situations. Robert Barrett (1988), another medical anthropologist, asserts that in creating mental health clients’ case records, practitioners literally write features of patients’ lives

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playing with the idea of inventing a theoretical heuristic that links emplotment and artifactuality. I want to figure out a way to theorize images and stories as enacted between bodies and memories, without creating binary structures in my descriptions. Images and stories mediate between our bodies and embodied memories but are also “inside” of both (or each) of these not-truly-separate categories.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Boyarin (1994) posits, “On one hand, we pragmatically assume that time is a one-dimensional and irreversible phenomenon. On the other hand, our commitment to the past and its representations

into being in ways that are complicated and sometimes stigmatizing. Disability studies scholar G. Thomas Couser (1997) notes, “The treatment of illness or disability typically, and necessarily, involves a sort of narrative collaboration between doctor and patient – the creation of a new ‘life text’” (10).

Jamie Saris’s philosophy of place points to the ways representations, embodiment, and individual narratives are necessarily influenced by institutional settings. Michel Foucault has taught us that institutional settings are discursive, and interrelate in complex ways with the individuals and communities that they house, treat, control, school, etc. Medical anthropologist Sue Estroff’s foundational work on outpatient psychiatric settings relies in part on the powerful role of place in defining deviance and health within individual and collective narratives (Estroff 1981/1985, 1993, 1997, 2004). As Smith and Watson (2001) note, emplacement “can be described as a dense and multilayered intersection of the temporal and the geographic” (74), and emplacement’s geographically specific aspects clearly merit attention, particularly in local and regional instances of social work practice.<sup>13</sup>

Disability studies activists and scholars seek to problematize the ways that narratives of the disabled have often been appropriated by “normals,” and advocate for increased attention to be paid, with deepened and ongoing respect, to the representations

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implies that the past affects the present in much more complex ways than the model of points on a straight line permits us to imagine” (2).

<sup>13</sup> Scholarly literature that attends to the central role of “space and place” in establishing community and individual identities has been growing in leaps and bounds, especially in the fields of comparative literature, cultural geography, psychiatry, and medical anthropology. Two excellent examples that specifically address psychiatric contexts are Desjarlais (1997) and Fullilove (1996).

of disability that are and have been rendered by the disabled about themselves, for each other, and as a way of “talking back” to an often ignorant public. As G. Thomas Couser (1997) points out, “In the last few decades people with disabilities have been increasing in visibility, independence, assertiveness, and political power – as well as in numbers. The increasing politicization of disabled people has to do less with sheer numbers than with changing consciousness” (179).<sup>14</sup> As noted above, Couser created the term “autopathography” as a way of recuperating narratives of disability from the medical establishment for the expressed purpose of using them by disabled people for disabled people. Smith and Watson (2001) summarize the promise of his term as follows: “[Couser] first used this term to characterize personal narratives about illness or disability that contest cultural discourses stigmatizing the writer as abnormal, aberrant, or in some sense pathological. Couser has suggested that such narratives be seen, instead, as ‘antipathological’” (187).

Couser (1997) remarks, “Increasingly, then, narratives of somatic dysfunctions explore the ways in which culture constructs illness and disability, whatever their proximate causes, according to its anonymous and seemingly arbitrary dictates. One common purpose is to invalidate dominant cultural narratives of invalidism” (12). Therefore, “autopathographic” narratives may be seen as “antipathological” precisely because rather than centering illness or treatment, they “[critique] social constructions of

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<sup>14</sup> Throughout the dissertation, I will make reference to the projects of disability studies and situate my own work in that context (and as distinct from that context, for reasons that will be elucidated). Couser’s and Linton’s work help me articulate what I am saying in this passage.

the disabled body and [incorporate] a counternarrative of survival and empowerment that reclaims the individual's or a loved one's body from the social stigmatization and the impersonalization of medical discourse" (Smith and Watson 2001, 187-188).<sup>15</sup>

Because of Paul Ricoeur's influence and prominence in narrative studies across the disciplines, my discussion of narrativity clearly owes a great deal to his views of temporality and narrative.<sup>16</sup> According to Ricoeur (1984), eternity is always still and time is always in motion. In the first volume of the trilogy *Time and Narrative*, his interpretations of eternity and time and their application to narration are based upon his reading of St. Augustine's *Confessions*, used by Ricoeur to forward his own theory of time.<sup>17</sup> Ricoeur states that eternity is not in the present, and it is neither past nor future, yet it determines present, past, and future time. Moving and movable time may be employed as a measuring device, used by evaluating its "proximity" to eternity's perpetual fixity. In this sense, Ricoeur's rephrasing of Augustine's view of time resembles a metronome attempting to track and render mathematically divisible an eternal music's immeasurable spheres. Its motions are how one may understand the

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<sup>15</sup> In a personal E-mail exchange with me, Dr. Couser noted that some PWDs (persons with disabilities) have informed him that they do not like the term "autopathography." Some of these individuals have specifically questioned its utility and usage because, they have argued, in certain ways – and despite its "antipathological" potential – that the term reifies the existence of "pathology."

<sup>16</sup> I would like to embark on a book-length project on feminist responses to Paul Ricoeur's work. An excellent entry point for such a study is Lois McNay's *Gender and Agency* (2000), as it contains a compelling discussion of Ricoeur's scholarship, the topic of coherence, and feminist theory.

<sup>17</sup> In the *Time and Narrative* trilogy, Ricoeur in part sees his project of helping readers "apprehen[d] [the] correspondence between narrative and time" as accomplished by a "confrontation between the Augustinian theory of time and the Aristotelian theory of the plot" (*Time and Narrative* Vol. 3, 241). One of his goals, among many others, is to think through "the configuration of time by narrative" (Ibid.).

“passage” of time, a concept that Ricoeur maintains is intuited to be “true” or “real,” but that cannot be easily explicated. How one “measures” time is differently interesting to Ricoeur than understanding what time is. He suggests that a clear explanation for the latter may rest upon the explication of the former.

Ricoeur’s analysis and my description of it rely in part upon an explicit summoning of sensory experience in relation to language and imagination. The auricular realm is especially important to Ricoeur; he uses the example of a ringing bell to illustrate his theory of three-fold time.<sup>18</sup> Ricoeur explains that a ringing bell’s sound is experienced as it begins to resonate, as it continues to resonate, and as it ceases to resonate. Importantly, he asserts that the bell’s sounds, whether past, present, or future, are typically spoken of using the past tense. The “not yet” of the future is a form of the past tense, and the resonance that occurs in the present is recounted once it has ended, hence it is an invocation of the past. The passing of the present is expressed in the past tense. Ricoeur’s theoretical structure suggests ways of thinking about how the present speaks to the past and how the past speaks to the present and future through representations and stories.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, Ricoeur seems to presume in his illustration that a bell is necessarily engaged through auditory channels, but does not openly consider the tactile and other sensate experiences connected to ringing, the potential relevance of non-waking states to his theory, nor the plausibility of his metaphor for explicating time to/for/with a Deaf person.

<sup>19</sup> Gay Becker (1997) notes that Ricoeur “observes that everyday praxis orders the present of the future and the present of the past, that is, how practice in the current moment in time orders one’s view of past, present, and future” (225, n. 18). This perspective reminds me of Bourdieu’s explanation of “habitus.” Daily human and systemic practices bring forward an awareness of the materiality of ideology. Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus” may be seen as a description of how practices of ideology become materialized each day, within a framework of culture that Raymond Williams calls “everyday life.” The “everyday” may also

Ricoeur asserts that the non-linear or non-chronological is not equivalent to the atemporal. Thus, time can be understood to be circular, layered, spectral, multiplicitous, processual, etc. Ricoeur's references to peregrination in relation to narration are compelling when one considers that peregrination, or a journey from one place to another, and the associated acts of migration, wandering, or roving, are easily understood to be able to occur in non-linear ways. Although there are potentially strong parallels and convergences between peregrination and narration, practitioners in the social sciences, cultural theory, social work, and psychotherapy frequently identify narration as a process which renders "coherent," "cohesive," and "linear" a set of temporal experiences or variables which are often initially more disparate and non-linear than orderly, thereby suggesting that peregrination and narration are wholly different in how they function: peregrination is typically nomadic and narration allegedly aims to be serial and linear.<sup>20</sup>

Scholars from various disciplines observe that Ricoeur positively highlights the central, guiding role and understandable prowess of coherence in narrative identity and narrative construction. For example, according to Gay Becker (1997), "Paul Ricoeur notes that the corpus of our individual histories is brought together by a work of imagination that, in articulating the various points of connection, transforms it into a coherent story. He maintains that in the midst of experience it is not possible to know the

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be invoked as Husserl's (and Schutz's) "life-world." See: Bourdieu (1990); Williams (1958/1983, 1977); Carr (1991); and Schutz (1978).

<sup>20</sup> For an intriguing philosophical discussion of coherence and how "narrative structure . . . is the organizing principle not only of experiences and actions but of the self who experiences and acts" (Carr 73), see David Carr's "The Self and the Coherence of Life" in *Time, Narrative, and History* (1991: 73-99).

meaning of one's actions – that only with time do certain aspects of what is meaningful emerge" (26).

In a recent essay, critical theory and French literary studies scholar Patrick Crowley takes up what I call Ricoeur's "coherence orientation" while he (Crowley) addresses the relevance of Ricoeur's work to the study of autobiography. Crowley specifically discusses his interest in the reasons why Ricoeur has not more robustly addressed the study of autobiography in his own work. Crowley notes, "That Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity is being applied to autobiography is not surprising, what is surprising is that autobiography only appears on the margins of Ricoeur's work. Given that his concept of identity would appear to have its generic home within autobiography, Ricoeur's near silence invites inquiry" (1).<sup>21</sup>

In summarizing Ricoeur's theories of narrativity and narrative identity, Crowley explains that for Ricoeur, overall, narrative is a negotiation between "change and permanence," as it "organizes the contingencies of existence into a coherent whole" (2). This "mediat[i]on" occurs "through a process of emplotment" (Ibid.). In a compelling but fraught essay on "Multiple Personality Disorder," memory, and narrative identity, Paul Antze (1996) states, "If Paul Ricoeur is right, then our very experience of identity, of being someone in particular, has a tacit narrative structure" (6). Citing Ricoeur, Antze

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<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, Ricoeur "responds" to this very issue in Morny Joy's collection, *Paul Ricoeur: Context and Contestation* (1997). Discussing his work in relation to women's autobiographies, he self-reflexively asks (and notes), "Does the rootedness of narrative in memory, combined with the dialectic of acting and suffering, allow me to do justice to narratives composed by women? By giving a place today to the theme of the wounded memory along with that of the therapeutic function of narrative, I hope to have made some progress in this direction" (xli).

says that “narrative labor has its own dynamic, driven by a perpetual tension ‘between the demand for concordance and the admission of discordances’ – by the need, in other words, to find threads of continuity in the face of ‘diversity, variability, discontinuity and instability’ [*Oneself as Another*, 140-141]. Clearly there are many ways of resolving this tension” (Ibid.).

Therefore, it is understandable that Crowley sees Ricoeur as “privileg[ing] the whole over the part” (4). Crowley ultimately argues that “Ricoeur’s formulation of narrative identity is not only cursory in its consideration of autobiography but . . . autobiography reveals the limits of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic approach to texts” (6). Crowley highlights the fact that Ricoeur’s own “notion of narrative identity changes over time” in his scholarship (Ibid.). He notes, “Indeed, Ricoeur’s work on narrative identity provides a perfect illustration of change and displacement over time” (9). According to Crowley, Ricoeur “subordinate[s] the instability of narrative identity, and in particular the waywardness of many autobiographical texts, to a deferred understanding of the self” (10). This “waywardness” evokes Ricoeur’s reference to peregrination, discussed above. Crowley ends his argument by saying, “Ricoeur’s work offers an admirable ethics but a reluctant engagement with autobiographical texts that reveals the fragility, not simply of Ricoeur’s concept of narrative identity, but of his use of hermeneutics to understand the self through the mediation of texts” (11).

I agree with Crowley’s assertion that Ricoeur’s “subordination” of narrative and narrative identity’s “instability” and “waywardness” is troublesome. Moreover, it seems

to me that the organizational structures undergirding and the guiding principles for describing narrative need not be linear, nor must they privilege “coherence” at the expense of narrative’s – and, by extension, narrative identity’s – peregrinating (or peregrinatory, as in migratory?) potential.<sup>22</sup> There may be distinct advantages, individual and collective motivations, and numerous creative reasons for presenting a narrative which is at least partially non-linear and nomadic, a descriptively relayed peregrination. It is useful to consider the explanatory purposes of a narrative’s multivocal, non-linear, and emergent elements, as well as the explanatory purposes of its “coherent” features.<sup>23</sup>

The imaginative and complex “mind” is not merely an internalized machinist for processing the spatiality of time through narrative, and contemplating the utility of non-linear narrativity is not simply an exercise in analyzing or unpacking the efficacy of storytelling and the advantages of what is sometimes pejoratively referred to as tangentiality. The promise of narrative “resistance” is also not being romanticized herein. Instead, I am forwarding a politicized reading – a theory – of (in)coherence and narrativity that takes issue with the coding of linearity and coherence as normal and desirable.

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<sup>22</sup> In the first volume of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur describes the complex relationship between concordance and discordance in works of tragedy. Sometimes discordance is ultimately dominated within tragic narratives in order to “replace perplexity with lucidity” in the retelling of historical tales (44).

<sup>23</sup> In *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), Ricoeur revisits and at times augments some of his work from the *Time and Narrative* trilogy. He says, “The problem posed is no longer that of a transposition, of some expression starting from other, less scholarly uses of narrative, but of the articulation between narrative coherence and explanatory connectedness” (552, n 14).

Sociolinguist Charlotte Linde (1993) is well-known for her description of narrative coherence. A student of William Labov's, Linde adapted her teacher's theory of narrative linear order and applied it to the specific genre of "life stories." For Linde, a life story is a constant, interactively shaped, revisionist history of the self, with no real version but multiple versions that are always under construction. According to Linde, while specific versions of life stories are potentially quite mutable, they likewise persistently incorporate linear features that Linde calls coherent, and they maintain coherence for a given individual's sense of self, because, she believes, they must.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps some "mentally ill" adults are not properly defined by coherence, as it is underscored by Linde, because these individuals do not necessarily adopt traditional "Western" identity motifs in the first place – here, at least in part, may lie the origin of their being labeled as deviant. As Linde notes, coherence is coherent because (as she puts it) "competent" people do it, which suggests that: a) incoherence is not what "competent" people strive for; and b) "incompetence" is measured in part by (perceived) incoherence. Thus, a person defined as "having" a "mental illness" is in some cases defined as such because she or he is a person with a life story that "normals" label as incoherent, not because that person is "really" incompetent or is "really" incoherent.

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<sup>24</sup> Gay Becker (1997) asserts, "Anthropologists agree that a sense of coherence is culturally grounded, that it is through culture that people make sense of their worlds, while social science concepts developed by nonanthropologists, such as coherence . . . and continuity theory . . . all view continuity as mediated through the person rather than through culture. Charlotte Linde (*Life Stories*, 17) observes that creating coherence is a social obligation and a measure of cultural competence" (224, n. 5). Becker goes on to explain how "concerns with meaning and coherence are reflected in how [a] person is conceived and portrayed," and cites multiple references to support her claims.

Furthermore, many individuals diagnosed with “mental illness” are able to “be coherent” or “act coherent” – or they may choose to “pass” as what they think “normals” consider “coherent” – in certain frames and not others.<sup>25</sup> Ideas and enactments that can be socially coded as deviant or incoherent have long been experimented with and critiqued by filmmakers, visual and musical artists, poets, as well as by many other kinds of narrators. Definitions of coherence and incoherence, and of competence and incompetence, are therefore substantially complicated.

I disagree with Linde in that it seems to me that incoherence is often a part of narrative structure in general, and life stories in particular, even among “normals.” It may be that “normals,” unlike those labeled deviant, have social cachet that allows them to manipulate incoherence more successfully. Perhaps the commitment to locating and privileging coherence can be interpreted as a preoccupation with a new valence of rationality, and this may be why, tautologically, “normals” who have the cultural capital to successfully manipulate the apparatuses of incoherence are not labeled “mad,” while others who are seen to be “really” incoherent – and thus “mad” – are labeled or may be labeled “irrational.”

It would be problematic to call the theory I am forwarding here a feminist theory, although part of me would like to call it that. I cannot name it feminist without further explanation, because I resist rehearsing, repeating, and advancing an old and quite

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<sup>25</sup> My use of “frame” follows Erving Goffman’s (1961) adaptation of Gregory Bateson’s definition of “frame.” (See *Frame Analysis*, 7).

famous argument: “reason,” “coherence,” and “rationality,” long associated with “masculinity” and “maleness,” are set up in binary opposition to “unreason,” “incoherence,” and “irrationality,” long associated with “femininity” and “femaleness” in “the West.”

Rather than reifying troubling tropes of agency, “(in)sanity,” and identity, I am suggesting instead that the “cultural capital” argument I am forwarding may be seen as feminist in its own right. In thinking through these ideas, I am indebted to Sue Estroff, especially her discussion of the “strategies” people labeled “crazy” use to function in a violent and stigmatizing world.<sup>26</sup>

Cheryl Mattingly shares my concern regarding a disconcerting preoccupation with narrative coherence and continuity. She asserts, “If narrative offers an intimate relation to lived experience, the dominant formal feature that connects the two is not narrative cohesion but narrative drama. We follow a narrative suspensefully, always reminded of

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<sup>26</sup> My perspective is strongly influenced by Estroff’s scholarship, especially her theory of “role engulfment,” both on its own terms and as it relates to and extends Talcott Parsons’ theory of the “sick role.” See: Estroff (1993). In my essay “‘Normals, Crazies, Insiders, and Outsiders’: The Relevance of Sue Estroff’s Medical Anthropology to Disability Studies,” I note, “According to Estroff, there are numerous ways that people labeled ‘mentally ill’ strategically utilize the idea of their ‘deviant identities’ to their advantage, and they may embrace such identities as meaningful and complex, rather than just imagining these identities as wholly problematic or as merely disruptive and difficult. Estroff asserts that ‘craziness’ may be a choice for some and can become an ongoing performative identity. She explains there are ‘rules for making it crazy,’ particularly if one is compelled to seek what she calls ‘career options’ as a way of negotiating life within the realms of mainstream clinical psychiatry, and within a larger society that punishes people with stigmatic consequences for doing what they are in some ways set up to do ... Estroff points out that engaging with ‘craziness’ as a disabled ‘identity’ or ‘role’ is often ‘the means by which [mental health clients] ‘make it’ or survive’ in a fraught system and beyond (*Making it Crazy*, 38) ... Attempting to use a stigmatized identity to one’s advantage and finding other ways to strategically survive in a society that stigmatizes those labeled ‘mentally ill’ are complicated choices, and there may be serious ‘costs’ to those who accept or who negotiate stigmatizing labels in order to claim financial benefits. However, these choices can be some among many ways of managing within an unsettling society whose hardy and ubiquitous mental health industry aims to ‘serve’ but often simultaneously harms individuals who are labeled ‘mentally ill’ by ‘experts’ in that industry” (79-80).

the fragility of events, for things might have turned out differently” (Garro and Mattingly [2000], 268-9). Echoing Mattingly, and Victor Turner, I believe it is fruitful to think about how cinematic and autobiographical discourses – as “narrative dramas” and “social dramas” – “suspensefully” influence and reflect societal perceptions and definitions of narrative coherence and incoherence, as they are represented in the life stories of “mentally ill” women, and the sometimes problematic and sometimes effective translations and transmutations of these stories on-screen.

Complex, non-transhistorical, and culturally specific semiotic and material processes can be said to engineer textual (im)perceptibility, rendering and orchestrating meanings that are receptively (un)intelligible and (in)tangible to varying audience members depending upon their subject position, time, place, and so on. While I mostly adhere to this understanding of the non-transhistorical in my own thinking and scholarship, I am also interested in the ways in which the primary texts that I am examining are at once utterly artifactual and temporally alinear. These texts are simultaneously unique products of their own time, and defiant of temporal linearity, in their frequent ability to summon perceptual discontinuities and continuities and in the ways that myriad audience members are often able to comprehend them outside of the context of the texts’ nascent times.

In addition to the fact that some audience members can proficiently read texts “outside” of the texts’ original temporal contexts, it is important to note that individual agents in an audience receive, consume, and glean their own textual meanings which,

however discursively produced they also may be, can be experienced and described as “personal” and special.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the stories that unfold in films and written autobiographical texts may also be described as palimpsests.<sup>28</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1973) suggests that the worlds of art and language are rife with palimpsests, sources of meaning and interpretation that may have been written upon repeatedly, but within whose realms one might find residual clues of cultural significance and value.<sup>29</sup> In what might be called a distinctly “liminal” elaboration of a novelist’s prowess to describe difficult and complicated topics artfully (in this case, the desire to kill), Merleau-Ponty remarks, “The desire to kill is nowhere *in* the words [of a novel]. It is between them, in the hollows of space, time, and the

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<sup>27</sup> Issues of audience “reception” and “consumption” will be raised throughout the dissertation. Judith Butler (2004) notes, “The act of self-reporting and the act of self-observation takes place in relation to a certain audience, with a certain audience as the imagined recipient, before a certain audience for whom a verbal and visual picture of selfhood is being produced” (67).

<sup>28</sup> According to Childers and Hentzi’s *Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism* (1995), the concept of a palimpsest has often been used by “Anglo-American feminist critics” to “expose concealed, subversive meanings in women’s texts” (218). Diana Gittins (1998) considers palimpsests in terms of narratives that “overlap,” and how “a kind of palimpsest develops where one person’s silence is elucidated by another person’s narrative, and *that* person’s silence partially filled by someone else’s. There is never a complete picture” (51, original emphasis).

<sup>29</sup> I am aware that there are limitations and problems in invoking Merleau-Ponty’s work. While his phenomenology of perception implies that there is an “order” within the world as we perceive it (an “order” that I find somewhat reductive, if not disturbing), the relationships between perceptions, feelings, and actions as underscored by Merleau-Ponty are interesting to me. According to Merleau-Ponty, sensory processes, the senses themselves, and emotions are always influenced by our surroundings. His brand of phenomenology describes the ways that the world in which we live contours our lives. This perspective can be interpreted as a kind of early cultural constructionism, but Merleau-Ponty’s somewhat interactionist model does not go far enough in describing how society “shapes” our thoughts and actions, and leaves questions of subjectivity and agency deeply undertheorized. Yet, his stance on what can be called “embodied ontology” is intriguing. He may be justifiably accused of being insufficiently materialist, but his theories are not disembodied, as he joins the body with consciousness, and refuses the “mind/body” binary (or dualism) that is so problematic for any discussion of “mental illness.” For these reasons, among others, I find his work useful.

significations they delimit, the way movement in the film is between the immobile images that follow one another, or the way the letters in some advertisements are made less by the few black lines than the white pages they vaguely indicate - blank, but full of meaning, vibrating with lines of force, as dense as marble . . ." (88-89, original emphasis).

In the translator's introduction to Merleau-Ponty's *The Prose of the World*, John O'Neill remarks, "Phenomenology is remarkable for its introductions not only of itself but also of the world to which it returns us" (xxvi). Here, the idea of "return" implies an enactment of embodiment which may promote and/or deter alienation. The "vibrating" stories that dwell and change within cultural artifacts, including films and written autobiographical texts, are both "dense as marble" and deeply permeable, open for interpretation in terms of their meaning and perceptual relevance, and their promise to further or dissuade alienation.

I want to extend Merleau-Ponty's discussions of the novel, "classical" art, aesthetics, and language to a consideration of film representations and written first-person stories. Interconnecting and at times taking issue with the outlooks I have adapted from the theorists whose works I have discussed herein helps me negotiate the frequent preoccupation with narrative coherence and personal cohesion and discuss the potency of non-linearity (or sometimes-linearity) in images and stories that often contain stigmatizing and other kinds of tropes about "mental illness," tropes that have been repeatedly uttered, drawn, depicted, felt, and written upon in various modifications

throughout the twentieth century and into the present century. This theoretical and methodological experiment may also illuminate some of the reasons why this cultural recycling (of tropes) has occurred and for what purposes, and, when fissures in these patterns have occurred, why and how these tendencies toward tropological repetition have been altered or disrupted.

In “The Burden of Coherence,” Jan Baetens (2000) remarks, “. . . reading is not the progressive elimination of the text’s incoherencies. It is on the contrary the creation of new incoherencies, of new rests, the production of which is the motor of interpretation. The reading process progresses spirally, not one way as the emptying of the class of incoherencies and the filling up of the class of coherent units. The interest of art and literature, with respect to coherence, is then to make us sensitive to this process and to its stimulating and unescapable violence” (n. pag.). In this dissertation, I aim to describe stories and representations and the societal messages they carry, forward, deny, and refuse as mosaic narrative peregrinations, rather than as merely “coherent” or “incoherent” narratives.

## CHAPTER 2

### “You Freud, Me Jane”<sup>1</sup>: From Melodrama to *Marnie* (1942-1964)

#### Chapter Overview

This chapter begins with a discussion of texts that were created during the 1940s, at the height of World War II and immediately after the war – and at the height of the melodramatic and largely pro-psychoanalytic film era – and culminates with a discussion of material created in the mid-1960s, a time during which the American antipsychiatry movement and other social justice movements were building increased momentum.

According to Gabbard and Gabbard’s *Psychiatry and the Cinema* (1999), the 1940s and 1950s witnessed the promulgation of the “social problem” film. 1962 is especially significant because it is considered by the Gabbards to be the end of the “golden age” of positive and frequently unproblematized psychiatric representations in mainstream American cinema, and hence is a demarcation for a significant paradigm shift in representations of “mental illness.” The mid-1960s are important as a temporal delimiter, and may be assessed as liminal<sup>2</sup> because they articulate the changes that took place after the end of the “golden age” and before the major influences of the social justice movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. An extended discussion of this liminal time period, and of the antipsychiatry movement in particular, will be presented in chapter 4.

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<sup>1</sup> This quote is borrowed from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Marnie* (1964). Marnie (Tippi Hedren) facetiously says this to Mark (Sean Connery) during one of the many scenes in which he is “analyzing” her and (he thinks) attempting to uncover what he perceives to be “the origin” of her non-normative behaviors.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Victor Turner and Barbara Babcock, I have an abiding investment in the power of “liminality.”

This chapter is divided into several sections. I begin by describing the historical privileging of psychoanalysis – and of psychoanalytic readings of melodrama in particular – in conversations about and studies of female identity formation, feminist politics, and representations of women, especially in the fields of feminist autobiography and media studies. Then, I present three “takes,” a series of comparative analyses and close readings of a selection of texts. I begin by dovetailing from the introduction into a discussion of the classic film *Now, Voyager* (1942), and some of the roles of melodrama today. The second “take” is a discussion of Mary Jane Ward’s autobiographical novel *The Snake Pit* (1946) and its 1948 film adaptation. The chapter concludes with comments on Alfred Hitchcock’s *Marnie* (1964), including a close reading of Hitchcock’s compelling theatrical trailer.

### **Introduction: Feminist Psychoanalytic Critique and Melodrama**

I elect to “modestly enter”<sup>3</sup> a longstanding, processual conversation about melodrama’s roles and relevance in the worlds of feminist autobiography and media studies. Peter Brooks’s seminal study on dramatic and literary melodrama as “the mode of excess” (1976/1995) and Doane’s early critical work on cinematic melodrama as “women’s film,” especially the chapters “Clinical Eyes” and “Pathos and the Maternal” in *The Desire to Desire* (1987), inform my understanding of melodrama’s historical contexts. Many readers and collections have emerged about the centrality of melodrama to feminist media theory. Among these, Christine Gledhill’s *Home is Where the Heart Is* (1987/1992) and Marcia Landy’s *Imitations of Life* (1991/1995) have been particularly instructive to me as a film scholar because of the broad range of materials included in these edited volumes.

The psychoanalytic approaches to reading melodramas and other kinds of “women’s films” are varied. Many scholars have pointed out the resonances that exist between psychoanalysis as a private practice of intimate unfolding and film as an apparatus for conveying social beliefs and meaning, and between the origins of psychoanalytic theories and film theories, more broadly construed. In his essay on the “parallel” historical lives between cinema and psychoanalysis, Stephen Heath (1999) remarks,

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<sup>3</sup> Susan White encouraged me to take this approach after I told her of my feeling intimidated about writing about the often cited and frequently analyzed classic *Now, Voyager* – and about my entering scholarly discussions of melodrama more generally.

The reduction of psychoanalysis to a platitude of representation that was effectively part of the history of the dominant narrative cinema went along with a similar reduction of cinema by psychoanalysis, this then informing the latter's reactions of dislike and distrust on that basis . . . [T]he shift to a different consideration of cinema via the film-studies "cinema and psychoanalysis" emphasis changes nothing of this unless that consideration involve[s] cinema in its heterogeneity to as well as in its availability for the analytic representations made. Where is cinema being seen from and what is the desire that is assured in seeing it from there and what stands out against that seeing, pushing to the real of such a vision, the vision that seeks to maintain that seeing? (49).

Reading this, I wonder what Freud might have felt if he had been able to live an unrealistically long life so he could have seen how film theory and autobiography studies have been powerfully influenced by his work and Lacan's. For decades now, psychoanalysis has provided an efficacious framework for examining how presumably "intrapsychic" (or personal) and social phenomena are utilized by film creators and literary writers for ideological and critical purposes, how these phenomena interact within cinematic and literary representations (whether intended on the part of the producer/creator/writer, or not), how these representations are psychically and socially received and digested by consumers, and how all of the above influence society-at-large.<sup>4</sup>

In her extensive discussion of the mimetic relationships between American literature and psychoanalysis during World War II, Erin Redfern (2003) "identifies and explores the influence of a formative moment in American psychiatry and contemporary

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<sup>4</sup> As part of his dissertation project, Christopher Amirault (1996) "describes the often fraught yet resonant relationship between psychiatry and cinema and argues that the collaboration presented a new type of psychiatric patient. Mental illness films from the 1940s indicate that Hollywood and the psychiatric profession established a compromise between the demands of classical cinematic narrative and psychiatric discourse by encouraging viewer identifications with the patient via an enticing cinematic narrative" (dissertation abstract).

narrative,” and she “contend[s] not only that these developing fields were mutually constitutive, but that their textual productions worked in tandem to delineate a tenacious and culturally pervasive account of inner psychological processes” (iii). She claims that there are “psychologized, narrativized, and quintessentially American assumptions about ‘pathological personality’” that arise during this time period, and in her critique she pays special attention to what she refers to as the “twinned ‘diseases’ of alcoholism and homosexuality” (Ibid.). Clearly, she takes issue with the potent deployment of the term “disease” (as evidenced by her usage of quotation marks).

Redfern remarks that many of the “assumptions” about psychological “disease” that emerged during the 1940s still hold sway (iv). She says that these assumptions “continue to enjoy an ideological currency in both our personal and fictional narratives today” (Ibid.). Like Redfern, I wonder how the “psychological encoding” that takes place in literary texts “become[s] so legible, [and is] such [an] effective shorthand for so many readers? When and by what means did such a code come to be culturally dominant, applied to people, cultures, and nations as well as fictional characters?” (Redfern 3). In addition to examining fictional literature in these ways, Redfern’s questions might be applied to the analysis of autobiographical and cinematic texts.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Redfern begins her literature-centered study with a close reading of John Huston’s film *Let There Be Light* (1946), because, she says, it “stands out as the perfect example with which to ground my subsequent reading of literary narrative and American psychiatry in the 1940s” (14). She calls the documentary (originally titled *The Returning Psychoneurotics*) about traumatized war veterans returning home a “celluloid narrative” that “does much of the same work as the novels I go on to analyze in greater detail” (15). Redfern says that her analysis of Huston’s film “illustrates the significance not only of the cultural phenomenon of ‘actual’ psychoanalytic psychiatry but of its manifold and related representations,” representations that, she notes, are “highly mediated” (Ibid.). Redfern also discusses *Let There Be Light* in the context of the “documentary-like, instructive prose” in the opening of Hitchcock’s *Spellbound*, and draws other interesting comparisons between the two films (19).

Redfern highlights what she sees as the “merging of psychoanalytic, psychiatric, and medical models” that occurred in the United States by the end of World War II (29). She notes that this merging was “[d]issemina[ted] in directions as diverse as national policy, popular childrearing texts, and newspaper and magazine articles, [and] it reverberated through mainstream American culture” (Ibid.). Redfern’s stance can be linked with my view that Ricoeur’s idea of emplotment variously interacts with voicedness and narrativity within written and cinematic works, and with Mattingly’s (1994) “therapeutic” adaptation of Ricoeur’s idea of emplotment.

Redfern is specifically concerned with what she refers to as the “psychologization of literary form and content” and “the refracted literariness of psychiatric theories” (5). Feminist critics continue to debate the ethical and political implications of appropriating psychoanalysis for “pushing the real” of cinematic, literary, and other kinds of interpretive “vision.” Jacqueline Rose’s introduction to *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (1986/1989) summarizes the history of the debate, provides a context for the usage of psychoanalysis outside of its “primary institutions and therapeutic domain,” and advocates for the utility of feminists adopting the concept “unconscious.” Along with her feminist allies, Rose wonders how female critics, filmmakers, and viewers might imagine themselves “within the terms and discourse largely of two men” (2).

Elizabeth Cowie (1997) provides a slightly different version of the history of feminist psychoanalytic film criticism. She confronts the idea that film is merely “imaginary,” and argues for a lively discussion among feminists regarding film’s

structural and material effects upon consumers.<sup>6</sup> Echoing Doane's work in *Femmes Fatales* (1991), Cowie relies upon a concept of "masquerade" to describe the centrality of female sexuality to psychoanalytic theory, and, by proxy, to psychoanalytic film theory. In her introduction to Lacan's *Feminine Sexuality*, Juliet Mitchell (1985) claims that when Freud famously asked what a woman is, what he meant to be asking was "how she comes into being" (4-5). The "return to Freud" associated with Lacan firmly grounds Freud's theory of subjectivity as dependent upon female sexuality. In Jacqueline Rose's introduction to *Feminine Sexuality* (1985), she asserts that psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity and femininity must be taken together (28).

According to Rose and Mitchell's dual introductions to *Feminine Sexuality*, the "great debates" around psychoanalysis during the 1920s and 1930s backgrounded but could not utterly erase Freud's penultimate claim that there is no absolute definition of "feminine" or "masculine." Freud's stance regarding gender – offered in a sometimes confusing and even contradictory fashion over the course of his writing career – was famously recuperated and taken up by Lacan, for whom psychoanalysis was a method that "gives an account of how [definitions of gender are] produced" rather than a set of claims about essentialized gender identities (Rose, Introduction to Lacan 57). Many

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<sup>6</sup> Simi Linton's (1998) disability studies scholarship is committed to a similar project in her (I think) Barthesian enunciation of the multiplicity of textual meanings (see, for example, Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* [1972/1993], among his other works). The emotive-corporeal and political impacts of representations of the disabled are likewise underlined by disability studies scholars Mitchell and Snyder (1997/2000, 2000), among others. It is important to note that, in my opinion, despite the excellent critiques of ableism they seek to promote, some practitioners within the emerging field of disability studies do not go as far as I would like them to in their commentaries on representations. I for one wish that more disability studies scholars paid more attention to the economics behind representations.

Lacanian feminist film theorists understandably focus on Lacan's obsession with the dual centrality of the phallus and the castration complex, and they also typically question the way a subject is said to realize her/his subjectivity through symbolic linguistic means, rather than highlighting Freud's and Lacan's at times paradoxical anti-essentialisms vis-à-vis gender.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>For an excellent poststructuralist accounting of the discursivity of gender as performative, and the simultaneous refusal to privilege psychic or biologicistic understandings of gender at the expense of material and social understandings of gender, see Judith Butler's critical responses to feminist psychoanalytic theories – and to psychoanalytic thinking more broadly – in *Gender Trouble* (1999) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993).

**Take One: On Needing *Now*, *Voyager*, and Melodrama Today**

“By continuing to talk and write about these films, we keep them alive.”

– Susan M. White, private conversation with author

Linking psychoanalytic critique with melodrama, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (1991/1995) describes melodrama as a form that is both tragic and bourgeois, in which “hysteria” and other kinds of emotional excess are the means for both reifying and critiquing gendered class structures within capitalism. Like other scholars who write about melodrama, Nowell-Smith emphasizes that the genre operates through the conventions of realism. Linda Williams’s (1987/1992) reading of *Stella Dallas* (1937) underscores the way class as a trope guides melodramatic narrative, making it possible, for example, for a social mother to be a “better” mother than a biological mother (this “improvement,” however, is not without its conflicts for the characters portrayed). Maria LaPlace’s (1987/1992) study of *Now, Voyager* highlights the transformation undergone by Charlotte Vale as she separates from her toxic mothering history and establishes her own identity within capitalism, with the necessary aid of psychotherapy. In Williams and LaPlace’s readings, protagonists Stella Dallas and Charlotte Vale both suffer greatly: in *Stella Dallas*, a mother is seen “selfishly” (and, some critics argue, selflessly) to sacrifice her daughter to improve the child’s class positionality; in *Now, Voyager*, a daughter can socially mother an unrequited love’s child but is forbidden from enjoying the pleasure of that love’s sexual company.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>E. Ann Kaplan (1990a) compares *Now, Voyager* and *Marnie* “in order to explore the multiple determinations at work on well-worn Hollywood representations of mother-daughter relations” (20-21).

*Now, Voyager* (1942), *Cat People* (1942), *Dark Waters* (1944), *Spellbound* (1945), *The Dark Mirror* (1946), *The Locket* (1946), *Possessed* (1947), *The Snake Pit* (1948), *The Cobweb* (1955), *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957), *Suddenly*, *Last Summer* (1959), and Hitchcock's *Marnie* (1964), are examples of what Doane (1987) calls medical discourse films. Representations of psychiatry in cinema must be historically situated, and although all of the films listed here can be categorized as medical discourse films, Doane's analysis is generally limited to films of the 1940s (a notable exception is her discussion of *Stella Dallas*).<sup>9</sup> In particular, Doane uses *Cat People* as a case study for analyzing the ways cinematic images both dramatize and show the "limits of" psychoanalysis (49). Continuing where Doane leaves off, Janet Walker (1993) and David Rodowick (1991/1995) describe the relationship between madness and ideology in post-World War II films. Deborah Linderman (1990) expands Doane's reading of *Cat People* by using a Kristevan lens to address "the cultural imperatives of exclusions" evidenced in psychoanalytic cinema (83).

Doane shows how the doctor, psychotherapeutic practitioner, or the character who assumes one of these kinds of expert helpmate roles, is the "pivot" or link between visibility and invisibility in medical discourse films. The male doctor is like a detective who reads the symptoms on a woman's body, thereby gaining special and expert access

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She is "interested in the ideological constraints within which the film narratives function – what mother-daughter representations are repressed, absent, as much as which ones are there – and [accounts] for the repressions via Kristeva's theories of the mother as the culturally necessary 'abject' or phobic object" (21).

<sup>9</sup> If Doane's arguments about medical discourse films are extended beyond World War II and the Cold War period, it could be argued that the majority of the films that I analyze as primary texts throughout this dissertation might be categorized as medical discourse films.

to her story, identity, and inner truths. He makes visible for himself and for the film audience what typically lies hidden and private within the woman.<sup>10</sup> While the assumed goal of this task is to heal the female patient, the doctor simultaneously benefits by gaining greater gendered power, usually by controlling the woman and by elevating his male ego. Below I will discuss how in *Marnie* Mark Rutland (Sean Connery) performs the function of a psychotherapist for Marnie (Tippi Hedren), whether she likes it or not.

However, gender is not merely stereotyped or over-simplified in these films. Although gender roles at first seem inverted in Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), since the male (Gregory Peck) is the "patient," Doane claims that the female doctor, Dr. Constance Peterson (Ingrid Bergman) is constituted as an analysand since she is a "frigid intellectual woman" (46). *Cat People* complicates gender roles in the ways it accentuates psychotherapeutic limitations: by the film's end, viewers are given the message that male analysis cannot always overcome the allegedly shattering (and even in some cases feared-to-be-lethal) prowess of female sexuality and fecundity.

As a cinematic depiction of the complex relationships between female patients and male doctors, and for numerous other reasons, *Now, Voyager* continues to sustain public interest and is the subject of ongoing scholarly fascination.<sup>11</sup> As Stanley Cavell

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<sup>10</sup> Kaja Silverman (1988) makes similar assertions when she notes that "'talking cure' films also deprivilege the female psyche by denying to woman any possibility of arriving at self-knowledge except through the intervening agency of a doctor or analyst" (65). She uses *The Snake Pit* and *Marnie* among her examples to make this case. Earlier in her text, she notes that "authoritative speech . . . is an implied attribute of the doctor in Irving Rapper's *Now, Voyager* (1942), to whom the female protagonist confesses everything without quite knowing why" (54).

<sup>11</sup> In terms of the myriad kinds of creative responses to and obsessions with the film, Remy Holzer's (1999) poem "Current 'Now, Voyager' Fantasy" is an interesting addition to the mix.

(2004) notes, “*Now, Voyager* is a central document to consider in an examination of the recurrent figure of the psychoanalyst in the history of cinema” (236). I have discovered that it is many scholars’ “favorite movie,” and it is one of my favorites, too. While watching *The Snake Pit* is an admittedly infuriating enterprise, *Now, Voyager* seems in contrast an almost guilty pleasure. Long before I read Patricia White’s (1999) intriguing “queer” analysis of the film, I was titillated by Betty Davis’s complexity<sup>12</sup> in an often disturbingly misogynist, classist, and pro-psychiatric cinematic landscape. On these grounds alone (its portrayals of sexism and classism, its largely uncritical fashioning of a kind and powerful therapeutic presence), I really should not like *Now, Voyager*, but I sure do.

Perhaps (or at least I hope that) it is more than an instance of merely feeling a “countertransference” or some kind of “projective identification,” for me, like so many others I know, to sappily say that I “love” Bette Davis as Charlotte Vale in *Now, Voyager*. I love her looks (both “before” and “after” her transformations), her snappy attitude, and her refusal to kowtow to her dominating and vitriolic mother. I like the way she looks at Jerry (Paul Heinreid) and each time I watch the film I somehow still wish that they could be together, since that is what they seem to want (at least partly), but the realization of that fantasy scenario, of course, is not what would forward the melodramatic plot.

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<sup>12</sup> As David Robinson pointed out when providing feedback on an earlier draft of this chapter, *Now, Voyager* “has long been a gay male favorite, both celebrated and critiqued via camp appreciation.”

I am fascinated by the ways Charlotte openly flirts with Dr. Jaquith (Claude Rains), and how he is not, at least for me as a repeated viewer, just a compassionate and obnoxious doctor who pulls all her patient-marionette strings, as many feminist analyses might have one believe. I have mixed feelings - but mostly feel amused - when I see Charlotte and Dr. Jaquith eat fleshy hot dogs together on the floor by the fireplace in her disgustingly wealthy home in the aftermath of her mean mother's demise, as she decides with him to help financially sponsor the asylum to which she feels she owes her sanity. Watching Charlotte eat ice cream with Jerry's daughter Tina (Janis Wilson) is more appealing and moving to me than watching Tina, under Charlotte's care, become (I think) grossly feminized in ways that echo Charlotte's own "necessary" feminization and practiced heteronormativity (necessary because of the film's time period).<sup>13</sup>

Most of all, I respect how Charlotte is an agent in her own life, and while it is true that her agency is largely predicated upon her enormous class privilege (which is an anathema to me, personally), and her problematic complicity with a temporally-specific psychiatric status quo, her refusal to be emplotted without her own explicit consent makes her voice an especially strong and clear facet in an otherwise fraught narrative. Stanley Cavell (1996) points out that "the legitimacy of the social order in which [Charlotte] is to participate is determined (to the extent to which it can be determined) by her consent, by whether she, in her state of freedom, finds that she wants the balance of renunciation and security the present constitution of society affords her" (147). As

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<sup>13</sup> In his feedback on an earlier draft of this chapter, David Robinson commented to me that "a camp response to such elements allows for both celebration and critique."

Jeanne Thomas Allen (1984) notes, Davis's portrayal in *Now, Voyager* "offers something rare and vital in American mass culture: the story of a woman's struggle to gain initiation into adulthood and a relative measure of independence" (9). Allen refers to the film as an example of "women's initiation-ritual fiction" (10). In these ways, Charlotte Vale as portrayed by Bette Davis could be said to resemble Davis as a Hollywood "character" in her off-screen life, known during the "prime" of her career and since (and not always positively, to say the least) for her fierce independence and assertiveness, at least "to the extent" that these modes of self-expression could be rendered in the "constitution of society" in which she lived.<sup>14</sup>

Melodramas like *Now, Voyager* continue to have relevance today for reasons that include and go beyond the very important function of depicting female dependence and independence, however circumscribed that independence may sometimes be. Recent melodramatic works, including Todd Haynes's *Safe* (1995) and *Far from Heaven* (2002), and Sam Mendes's *American Beauty* (1999), beg the question, "why these movies, now?"<sup>15</sup> Both major female characters in *American Beauty* are depicted as having serious communicative "problems" that occur on opposite sides of an extremified,

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<sup>14</sup> LaPlace (1987/1992) convincingly argues that Bette Davis played a crucial role in the film's marketing to women as beauty product consumers and as members of the private sphere. In highlighting *Now, Voyager*'s complicated relationship to capitalism, LaPlace focuses on Davis's important function as part of a "star-system" that is extradiegetically recognizable to female viewers who might identify with Davis's powerful off-screen reputation. In his feedback on this chapter, David Robinson pointed out that these extradiegetic elements "are integral to gay male appreciation of the film."

<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to Abby Clouse for asking me this question during our discussion of *Sylvia* (2003), to Lane Van Ham for talking with me about Todd Haynes's films in relation to my scholarship, and to Kathleen Powers for our screening of and subsequent conversations about *American Beauty*. Kathleen and I have also discussed the role of class politics and the depictions of "suburbia" in these films, subjects that surely merit further attention.

gendered emotional spectrum (Carolyn Burnham [Annette Bening] is hyper-expressive and Barbara Fitts [Allison Janney] is nearly catatonic), and Carol White (Julianne Moore) in *Safe* resembles a stereotyped-as-hysterical post-World War II housewife. *American Beauty* tackles the sensitive subject of “closeted” homosexuality, the dangers of internalized homophobia, and the different dangers that may manifest when that internalization is externalized. *Far from Heaven* takes place in the past, and its attention to issues of racism, forbidden sexuality, and homophobia in a post-World War II “anytown, U.S.A.” type of scenario utilize the past as a seemingly safe distancing device in order to indict the troubling continuance of racism and homophobia today.

Perhaps these films’ directors intend in some ways to use subtle yet overt techniques to critique our current political leaders, which some progressive critics have compared to leaders during the McCarthy era, a time when many Hollywood melodramas were originally created. In addition to a kind of directorial anger that I perceive in these “new” melodramas, these films, and their continued popularity in the land of video rentals, also index a kind of eerie nostalgia for the McCarthy period (although hopefully not for its disturbing domestic trappings and instances of violence), especially in the wake of an infusion of “heroism” and other post-9/11 cultural tropes that, I think, have curiously joined with the standard tropes and conventions of “original” 1940s and 1950s melodrama. The new melodramas are therefore simultaneously negative about and romanticizing of the American past, while they creatively comment on the materiality of the present American political climate. Like older melodramas, these films ask viewers

to tackle difficult but crucial questions about disability, sexuality, race, gender, and class in our society.

**Take Two: *The Snake Pit* from Page to Screen**

“My analyst told me  
That I was right out of my head  
But I said dear doctor  
I think that it’s you instead  
Because I have got a thing  
That’s unique and new  
To prove it I’ll have  
The last laugh on you  
'cause instead of one head  
I got two  
And you know that two heads are better than one.”  
– from “Twisted”<sup>16</sup>

Mary Jane Ward’s *The Snake Pit* (1946) is among the most famous narratives of women’s “mental illness” in the mid-twentieth century. As “second wave” feminist literary and autobiography scholars began to question categories and taxonomies, Ward’s study of institutionalization, like Sylvia Plath’s later work *The Bell Jar* (published in 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas), became known as an “autobiographical novel,” and to this day the text challenges the often facile distinctions between memoir and fiction. The same can be said of Joanne Greenberg’s autobiographical novel *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (published in 1964 under the pseudonym Hannah Green). Marta Caminero-Santangelo (1998) remarks,

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<sup>16</sup> The authorship of the popular jazz standard “Twisted” is often incorrectly attributed to Joni Mitchell, as it appears on her critically acclaimed *Court and Spark* (Asylum 1974). However, the music is more correctly attributed to saxophonist and “tenor man” Wardell Gray (1921-1955), and was probably composed during the late 1940s. Jon Hendricks (of the jazz trio Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross) wrote the well-known “vocalese” jazz lyrics originally made famous during the 1950s by Annie Ross (as her “signature” song) and later made famous again by Joni Mitchell. Woody Allen uses “Twisted” with biting irony during the opening credits sequence of his self-reflexive and semi-psychoanalytic treatise *Deconstructing Harry* (1997). Special thanks to Jazz Journalists Association member Howard Mandel for confirming my ideas about Gray (to the best of Mandel’s knowledge).

It is possible . . . that “fictional” texts [like these] . . . grant the authors a greater distance from their mad protagonists. After all, the distinguishing feature of autobiography is arguably not, as has been traditionally asserted, that it is more “accurate” in terms of some externally verifiable set of “facts”—a position that has been increasingly discredited—but rather that it is an act of self-presentation, however “accurate” or “verifiable” its “facts,” in a way that a novel, even an “autobiographical” one, is not. Thus authors who choose to write narratives closely corresponding to their personal lives but to present those narratives as fiction have chosen not to present *themselves* as the former madwomen of their narratives. And the more “fictional” an account seems—the more it does not correspond to the verifiable “facts” of the author’s own life—the greater that distance becomes. Yet distancing maneuvers are hardly absent even from the more explicitly “autobiographical” narratives of madness (19, original emphasis).

While Caminero-Santangelo’s claim that “madwomen” can be said strategically to “distance” themselves from their lives by writing their stories in novelistic versus overtly autobiographical formats is a compelling point, I am more interested in her statement that she is not “concerned with whether the events depicted ‘actually happened’ to the authors,” since “[w]e can now take as a given that even the narrators of autobiographies are creatively constructed personas, the products of deliberate artistic choices” (20). Clearly identifying herself with a constructionist school of feminist autobiography scholarship, Caminero-Santangelo takes pains throughout the text to point out her commitment to questioning tropes in women’s narratives of “madness,” and she is understandably fixated upon the broader political project of reading the texts she selects in order to forward feminist critiques of “madness” that deliberately go beyond what she sees as the unhelpful and troubling “rebellion” tropes that are frequently employed by feminist critics.

Citing Leslie Fishbein's (1983) discussion of the film, Caminero-Santangelo points out that *The Snake Pit* was "converted" into a movie by the filmmakers because of its perceived potential to criticize overtly the problematic and often violent workings of American asylums at the time (21). She notes that "A reading of *The Snake Pit* confirms the novel's concern with asylum reform" (Ibid.) and adds that "Ward's novel, like [protagonist] Virginia's projected autobiography, is meant to be a critique of asylum conditions which will actually change public perceptions" (22). Caminero-Santangelo directly links the novel and the film with the later "popularization" of the antipsychiatry movement (Ibid.).

Curiously, in their introduction to *The Snake Pit* and five other "firsthand accounts" written by women that convey experiences that took place in their lives when in asylums between 1921 and 1945, Geller and Harris (1994) claim that

Unlike the women who wrote during the two previous periods, the six women whose accounts follow were concerned with their personal experiences of asylum care and not with broader issues of reform. They wrote of the many personal indignities they suffered at the hands of sadistic attendants and of the terror they felt when they received "hydro" and wet pack therapies in particular. Some also described the changing hospital milieu, which now emphasized predictable schedules, social and recreational therapies, and a greater emphasis on "talking cures" (263).

While I agree with the descriptions offered here of various "indignities" and the reference to important changes in psychotherapeutic discourse and practice in the early to mid-twentieth century, I strongly disagree with the claim that Ward and others from this time period (including Frances Farmer, whose memoir I will address in chapter 3) were *not*

“concerned . . . with broader issues of reform.” I also disagree with the false binary between “the personal” and “the political” that Geller and Harris’s statements unfortunately create.

Drawing connections between Ward’s text and related works, including Kate Millett’s *The Loony-Bin Trip* (1990), Caminero-Santangelo says, “we must listen attentively to the madwoman’s account for what it tells us about self and world. The personal *is* political, and its silencing by whatever means—including through theory and criticism which obscure the personal point of view—is a political act” (26, original emphasis). She goes on to say that “Women’s asylum accounts are centrally located within a feminist politics which attempt to rescue the hitherto unheard voice of the woman and restore it to view in the larger debates about mental health care. Yet, ironically, these voices have occasionally continued to be silenced by exactly those people with the greatest commitment to hearing them” (28).<sup>17</sup> In claiming that Ward was not interested in mental health reform, Geller and Harris, who surely have good intentions in their overall project, can also be said to be “silencing” Ward and others.

Susan Hubert (2002) notes that Ward’s *The Snake Pit* and Millett’s *The Loony-Bin Trip* “challenge psychiatric practice and even the very notion of mental illness” (26). Hubert argues,

The publication of fictionalized and pseudonymous accounts can be related to the emphasis on psychopathology over against exposés of psychiatric treatment. Writers who are intent on exposing the horrors of forced institutionalization do not need to hide their identity (although

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<sup>17</sup> In chapter 4, I will take issue with some of Caminero-Santangelo’s claims, and applaud others.

Mary Jane Ward did so in her semiautobiographical novel, *The Snake Pit*, which popularized the image of the mental hospital reflected in the book's title). Using their actual names gives credence to their accounts (as women who have experienced forced hospitalization); moreover, if they are trying to vindicate themselves through these accounts, it is imperative that their identity be known. On the other hand, writers who portray themselves as mentally ill, even if they have recovered, may feel the need to hide their identity. Anonymity is one way of avoiding the stigma of mental disease (77).

While I distinguish myself from Hubert in that I do not accept the ontological existence of “mental disease” as easily as she seems to (at least in this passage),<sup>18</sup> I find her overall argument here to be nuanced and persuasive.

Hubert points out that *The Snake Pit* “encourages readers to identify with Virginia Cunningham” (114). This is also true of the 1948 film adaptation. In her essay on “postwar Freudian figurations” of “mentally ill” women, E. Ann Kaplan (1990b) notes,

In between *Now, Voyager* and *Marnie* are the immediately post World War II films—*The Locket* (John Brahm, 1946), *Secret Beyond the Door* (Fritz Lang, 1948), *The Snake Pit* (Anatole Litvak, 1948)—where the evil mother has less prominence or where the stress is not so much on the mother's specific damage to the child's psyche. We can see these films, however, as marking the first impact of women's move into the work force during the war. The increased level of women's threat to returning veterans began to stimulate a deeper kind of reaction for which Freud's theories became a convenient conduit (129).

Virginia Cunningham, whose work as a writer is largely rejected and devalued at various points in the film, is institutionalized by her husband. Her husband's place of employment, like an inverted mirror of the devaluing of her own employability, becomes a point of confusion for her when she is being assessed for possible discharge during

“staff” (an official meeting with the psychiatric leadership of the asylum, depicted in the film as being akin to her testifying on her own behalf in a court of law, to prove the truth of her “sanity” and “recovery”). Virginia’s inability to sustain her work life (though not her own fault), in contrast to her inability to sustain her domestic life (in her seeming “refusal” to behave properly, and conform to gender norms as an obedient woman and wife), are, as Kaplan suggests, very much at the core of the film’s messages. Throughout the film, the narrative emplots Virginia as someone who is at once shameful, heroic, and victimized, as someone viewers should admire and yet feel sorry for, and as someone with whom women in particular might complicatedly identify.

Although it severely criticizes forced institutionalization, and takes issue with controversial subjects like shock treatment, *The Snake Pit* also praises the accomplishments of the “talking cure” and as such still fits securely within the “golden age” discourse that frames psychiatrists (if not always psychiatry) as good and healthy. Even the very disturbing depictions of ECT still redeem the usefulness of this kind of “treatment.” As Gabbard and Gabbard remark, “after exploiting the melodramatic aspects of electroshock, *The Snake Pit* goes on to endorse its positive effects: after a few sessions, the patient’s condition begins to improve, and soon she is able to reap the benefits of psychotherapeutic interventions” (27). Gabbard and Gabbard note that *The Snake Pit* “fits most neatly into the genre of postwar social problem films” (60), and that while the film “tries to present the dilemmas surrounding the treatment of mentally

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<sup>18</sup> As will become clearer in chapter 4, this is not the only way in which I distinguish my stance from Hubert’s.

disturbed patients [,] . . . true to the Hollywood pattern, [it] ultimately displaces them into melodrama” (Ibid.).

### **Take Three: Marnie Talks Back**

“Worry, why do I let myself worry?  
 Wonderin’, what in the world did I do?  
 Oh, crazy, for thinkin’ that my love could hold you.  
 I’m crazy for tryin’ and crazy for cryin’  
 And I’m crazy for lovin’ you.”

– Willie Nelson, from “Crazy” (popularized by Patsy Cline)

“It is the story of a girl, who doesn’t know who she is. She is a psychotic, a compulsive thief, and afraid of sex, and in the end she finds out why . . . The audience can’t bear the suspense of the person being discovered. ‘Hurry up! Quick! You’re going to be caught!’”

– Alfred Hitchcock, on *Marnie* and “rooting for the evildoer to succeed”<sup>19</sup>

Tony Moral’s recent endeavor, *Hitchcock and the Making of Marnie* (2002), is a notable and provocative entry into the film’s history and an intriguing examination of many of the film’s specific components. Moral defends *Marnie*’s (1964) promise as a theoretical text despite its being panned by the majority of critics shortly after its release.<sup>20</sup> His project of reclamation and redemption contains two chapters devoted to “Critical Reception” and “Artistic Interpretation,” and these discussions are especially instructive for readers wanting to learn more about responses to the film and its numerous influences. Moral convincingly argues that film directors Nagisa Oshima, Claude

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<sup>19</sup> This quotation appears in the concluding section of Peter Bogdanovich’s Museum of Modern Art Film Library volume, *The Cinema of Alfred Hitchcock* (1963), “in preparation” for *Marnie*’s theatrical release (46). Heartfelt thanks to Kathleen Powers for giving me this text.

<sup>20</sup> When I refer to *Marnie*’s “promise as a theoretical text,” I refer to the fact that despite being “panned,” it is a sophisticated piece of cinema that merits analysis, and has indeed garnered a lot of scholarly attention because it deserves that attention (and I think that this is Moral’s viewpoint, as well). I believe *Marnie* is useful for discussing many social issues of relevance in our society, and therein lies some of its “promise.” Thanks to Lane Van Ham for reading an earlier version of this essay, and for asking me to describe this stance in greater detail.

Chabrol, François Truffaut, Weiner Fassbinder, Martin Scorsese, Stanley Kubrick, and others were strongly affected by *Marnie*.

Moral addresses feminist reception of Hitchcock's work in general, and of *Marnie* in particular. For example, he cites Tania Modleski's (1988/1989) famous scholarship on *Rebecca* (1940) to suggest that Hitchcock's "work is characterized by a thorough going ambivalence about femininity, which can then account for the conflicting critical interpretations his films have generated and the woman's position within them" (173). He notes, "For Modleski, the strong fascination and identification with femininity revealed in Hitchcock's films subvert the claims to mastery and authority not only of the male characters but of Hitchcock himself" (Ibid.). Moral sets up an intriguing commentary that contrasts works by Laura Mulvey (1989), Sandy Flitterman (1978), and Raymond Bellour (1977).

Moral asserts, "With *Marnie*, Bellour extended Mulvey's notion of voyeurism to that of the film camera itself. In a detailed analysis of the film's opening sequences, he theorized how *Marnie* is inscribed in the film via Hitchcock's male surrogates . . . Critical to Bellour's reading was Hitchcock's early cameo appearance, which established the director as the 'enunciator' of *Marnie*'s story" (172).<sup>21</sup> Despite Moral's claim, it is not

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<sup>21</sup> In an interview with Janet Bergstrom (1979a), Bellour remarks, "The term 'enunciator' as I use it marks both the person who possesses the right of speech within the film, and the source (*instance*) toward which the series of representations is logically channelled back" (94, original emphasis). Kaja Silverman (1988) summarizes, "Bellour illustrates [his] account of Hitchcockian enunciation through *Marnie*, a film which begins with an overtly voyeuristic rear shot of the title character on a train platform, and which then proceeds in shots 2, 21, and 25 to align that image of woman with three quickly successive male looks—Strutt's, Rutland's, and Hitchcock's (in his guise as a character within the fiction)" (203). Later, Silverman refers to how Hitchcock as "[. . .] the filmmaker speaks [himself] as the point of absolute textual origin. Such is the case in *Marnie*, where Hitchcock not only makes his usual appearance on the image track, but turns to look boldly at the camera and the theater audience, as someone clearly in control of both" (213).

clear that Bellour's analysis of *Marnie* is in fact derivative (let alone an "extension") of Mulvey's work on Hitchcock.<sup>22</sup> In any case, I observe the (un)willing existence of the viewer-as-analyst, and I think that the viewer's complicated role, along with Hitchcock's role as "enunciator," is actually set up not as "early" as Hitchcock's cameo, but even earlier than that. As I will show below, these roles were invested with meaning before the film was even released, as they are presented in its theatrical trailer.

I was glad to discover that Moral attends (however briefly) to Lucretia Knapp's (1993) and Shameem Kabir's (1998) lesbian feminist and queer readings of *Marnie*. In different ways, Kabir and Knapp each locate in *Marnie* a place for lesbian desire and representation. According to their arguments, these desires and representations are manifest within the film as expressed by characters inside of *Marnie*'s world, and extradiegetically, in the gaze of female audience members who lustily watch Marnie in *Marnie*, and/or whose attention is primarily on the alliance between Marnie (Tippi Hedren) and Lil Mainwaring (Diane Baker), not on what happens between Marnie and Mark (Sean Connery).

One creative sensual approach is for a woman spectator to imagine herself as Mark in relation to Marnie. Kabir says that she identifies with Mark and is thus able to long for Marnie. However, Kabir also notes the fraught nature of her identification with

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<sup>22</sup> Janet Bergstrom (1979b) takes up the issue of whether or not Bellour indeed "extended" Mulvey's work, and notes that his work is (she thinks) "more complicated" than Mulvey's (57). She says, "But if Bellour's work has progressively elaborated ideas which Mulvey, who was writing from a different perspective, placed at the center of her argument, and if Bellour has extended them in the process of demonstrating how these structures of fascination work within specific films, the resulting picture of the classical cinema is even more totalistic and deterministic than Mulvey's. Bellour sees it as a logically consistent, complete and closed system" (Ibid.).

male characters in numerous films, including *Marnie*, because “No matter how delicately implied or thankfully left off screen, [the film’s] rapes confirmed that an assertion of masculinity can sometimes be an expression of aggression against the woman” (cited in Moral, 174).

Knapp focuses on what she perceives to be a resistant “queer voice” in *Marnie*, and, unlike some queer theorists, does not claim that the film is solely or *really* “lesbian” in its depiction of the relationship between Marnie and Lil. Listening for a “queer voice” suggests that the film is offered up to viewers for its queer interpretative potential. However, the perspective here is more than just “If only you listen, you can hear the queer voice in *Marnie*.” Rather, Knapp’s work in particular is a political response to the perceived restrictive tone of earlier feminist thinkers, including Laura Mulvey. Knapp is of the multiple readings school of film theory, meaning that she believes in the promise of multiple interpretations but does not claim that some readings prove the “truth” behind a film’s images. Instead, she highlights plausible queer reading approaches and interrogates the ways some readings are privileged over others. I join Patricia White (1999), Chris Straayer (1994), Andrea Weiss (1993), Knapp, Kabir, and other theorists who are politically invested in locating a queer gaze or look in popular cinema, but not on “forcing one” when none exists.<sup>23</sup> I too interpret *Marnie* to be rife with lesbian desire, images, and tropes, and acknowledge its potential as a vehicle for discussing lesbian representation and reception.

In the beginning of the theatrical trailer to *Marnie*, Alfred Hitchcock swoops down toward the audience on his directorial crane, then addresses his viewers directly, hands folded, as if preparing to have a cup of tea with us. He says: “*Marnie* is a very difficult picture to classify. It is not *Psycho*, nor do we have a horde of birds flapping about and pecking at people willy-nilly. We do have two very interesting human specimens: a man, and a woman. One might call *Marnie* a sex mystery, that is, if one used such words. But it is more than that. Perhaps the best way to tell you about the picture is to show you a few scenes . . .” Given what many have called the film’s subsequent commercial failure, his comments in hindsight seem both ironic and petitioning – he wants his fans, followers, and new viewers to see and financially contribute toward his latest cinematic endeavor, and, as was famously the case with his cameos in his own films and in interviews about his own work, he likewise seems ironic and self-reflexive as he talks with us about the film product. Despite or perhaps because of his attempt at solicitation, the trailer seems to acknowledge Hitchcock’s ambivalence about presenting his audience with a film that is impossible to fully enjoy, for as much as one might “enjoy” *Marnie*, as viewers we are also set up to feel bad or guilty for doing so.

Switching from the illusion of direct speech to a ghostly but intimate voiceover, Hitchcock gives viewers a sneak peek at the newest film, describing each of the two major characters in turn with scenes of them in action. Hitchcock calls Mark Rutland

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<sup>23</sup> When reading an earlier version of this essay, Susan White helped me realize that I had (unintentionally) made a pun about “force” in the context of discussing *Marnie*, a pun that is surely fraught given that sexual

(Sean Connery) “. . .a thoughtful man, dark and brooding,” and adds, importantly, that “He is, in a sense, a hunter.” In our first glimpse of Mark, he is depicted in medium shot, and he faces the audience – slick, suited, and confident – in his family’s Philadelphia mansion. A winding, fancy staircase is in the background. Immediately after the hunting comment, Marnie (Tippi Hedren) is shown sashaying down a flight of straight stairs in her mother’s house. Despite the obvious staircase theme parallels, the actual visual cut from the previous shot seems deliberately awkward, not seamless, and we see Marnie’s snazzy, sexy shoes first, then her long legs. It is almost as if we are about to be directed to look up her skirt.

As Marnie approaches the viewer’s gaze, and one anticipates seeing all of her soon, the master of suspense notes, “And this is what he is hunting: Marnie.” Is Hitchcock kidding? Yes and no. While Mark is shown in a medium to full shot from the start (we see his face, his head is clearly attached to his body, he is not depersonified), Marnie, the somehow hunted, is initially presented to us as an incomplete “specimen,” as she is compartmentalized into a series of sexualized body parts. Using staircases in both cases, and thus playing fast and dirty with explicit Freudianisms (as he often does), Hitchcock foreshadows the film’s themes of sexism, depth, and descent.

Marnie’s name is uttered after a pause as she turns on the bottom of the staircase. Her name is spoken at the exact moment that we see her face for the first time. Hitchcock continues to describe her in the scene shown “in her mother’s modest house,” and “wonders” – as he cognitively aligns with the viewer – “how two such different

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assault is a subtext throughout the film (hence, the less than delightful pun).

people could cross paths.” The film is also, then (or hopes or attempts to be), a gutsy commentary on the relationships between heterosexuality, gender dynamics, and class politics in the mid-twentieth century.

We learn that their paths’ crossing “certainly wasn’t Marnie’s idea,” as she was “going about her business like any normal girl.” Marnie’s allegedly “normal girl” status is noted as we see her robbing a business safe, and Hitchcock adds, ironically, that she is “happy, happy, happy” (“like any normal girl”), as Marnie looks over her shoulder, understandably nervous, carefully moving with tightly gloved hands. Is she hoping not to be caught, or to be caught and thereafter punished? Is she thrilled? We aren’t sure, but is she really “happy,” in any case? So far, Hitchcock seems to be very sympathetic to Marnie’s plight, and while she is coded as anything but “normal” from the start, she is in some ways simultaneously shown to be a woman in trouble “like any normal girl” who strives to be “happy” in a heterosexist and misogynist world.

Hitchcock goes on to describe how Mark and Marnie meet, and how Mark discovers that she is “a rather excitable type” who demonstrates “strange behavior.” We learn that Marnie’s troubles are “deep,” and that hers is a “problem which Mark must probe.” In the trailer and throughout the film, Hitchcock’s psychoanalyticisms are over-the-top and campy, and suggest that he is making fun of analysis and its associated discourses in popular culture while taking seriously the ways that both the practices of analysis and their terrains in daily life have the potential to both help and harm. Crucially, he makes explicit (both in the trailer and in the film) how women in particular

are affected by psychoanalytical frameworks, for good and for bad. Along these lines, Teresa de Lauretis (1984) notes that “*Marnie* could be interestingly remade as *Sigmund Freud’s Dora: A Case of Mistaken Identity*” (157).

Moreover, Hitchcock compels the viewer to acknowledge or question her own involvement with and roles in relation to psychoanalytic discourses and practices. He even goes a step further, and compels the viewer to become complicit with psychoanalytic practice of a special kind.<sup>24</sup> The film is a clever and masterful manipulation on many fronts, including as a praxical enactment of a popular psychoanalysis in its own right, for if we choose to see this film, as is true of much of Hitchcock’s work, we will as its viewers become the analysts and the characters will be our analysands. As we watch Mark’s analysis as he seeks to unfold Marnie’s mysterious past and current dilemmas, and in the ways as movie-goers we wonder what’s “going on” with Marnie, and wait to see what will transpire between Mark and Marnie (and/or between Lil and Marnie), we voyeuristically participate in Mark’s “treatment” of Marnie, even if we are on her side.

If as viewers we guiltily need the self-undermining ironic distancing presented by Hitchcock in the trailer, so much more grist for the analytic mill. Perhaps in the trailer we are set up by Hitchcock to be desperately in need of the irony he in turn provides us both in the trailer and in the film itself. It is as if Hitchcock is playing a kind of shell game with us, referencing a psychoanalytic obsession with sex when there is no sexual

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<sup>24</sup> Jodi Ramer’s analyses adopt a very different approach in response to the psychoanalytic and other questions posed by *Marnie*. See Ramer’s two recent essays in *Synoptique* (2004 and 2005).

excitation possible for the female heroine, in a film that uses the specter of rape as a constant referent.

When Hitchcock calls Marnie “a rather excitable type,” her “excitability” is contextualized in the trailer by the scene in Mark’s office during a big storm when Marnie first sees the color red in Mark’s presence, and is terrified both of the lightning and the color she perceives (which he does not see: “What colors?” he asks).<sup>25</sup> Hitchcock tells us (and shows us) how Mark kisses Marnie to “calm” her, and then he jokes (?) that Mark is “apply[ing] mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.” We are then reassured that the picture is not “all sex and no mystery.” Marnie, we are told, has left her past behind and wishes to forget it, and Mark’s advances are “all in the spirit of investigation.” If Hitchcock’s psychoanalytic commentaries (both serious and humorous) up to this point are not evidence enough of where he is headed with this film – and of where he wants us to follow him – he tells us in the trailer that he is about to show a scene as “proof” that the film “is a talking picture.” Some viewers may therefore wonder how the film will index “the talking cure” that is therapy, and the “proof” one seeks in recuperating traumatic events in order to hopefully move past them.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> E. Ann Kaplan (1990b) notes, “Rutland, a parttime zoologist, is attracted to Marnie precisely because she represents the wild animal in the jungle that always threatens to overcome society. (This analogy is made literal in the scene in Rutland’s office when the thunderstorm brings on one of Marnie’s hallucinations and transforms the place into a temporary ‘jungle.’)” (136).

<sup>26</sup> According to Michele Piso (1986), *Marnie* “reveals women’s pain but cannot heal it” (169). A similar argument about the relationship between texts and pain is made by Marta Caminero-Santangelo, but the majority of Caminero-Santangelo’s examples come from fiction and first-person narrative accounts written by women, not from fictional films (she mentions films sporadically throughout the text, but does not give them sustained attention). At least in my interpretation of her text, in her seeking to unhinge the madness-as-liberatory trope that she finds so pervasive in feminist theory, Caminero-Santangelo eventually claims

The “proof” scene in the trailer is as follows: In Mark’s car, Marnie angrily complains, “You don’t love me. I’m just something you’ve...caught. You think I’m some kind of animal you’ve trapped.” Mark replies, “That’s right, you are. And I’ve caught something really wild this time, haven’t I? I’ve tracked you and caught you and by God, I’m gonna keep you.” Hitchcock notes, “That should be quite enough. If you wish to hear more, you will have to buy a ticket.” It seems the preview is done, but it is not. To further whet our appetite, Hitchcock adds, “As for which one of them is the wild animal, there are times when I’m not sure.” This is spoken as Mark, in pajamas and robe, aggressively slams the door and threatens Marnie, who is depicted as distressed and frightened. Mark angrily tears off Marnie’s nightgown, as the specter of sexual predation and assault looms over the scene. Hitchcock says, “I don’t think that was necessary. Actually I think I should withhold comment, since I’m not certain I understand this scene. I shall leave the explanation to your own vivid imagination.” This caveat is added as Mark puts his robe around traumatized Marnie’s naked body and approaches her with softer advances. His wish to comfort her is at once audacious, caring, and misplaced.

Up until this point, Hitchcock largely seems to have been guiding the viewer to sympathize with Marnie, but he notes at this juncture that “Mark is a complex man, dark and forbidding,” who “can be kind and considerate.” We are told that Mark is also “troubled because he cannot seem to unravel the mystery of the girl called Marnie.” Here the trailer’s scene clips end, as Marnie powerfully gallops on her horse Forio toward a

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that through autobiographical “asylum” narratives, women ultimately find their own experiences of “madness” to be ensnaring and overwhelming, even if they also benefit from personal growth and insights

stone wall too high for her to easily or even plausibly jump. A large red blot animates the screen, accompanied by a subtle “boom” (Is this a reference to the red theme? Is she going to hit the wall and die, literally or metaphorically? Is this a symbol of her cathexis?) and then suspenseful, nerve-wracking music swells while the viewer is greeted with a series of questions regarding how to properly categorize the film.

The list of questions ends with a paradoxical categorical imperative that is both didactic and meant to sell the film product: “Is Alfred Hitchcock’s *Marnie*...a sex story...?...A mystery...?...A detective story...?...A romance...?...A story of a thief...?...A love story...?...Yes and more!” Thus, Hitchcock amusingly ends where he starts – “*Marnie* is a very difficult picture to classify.” The theme of classification strikingly summons an analogy with psychological classifications as offered and wielded by therapeutic professionals. Hitchcock’s *Marnie* suggests in a complicated way that categories are sometimes over-determined and often dangerous, that films (and people) can be more than one thing, and that context and power structures must be taken into consideration in all relational matters. In *Marnie*, Hitchcock uses heterosexuality to play fraught games with his viewers, to titillate while undermining us, and so perhaps his complex solicitations in the theatrical trailer for this wonderful and disturbing film

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in the context of suffering and telling their own stories about this suffering. As noted above, I will further discuss my concerns with her line of thinking – again, as I interpret her stance – in the fourth chapter.

suggest that maybe Marnie “really is” queer after all, and that is one reason why his solicitations are ineffective and even, at least in some ways, put forth in bad faith.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Special thanks to Susan White for helping me unpack these ideas (and for helping me flesh out the idea of Hitchcock’s “shell games,” in particular) by talking with me about an earlier draft of this essay.

## CHAPTER 3

### **“Frances Farmer Will Have Her Revenge on Seattle”<sup>1</sup>: Frances Discourse and the Many Lives of Frances Farmer**

#### **Introduction and Chapter Overview**

“In her false witness, we hope you’re still with us,  
to see if they float or drown.  
Our favorite patient, a display of patience,  
disease-covered Puget Sound.  
She’ll come back as fire, to burn all the liars,  
and leave a blanket of ash on the ground.”<sup>2</sup>

– Nirvana, from “Frances Farmer Will Have Her Revenge on Seattle”

In this chapter I focus on a renowned historical figure whose life and its representations have exerted ongoing influence in American popular culture. Stage and screen actress Frances Farmer, as a person (1913-1970) and as an icon, is represented in both primary textual genres and across all the time periods addressed in this dissertation. Frances Farmer, person and trope, therefore presents a unique opportunity for interdisciplinary engagement in the context of my project. Below, I discuss numerous kinds of texts and discourses revolving around Farmer. The materials I address about Farmer span from during her lifetime to the present.

As noted in my dissertation introduction, throughout the project, I adopt a combination of temporal and thematic elements to structure each chapter and the work as a whole. I consider Farmer’s strong posthumous “presence” during the 1970s and 1980s

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<sup>1</sup> Javier Santiago-Lucerna wrote an essay on “pan-capitalism and alternative rock” that also uses this title quote. The title quote is from the Nirvana song, written by Kurt Cobain. Cobain was from Seattle, and is said to have identified with Farmer’s plight. Thanks to Kathleen Powers for introducing me to this song and to some of its interpretations.

to be an intriguing metonym for this time period. In Chapter 4, I will explain how some cinematic representations of women's "mental illness" from the 1970s and 1980s point to what Gabbard and Gabbard (1999) describe as a "reversal" of previous antipsychiatric trends during the mid-1960s, after the end of the "golden age" of psychiatry in the cinema (137). As I will discuss, some of these 1970s and 1980s films depict a hoped-to-be-emancipated patient in the care of a gracious psychiatric practitioner or therapeutic presence, and these images therefore harken back to "golden age" types of representations.

However, Farmer's story as explored by the texts that were produced during the 1970s and 1980s may be read as being consistent with a still present antipsychiatric stance. As Foucault explains in *The Order of Things* (1971/1994), paradigms do not simply or utterly shift without residual effects. Instead, there are overlaps in representations across adjacent time periods, and paradigms usually do not just vanish without a trace. Referring to the Gabbards's work, Harvey Greenberg (2000) explains, "The Golden Age's sudden demise coincides with a decline in government-sponsored psychiatric research" (334). He says that "A few pictures emerged at the close of the Seventies and the beginning of the 1980s that slimly redressed the prevailing negative read of therapy" (Ibid.).

I understand Greenberg to be saying that despite the representational "reversal" that surely took place during the 1970s and 1980s, there were still "prevailing" negative cinematic portrayals of psychiatric treatment at the time, and, in contrast (as Greenberg

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<sup>2</sup> Cobain apparently meant to compare Farmer (and her "revenge") to Mt. Saint Helen's.

puts it), “glorified” and “heroic” images were presented to the public, as well (334). As Greenberg notes, the Gabbards also cite “anti-therapist cycles” from this time period (Ibid.). Greenberg mentions *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and *Frances*, which both “glorified outlaw protagonists” and “depicted psychiatrists as repressive lobotomizers” (Ibid.). This prevailing negative sentiment is why I believe it is acceptable to consider Frances Farmer’s cinematic and bibliographic representation during the 1970s and 1980s an intriguing metonym for the time period.

Using cinematographic language to metaphorize my project, chapters 1 and 5 can be described as long shots, chapters 2 and 4 can be read as medium shots, and this chapter is a close up. In my “close up,” I first engage with “Frances Discourse” by addressing Farmer’s autobiography, two biographies about her, and related works. This material is followed by a discussion of *Frances* (1982) and *Committed* (1984), very different cinematic accounts of Farmer’s life and her psychiatric institutionalization. I conclude the chapter by discussing Farmer’s posthumous legacy as depicted via various sources on the Internet.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I hope to compose an interdisciplinary book-length study of Frances Farmer in the future – this chapter is the beginning of that endeavor. Special thanks to Susan White for coming up with this idea, and for encouraging me to pursue this work at a preliminary stage within the dissertation project.

### Frances Discourse

“Those who sit in stupors, staring into nothingness, are perhaps remembering times long past when things were better for them . . . when their lives were not complicated or harmed. And those who thrash in violence are at war with the injustices that finally became too bitter to bear. Those who scream incoherent challenges at unseen enemies perhaps were too gentle to slash out and destroy their real and intimate foes. By the standards set by the majority, to be insane is to be different, and those who are uncontrollably different are ‘locked away in crazy houses,’ to exist through years of intolerable misery and perpetual nightmares. It is not possible for the conscious mind to remain unimpassioned when confronted with personal brutality, nor can the ego become so deadened that it does not flinch when mocked or degraded. It is not insanity to have mental demons or periods of dementia, but let these demons rise to the surface and run amok, let the nerves collapse, let the spirit be so wounded that it limps and falters, and a commitment results.”

– Frances Farmer, *Will There Really Be a Morning?* (49)

Frances Farmer’s story about her own life, together with the stories that have been written and the images that have been created about her, form a complex web of elements that comment upon the experiences and representations of Farmer and the thousands of less famous women with histories of psychiatric incarceration. Farmer’s memoir, published two years after her death (*Will There Really Be a Morning?* [1972]), prominently features her description of her lengthy and egregious psychiatric institutionalization. Her story has been depicted in three major films: *Frances* (1982), a critically acclaimed mainstream production; a 1983 television production based upon and named after her autobiography; and *Committed* (1984), an independent feminist film.

From 1958 to 1964, Farmer was the host of her own television series, *Frances Farmer Presents*. Her life story was featured in an A&E “Biography” episode (2001). She has been the subject of theatrical plays (one of which is Sally Clark’s *Saint Frances*

of *Hollywood* [1996]), and she is the focus of ongoing activist, creative, and scholarly interest. There have been two rock and roll songs dedicated to her. Farmer appears as “the five of pentacles” in an online “Hollywood Tarot” deck, and the card named for her is labeled “hardship”:

Frances Farmer is a Level 2 archetype of Hardship. Luminously beautiful, her fierce independence was not understood in the Hollywood of the 40’s. Convinced that her unwillingness to cooperate proved her madness, her advisors had her committed. She experienced the most brutal of psychiatric experimentation and physical mistreatment. She was finally released, but spent the rest of her life in hardship (n. pag.).

In “season 1998,” the online “Cosmic Baseball Association” named Farmer’s “cosmic player plate” as the infield. Her life is introduced with the heading, “Frances Farmer: Pre-Frontal Dichotomy” (n. pag.). Frances Farmer’s lives, and their retellings, have been referred to as harboring a “curse” (Estrin 1982). On the lighter side of honoring Farmer, according to a recent “cheap eats” review in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (2004), “Frances Farmer French Toast” is served regularly in Seattle at Easy Street Records and Café (n. pag.).

Website hosts employ versions of Farmer’s life story and often focus on her psychiatric trauma to respond to the historical and contemporary politics of the American mental health industry. For example, some online writers and organizational sites that are devoted to fighting forced or unethical psychiatric treatment consider Farmer emblematic of what happens to many wronged or poorly treated patients, and thus use their version of her story to convey a cultural critique of the mental health industry.

Frances Farmer has become a “poster child” for some forms of antipsychiatric activism.

As a result of all of the above, Frances Farmer’s image has taken on qualities that liken her posthumous existence to an icon or trope. Farmer’s “tropification”<sup>4</sup> as a famous “mentally ill” woman is quite different from either Virginia Woolf’s or Sylvia Plath’s (both of whom are also iconized). I am curious about the reasons for this distinction. Woolf’s and Plath’s legacies surely bear the weight of the particularly volatile societal stigma attendant to the ways that both of their lives ended (by suicide). However, Farmer’s special “case” cannot be reduced to her having died of esophageal cancer rather than by suicide. Clearly, people are fascinated with her presence and with her relationship to the particular time periods during which she lived and died, but they are likewise fascinated with the ways that her life story can be retold and utilized in presentist terms.

Some writers and filmmakers have implied or overtly argued that Farmer was institutionalized by her mother (and by the state of Washington) for political reasons, due to her alleged viewpoints on communism and her lack of enthusiasm for the governmental regimes of her time, not because she “really had” a “mental illness.” In short, these critics say that she was locked up because of her rebelliousness and defiance being seen at the time as unbecoming for a woman. This point-of-view is prominently featured in *Committed*. Farmer’s famed assertiveness was not merely an issue of questioning gender norms in her native Seattle, once she moved to Hollywood, and

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<sup>4</sup> By “tropification,” I mean rendering a living or deceased person, concept, or thing into a trope. This term was coined in conversations about this subject with Kathleen Powers.

elsewhere. She aided farm workers and was an outspoken supporter of labor rights. In addition to her 1935 trip to Russia (against her mother's advice), Farmer was indeed notorious for her "vulgar" language and "unladylike" behaviors.

Farmer belonged to a leftist group theater company, and had a longstanding, abusive affair with its brilliant but vitriolic co-director and playwright Clifford Odets, who was eventually blacklisted by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Although in her memoir Farmer denies having ever had any official affiliation with the communist party, her mother and sister blamed communist associations for her emotional "decline," and her biographer William Arnold writes in *Shadowland* (1978) that she was definitely affiliated with communist organizations. He even provides photographic "proof" to support his claims. Arnold was an investigative reporter, and still writes regularly for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (unless there is another William Arnold working for the newspaper, but I don't think so).

As I have noted, the question of authenticity is frequently raised as a flag in autobiographical, biographical, cinematic, and other kinds of representations (including theatrical and Internet versions) of life stories. For example, the tagline for *Committed* is "The True Story of Frances Farmer." Farmer's history is especially prone to this kind of problematic interrogation of "truth," since there are so many versions of it presented for an eager and curious public. Arnold's *Shadowland* was the primary inspiration for *Frances*, while *Committed* seems to have been more directly influenced by Farmer's memoir. The same year that Arnold published *Shadowland*, Farmer's sister Edith Farmer

Elliot published *Look Back in Love: The True Story of Fame and Misfortunes of a Brilliant, Talented, Beautiful Actress and her Family*, in which she explicitly states that Farmer's autobiography was largely the fabrication of Jean Ratcliffe, who, Elliot says, invented the text after Farmer's death and then dedicated it to herself.

In her biographical rejoinder, Elliot (1978) cautions against "trad[ing] freedom for mindpolluting 'fictionalized facts'" and cites the bible and Ronald Reagan in her crusade for "freedom" and against "defamation" (275). Elliot says that she wrote *Look Back* to clear her family's name, "to set the record straight, to correct the salacious lies, half-truths, defamation of character dealt our family members" (Ibid.). Whether or not Ratcliffe was manipulative, as Elliot suggests in fierce terms in her biography of Frances and their family, Farmer's autobiography was clearly collaborative in nature; its copyright is credited to "Farmcliffe Enterprises, Inc.," a moniker that combines Farmer's and Ratcliffe's names.

Elliot claims that she "learned from [Frances's] lawyer that she never came in to sign the will she had sent me a copy of" (272) and that this will – if it was signed – was missing at the time of Farmer's death, so that Ratcliffe

produced a will of stationery-store-form leaving everything to her and making her executrix. It could serve one purpose only, to give her legal access to Frances' personal items and freedom to publish a rewriting of the manuscript from the tapes and carbon copies she had held out on Frances. Two years later she finally "cashed in" on her exploitive friendship in an alleged autobiography, of her own writing, full of salacious lies and libelous fiction (272).

Elliot knows she cannot "forbid defamation of the defenseless dead" (275), but she sure

wishes she could, at least from her own point-of-view.

Interestingly, Elliot claims that Frances suffered from hypoglycemia, that her emotional struggles largely stemmed from that, and that she was perhaps not “really” mentally ill. She says that with today’s “modern” medical interventions, Frances probably would have fared much better than she did during her own time, as she would have received proper care, diagnosis, and treatment. She says that Frances’s main problem was with alcoholism, and Farmer says this in her memoir. Elliot also describes an abortion in Farmer’s life as having had lasting effects on her experience of self and identity. Elliot sometimes felt spurned by Frances and later surely felt left out because of how she was treated (according to her reports) by Jean Ratcliffe in the wake of Frances’s death. She wants her readers to know that for a good portion of their lives, she and her sister were very close, and that she knew her very well. Elliot reclaims this intimacy in her book.

However, Elliot’s text is hard to take seriously because of its sometimes volatile and offensive language. For example, she discusses a “grubby, back-stage Depression-type cocktail party” (89) attended by Frances, and says that

Her description of it, later, reminded me of Jewish kids at one of our Seattle park field-houses, when we held impromptu entertainments on rainy days. Once on stage, it was almost impossible to get any Jew youngster off to let the others have a chance. Watching them, it was easy to understand why the vaudeville hook for pulling actors offstage was invented (89).

Elliot goes on to cite Jewish entertainer and writer Allen Sherman, and Jewish

“author, professor and urban studies specialist” Leonard Fein, each describing what it means to be a Jew (89). Then she notes,

Both overlook what every geneticist takes for granted. That Jews are the quintessence of survival. Five thousand years of punitive selection by God of His chosen people has produced in Jews the innate physical, mental and spiritual tools of survival unequalled by any other group of people on earth. It is both their privilege and punishment for being a “chosen” people. They can no more change their genetic heritage than zebras can, their stripes (89).

She continues, “We were raised to humility, gracious manners and accepting of all people. Frances had only known gentle Jews . . .” (Ibid.). Elliot goes on to imply that some of the Jewish people Frances knew later in her life had been less than “gentle” to her, and undermined her as a result. These Jewish associates, the reader surmises, were “leftists” or “radicals,” as well.

Elliot is also homophobic in her text, and discusses what she refers to as “the lesbian gossip” surrounding her sister: “It only bothered me because I knew Frances would not try to defend herself, only her friends. I knew her too well to believe she had any perverted sex interests . . .” (258). This theme is especially relevant because Farmer lived with Ratcliffe for a significant part of the end of her life and they were, it seems, very devoted to each other. Some would like to believe that they were lovers, but this is unsubstantiated and thus difficult to prove. Toward the end of the memoir, Farmer (or Ratcliffe?) notes,

And I have learned that to have a good friend is the purest of all God’s gifts, for it is a love that has no exchange of payment. It is not inherited, as with a family. It is not compelling, as with a child. And it has no means of physical pleasure, as with a mate. It is, therefore, an

indescribable bond that brings with it a far deeper devotion than all the others. So with gratitude I think of Jean, for she remained when others vanished. She believed when others doubted. And she gave when others received. Through her, all good was brought into my life, and through the good, I came to know and believe in God (369).<sup>5</sup>

Whoever wrote this particular passage, it overtly suggests that a deep connection existed between the women, but the passage likewise claims that they did not share “physical pleasure, as with a mate.”

According to historian Gary Atkins (2003), “the admission entries for the inmates registered [at Steilacoom] between 1916 and the late 1940s suggest a link between unacceptable morality in sex and the diagnosis for mental illness, even if the sexual orientation of the patient is not clear” (36-37). In *Gay Seattle*, Atkins includes a description of Frances Farmer’s story, and pays particular attention to her “case” when she was incarcerated at Steilacoom.<sup>6</sup> He says, “The story of Frances Farmer’s involuntary commitment to Western State in 1944 has become something of an underground urban legend in Seattle, appealing in particular to those who feel the city itself has remained seriously schizophrenic in its utopian dream of creating a ‘city beautiful’ to match the natural environment by controlling citizens who do not fit the vision” (37). Although Atkins’s usage of “schizophrenic” to mean “split” or “conflicted” is unfortunate indeed, his analysis of Farmer’s position in relation to Seattle’s history is intriguing.

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<sup>5</sup> According to the memoir, toward the end of her life Farmer accepted Christ and “was converted to the Catholic faith” (367).

After briefly summarizing many of the same layers of Farmerian discourse I seek to elaborate in my own work (the movies, the competing written stories, Cobain's song, etc.), Atkins notes, "Like any good Hollywood movie, Farmer's story has lent itself to multiple layers of interpretation by vastly different audiences. For gays and lesbians in Seattle, the story became emblematic of their own struggle against the city's mental health system, particularly as it intertwined with a story about a psychiatrist named Walter Freeman" (37). Atkins describes Farmer's college life at the University of Seattle in 1931 and beyond, and retells a story that appeared "in a magazine article written about her a quarter-century later" that "noted that while at the university she had sometimes dressed in a plaid boy's shirt, with a rolled collar open at the neck and her tightly cut hair 'slicked back, masculine style'" (38). Atkins also discusses some of Farmer's personal communications with and observations of lesbians at school, including those relayed in her own autobiography. He comments,

One of the debates about Frances Farmer has been whether she should be considered heterosexual or lesbian. Farmer herself never claimed to be a lesbian, and as a Hollywood film star, she played decidedly heterosexual roles. *Frances* . . . went to great lengths to portray her as heterosexual, including the creation of a fictional male character who supposedly loved her, and she him. Yet her autobiography disdained all the heterosexual relations in which she was involved . . . Arnold speculated in *Shadowland* that the energetic creativity that drove the talented, often rebellious actress was "a latent homosexuality that never quite made it to the surface." After her death in 1970, at a time when gay activism was fervent, some claimed Farmer had been a closeted lesbian and pointed to the fact that her autobiography, for example, appeared to have been written mostly by her close female friend Jean Ratcliffe . . . Edith Elliot denounced the Ratcliffe

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<sup>6</sup>Thanks to Clark Pomerleau for sharing *Gay Seattle* with me, and for our many helpful talks about Frances Farmer.

book in a letter to the *Indianapolis News* as “lesbian pornography fiction [full of] filthy lies” (45).

Ultimately, Atkins remarks, “Farmer’s sexual relations may have been so distorted by the stresses of her life that it is probably impossible at this point to know her actual orientation” (45). I understand his concern with “distortion” (although I might not put it quite this way), and I share his wish to examine the implications of labeling someone, however attractive or inappropriate that label might be. He continues, “Part of the difficulty of naming it lies with how the definition of ‘lesbian’ evolved over the decades . . . [Frances Farmer] was a product of the attitudes of the 1920s and 1930s, when, as historian Lillian Faderman has pointed out, it was more common for women who loved other women to frame their relationships as a type of romantic friendship that did not necessarily include sexual affection and did not call itself ‘lesbian’” (45-46).

If it is hard to know if Farmer was “really” a queer, it is perhaps differently difficult to know if she was “really” affiliated with the communist party, given the competing narratives about her life, especially if she may not have “really” written her own memoir. Moreover, the extent of Farmer’s abuse by the psychiatric establishment is difficult to assess, considering its competing depictions in biographies and in her autobiography. Notably, there is ongoing debate about whether or not Farmer was indeed a victim of infamous Dr. Walter Freeman’s transorbital lobotomy procedure while she was a patient at Western State Hospital (“Steilacoom”) during the late 1940s.

According to Atkins, there is no explicit listing of Farmer’s name among the rosters of those lobotomized at Western State, but several names resemble one of her

formerly married names. He says, “On the chart of lobotomy successes . . . produced for the Seattle Neurological Society, only the account of that one woman in her early thirties who had been diagnosed as schizophrenic and had not been paroled comes close to describing Frances Farmer’s situation. But it could also describe one of the other women who had been lobotomized on that day of Freeman’s first visit to Western State” (50). Atkins adds, “In a 1990s tabloid television program, however, Walter Freeman’s son claimed that his father had told him that, indeed, he had operated on Farmer. The son set the date during Freeman’s visit in 1949” (Ibid.)

*Frances* and *Committed* take for granted that Freeman lobotomized Farmer, as does William Arnold. Most of the Internet discourse around and creative portrayals of Farmer with which I am familiar (including the play *Saint Frances of Hollywood*) presume that she was lobotomized. Farmer’s mother would have had to approve a lobotomy as Farmer’s guardian at the time, since her rights were stripped away from her; she was considered “incompetent” by the state of Washington and put into her mother’s “care.” Farmer’s sister Edith claims that her family did not approve a lobotomy, and that it did not take place. Atkins says that Elliot “told a reporter for the *Indianapolis Star* in 1983 that doctors at Western State did indeed want her parents to let Frances be lobotomized, but they refused” (50). Atkins notes, “For Frances Farmer, it may simply be a question of what is the least believable—not the most believable—scenario: that the country’s most famous lobotomist passed through Steilacoom and did not try to cure Frances Farmer? Or that he did?” (Ibid.).

In *Psychotherapists on Film, 1899-1999* (2004), Flowers and Frizler describe *Frances* as follows:

The story of the Hollywood star Frances Farmer, who was raised by a stage mother and became a victim of her own poor choices and alcoholism. She is finally committed to a mental hospital. There she was raped, received ECT, and given a lobotomy in 1948. After that she was very passive and lived, if it [is] called that, for another 22 years (Vol. 1, 226).<sup>7</sup>

In another mammoth annotated filmography, *The Celluloid Couch* (1998), Leslie Rabkin similarly describes *Frances*. He says that Farmer, as depicted in the film, is “[b]eaten down by the System (and her own dumb choices)” (452), and was “made a guinea pig for the ‘ice man,’ neurosurgeon Dr. Walter Freeman, the champion of the transorbital lobotomy, who lifts her right eyelid, enters his pick under the eyeball, and presses it into her brain in 1948” (Ibid.). William Arnold also refers to Farmer as a guinea pig: “Because she was one of the most glamorous and complicated women of her generation, she became a prize guinea pig for arrogant and ruthless men who were determined to remold her into a more acceptable version of herself” (254).

Arnold and others describe Farmer’s deadened and emotionless presentation on *Frances Farmer Presents* and elsewhere as being a direct result of the lobotomy. Rabkin notes, “if you see the tape of her TV appearance years later on ‘This is Your Life,’ the personality-dulling destructiveness of her lobotomy is evident . . . [*Frances*] is a well-

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<sup>7</sup> Flowers is a clinical psychologist and professor at Chapman University. The late Frizler (who died as the book neared completion) was a professor of literature and film studies, also at Chapman. They note that their text was inspired by Leslie Rabkin’s *Celluloid Couch* and that the Gabbards’s work encouraged them to do their own “comprehensive study” of psychiatry and film. Their two volume work includes 5000 film

deserved assault on the misuses of psychiatric power, and the best account of its excesses – as well as that of Seattle’s hanging judge Frater – can be found in William Arnold’s book *Shadowland*” (452). Rabkin also provides a reference for “the history of prefrontal lobotomy and its variations” and a “portrait of Freeman” (Ibid.).

Whether or not she was queer, a communist, or lobotomized, one thing seems for certain: Farmer’s relationship with her mother was the emotional backdrop for much of her life. In the memoir, Farmer makes multiple references to her mother’s intrusions being a major feature of - and primary cause for - her serious problems. While many of Farmer’s remarks are livid, at times in the text she seems resigned to (but not exactly accepting of) her mother’s impossible behaviors. At one point she says,

I knew that I had to find my way out of this nightmare alone, and if I tripped and fell, I had to be the one to pick myself up. I could, therefore, carry no other load. My only obligation was to myself, and nothing could interfere. And Mamma interfered, simply because she could not help herself. It was part of her pattern, as was I (162).

In this section of the memoir, Farmer describes how she “lay the foundation” for her “recovery,” and that she knew in order to do so that she “would have to force the gate to the past even wider, and go beyond my time and even beyond the era of my parents, for my mother and father were also the products of a specific heritage and rearing. Here again, I was not a part of it, but it was a part of me” (163). Her insights about trauma are instructive for readers today.

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titles. I think that the word “on” in the book’s title has a double meaning, since Flowers is a therapist who writes on film, and the book is about therapists as they are depicted on-screen.

In a set of comments that I find related to my own interest in narrative (in)coherence, Farmer remarks,

There can be no chronological narrative, no orderly sequence of events for the following five years of my life. Nor can I specifically remember incidents except in shocking jabs of recall that still jolt my consciousness and affect my behavior . . . But I must attempt to relate the horrors as I recall them, in the hope that some force for mankind might be moved to relieve forever the unfortunate creatures who are still imprisoned in the back wards of decaying institutions (253).

Farmer's "jolts" and "jabs" creatively draw the reader into a metaphorization that describes and criticizes shock treatment's adverse and violent physical effects. This commentary about some of the hardest years of her institutionalization fly in the face of Geller and Harris's (1994) problematic claim that Farmer's memoir is largely "personal" and that she is not concerned with forwarding a social critique of psychiatry or interested in "broader issues of reform" (263).

Sally Clark asserts that the title of her play, *Saint Frances of Hollywood*, "is not an ironic title" (6). In introducing her tale, she says,

Nowadays, we think of saints as kind gentle souls . . . [b]ut there is an older tradition of saints as obnoxious strong-minded rabble rousers who battle against authority in order to serve their cause. These saints were punished for their insubordination . . . To the end, they did not betray their convictions. I believe Frances Farmer to be an unrecognized saint of the twentieth century (6).

Clark notes that "even as a lobotomized guest" on *This is Your Life*, "Frances Farmer managed to be subversive. I have never felt the same way about television since" (Ibid.).

Clark explains, "In 1984, I was possessed by the idea that Frances Farmer's life

was a perfect example of a classical tragedy so I decided that I would try and write one” (5). The published version of the play that I acquired features illustrations of her stage sets, including one of “Steilacoom,” which features a large golden cross, and “La Crescenta,” called the “screen actors sanitorium.”<sup>8</sup> Farmer was famous in her youth for writing an essay about God’s demise. Clark makes scathing fun of this fact by having the Farmer character deny God at various points in the play. She says in the asylum, “I’m in the bowels of the earth. He’d have a hell of a time finding me” (154).

In the closing scene of the play, Frances fights with Jean Ratcliffe, and their argument is interspersed with a recital of the Lord’s Prayer. Eventually, Frances says to Jean, “It’s not the pain, it’s you . . . It’s my mother. It’s this country. It’s God. It’s everyone who put me through this fucking shithole of a life and I am fucking getting out” (191). Jean yells at her to calm down, and Frances says, “I am fucking leaving. For good. And this time, no one’s going to stop me. And you can take your fucking kittens and your fucking dog named Sport...” Jean interrupts: “What’s the matter with you! Have you gone mad!” and, in the final line of the play, Frances retorts, “And your fucking biography and shove it up your fucking ass!” (immediately followed by the stage direction “*dies*” [Ibid.]). I think that here Clark is commenting on the obsessive retelling of Farmer’s story, and how Farmer might have felt about this narrativity if she could speak for herself, or be a different fly on each of the walls of the rooms in her posthumous lives. I will discuss a similar concern in relation to Sylvia Plath in chapter 4.

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<sup>8</sup> Farmer was “treated” at La Crescenta.

Clark's jokes about Farmer's relationship to God are interestingly contrasted with a 1983 article in *Christianity Today*, in which sympathetic author Harry Cheney reviews the film *Frances* and discusses Farmer's life. Cheney notes that some might claim that Farmer was punished for denouncing God and that is why she wound up the way she did. He warns against such a stance, as follows:

In a Christian context, it would be easy to pin all of Mis Farmer's misfortune on her original denial of God. Such a simplistic analysis would explain everything yet never answer the challenge of this penetrating film. Nor would it be a compassionate response to Frances Farmer's terrible ordeal (46).

The Frances Farmer that viewers experience in *Frances* is very different from the Frances we see in *Committed*. Both films could be introduced by a sentiment expressed by the Suicidal Tendencies, in their song "Institutionalized"<sup>9</sup>: "They stuck me in an institution. Said it was the only solution. To give me the needed professional help. To protect me from the enemy, myself."

In her work on cinematic representations of biographical works, Mary Carver (1999) brings together "performance, autobiography, biography, film, and feminist theory" in order "to examine Hollywood depictions of women's lives." Carver seeks to "analyze biographical films about women who have written autobiographies to answer questions about how cinematic performance creates and shapes audience perceptions of women's history" (viii). She notes, "While all of the women I examine were heroic in their own way, the quality of that heroism has been reshaped, skewed or even obscured

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<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Lane Van Ham for introducing me to yet another important song.

by the biographical films of their lives” (x). Carver discusses Frances Farmer for about ten pages in her almost 300 page dissertation, and uses *Frances* as an example to support her claims. Like Atkins, Carver points out that the male love interest in *Frances* was completely fabricated to engage audiences.

Jessica Lange’s relationship to Farmer is highlighted by Carver, who correctly points out that neither Lange nor Farmer was always taken seriously. Citing an article that appeared in *Newsweek*, Carver notes, “Just as Farmer was seen as another ‘pretty face’ for Hollywood to flaunt, Lange was often seen as ‘another bubble-headed model turned starlet’” (97). Lange was praised by critics for her powerful depiction of Farmer, whom she had always wanted to portray; Carver cites an interview with Lange in which she says she read Farmer’s memoir in 1974 when she was “working as a barmaid,” and wanted to play the part ever since (98).

In her concluding remarks, Carver explains that in all of the texts that she analyzes, “Hollywood ideology has stepped in to reform a woman’s success story into a more acceptable, and less threatening format” (269). Although in the body of her text she gives Frances Farmer very little attention, she uses *Frances* as her key closing example: “For example, audiences don’t have to endure Frances Farmer’s antics at the end of the movie, for the film shows her calm, relaxed, and under control. Of course, her obvious personality change is due to the lobotomy she endured in the mental hospital, but it assures the audience that she can still function as a ‘polite’ member of society” (269-270).

I agree with Carver's assessment that Hollywood ideology played a major role in the creation of *Frances*. However, I disagree with Carver's description of Farmer as "a stage actress whose reluctant rise to fame in the movies culminated in a nervous breakdown" (91), as this remark elides the complexity of what probably actually happened to Farmer. If in this passage Carver had referred to Farmer's life's complexity, instead of making the remarks that she does, her own point that women's life stories are "distorted" by Hollywood films would have been further supported.

I think that the most interesting interlude in Carver's brief analysis of *Frances* is the way she explains the creation of "Harry," who is the male narrator describing Frances throughout the film, as viewers eventually discover but (probably) do not know, at first. Carver says, "The film, *Frances* . . . chooses to create a male narrator whose voice-overs not only frame our perceptions of Frances, but whose appearance later in the film helps show her what is 'important' and 'real' in life" (93). She continues, "Because Harry is always there, serving as Frances's love interest from the age of eighteen, he takes on several additional roles of advisor and confidant, and even helps her 'break out' of the sanitarium at one point" (94). Carver references Gary Storhoff's (1995) analysis of *Frances*, in which he points out that Harry "directs the camera's gaze," and "shapes our perceptions of the life of Frances Farmer" (Ibid.).<sup>10</sup>

This discussion is reminiscent of my summary (in chapter 2) of Raymond Bellour's assessment of Hitchcock as the "enunciator" in (or of) *Marnie*, as well as

Hitchcock's usage of Mark Rutland (Sean Connery). Mark is an extension of Hitchcock's "gaze" and "voice" within the film narrative, and closely monitors Marnie's "life" on-screen. A similar enunciation argument might be made about director Graeme Clifford, and his use of Harry (Sam Shepard), in connection with the production of *Frances*. Although he does not mention Bellour's work, Storhoff notes, "Much recent feminist film theory has revealed how a director's control of the camera encourages women to identify with passive, suffering heroes" (272). To make this point, Storhoff cites scholarship by Laura Mulvey, E. Ann Kaplan, and Claire Johnston.

Carver cites an unnamed *Washington Post* reviewer who says that *Frances* "depicts Farmer as a total victim" (95). Jessica Lange's Frances is impudent and enraged, and to dismiss Farmer as merely or totally victimized misses the film's point about renouncing some kinds of mainstream psychiatric practices, not just because these practices victimized Farmer (and still victimize others today), but because Farmer herself loudly called for such a renunciation – hardly the expected tone from a passive victim, to be sure.

*Frances* is differently misread by Nancy Peske and Beverly West, in their nauseatingly coy *Cinematherapy* (1999). They describe *Frances* among their "mother-issue movies" (60-61) and engage a distinctly anti-feminist reading that makes the film seem to solely be a cathartic tearjerker for women who feel low. Peske and West have a peculiar understanding of "women's films" and melodrama that completely erases

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<sup>10</sup> Atkins and Carver do not say that Harry was played by Sam Shepard, Jessica Lange's lover (at the time), but Gary Storhoff (1995) makes mention of this point in a footnote: "[*Frances*] also marked the beginning

politics, and they make odd jokes about suicide and emotional trauma that are very offensive.

I disagree that *Frances* depicts Farmer as a “total victim,” but even if this is the sense that some viewers get when they watch *Frances*, one could watch the independent film *Committed* as an accompaniment or alternative to *Frances*, and get a very different impression and imaging of Farmer’s life. While *Frances* shows a transorbital lobotomy being performed on Farmer with graphically repulsive visual and auditory details, *Committed* uses a subtle reference at the film’s conclusion to imply that the lobotomy took place. The subtle technique for answering the pervasive “lobotomy question” in Farmer’s history is in some ways more disturbing and effective than *Frances*’s graphic depiction, because of the ways that such cinematic subtlety plays with the viewer’s psychological experience of the storyline. Such techniques are often used in thrillers, for similar reasons, and (by way of analogy) I for one usually find thrillers to be more unsettling than “slasher” or “gore” films.

Now that the suspense quotient has been properly met, I can say that in the final scene of *Committed*, Frances (Sheila McLaughlin) is shown in close up, having been interviewed by two psychiatrists, and she slowly closes her eyes when the conversation is over. She has just asked her interrogators why they called her in to meet with them, and they refuse to answer her, and say she is being “paranoid” again. Then, in slow motion, as her eyes open and then close again, her left eye gradually darkens and is finally completely blackened out on screen before the credits roll. The film is shot entirely in

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of Lange’s relationship with Sam Shepard, who plays her film lover and confidant, Harry York.”

black and white, so this scene is especially stark. Those viewers who know what allegedly happened to Farmer in 1948 or 1949 will immediately recognize what is being implied, and understand the horrific effects that took place thereafter. Viewers who also know that the aftermath of a transorbital lobotomy includes a major bruising of the eye socket will likely feel disgust on a different order than is experienced when watching the more heavy-handed lobotomy scenes in *Frances*.

*Committed* presents some of the many ways that individual people talked about Frances Farmer while she was alive. Importantly, the film features larger issues of “talk” in describing the psychiatric, hygienic, and homophobic discourses that existed around Farmer’s life. Her mother Lillian (Victoria Boothby) is repeatedly shown on her knees, tending to her garden, as she is talking to herself or perhaps to the audience about all the awful things Farmer has done and has put her through, and how she did her best to help her difficult child. In one scene, she talks to herself and the audience about Farmer while playing a dissonant “Silent Night” on her piano. When Lillian goes on the radio to warn other mothers of the dangers of communism, she is immediately followed by a radio announcer (John Nesci) who reads from the proceedings of the First International Hygiene Conference of 1930. Lillian looks on with horror, and also supportively, as the announcer explains the importance of preserving the nation’s mental hygiene.

At home with his family at the dinner table, Farmer’s doctor (John Erdman) tells his wife about his “difficult week” on the job, and how they have been trying some new medications that are making some of the patients hallucinate even more than before. He

says that Frances is “the most difficult woman I have ever encountered,” to which his teen daughter responds, “That doesn’t make her insane, does it?” Father and daughter then launch into a discussion about how he heard that she wants to study anthropology, and asks her who she expects will pay for that. She asserts that Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead do it, and he says, “Margaret Mead looks like a man and divorced her husband,” overtly implying the dangers of gender transgression and the inappropriateness of presumed lesbianism. After the girl is excused from the table, Dr. Dad turns to his wife and says, “Dear, we’re going to have to do something about your daughter.”

*Committed* offers Frances’s counterdiscourse in the conversations she has in the asylum with a nurse (Lucy Sanger), who is eventually at risk to get in trouble because of her intimacy with Farmer. Frances tells her confidant about how her mother once told her that if she (the mother) wanted to kill her husband (Frances’s father), all she would have to do is plead insanity and she could get away with it. Frances says that she was “framed,” and “wasn’t represented at all,” when the nurse suggests that she (or her case) were improperly represented. Farmer tells her nurse that she cannot lie, and “if someone’s a bastard, I tell them.” She says that it was “bad enough” that she was a “socialist sympathizer,” but that when she “went into the fields with the workers and got my lily white hands dirty, that meant I was really crazy.”

Frances looks bored, exasperated, and trapped in her mother’s presence when she is at home with her, in her custody. The scenes of her life in the asylum are also made to seem interminable. In one scene, the camera determinedly pans across women playing

cards, dancing, pacing, and rocking, as Frances watches them from the couch. At other times, the camera stays fixated on one scene of very limited, repeated activity in the recreation room or lounge. The viewer is given the impression that one should try to feel how Frances felt, day after day, month after month, year after year, in these ponderous and suffocating environments.

Shortly before the last scene, Lillian Farmer, again in her garden, tells us, “I slaved my whole life to make her decent,” and “The doctors say she’ll be quieter now, more peaceful. She’s all I ever had to call my own.” This monologue denies the existence of Edith, Frances’s sister, and, more importantly, it implies that Lillian consented to Farmer’s lobotomy. *Committed* does much more than blame the mother, however, since it depicts Frances’s own voice and other features of the time during which she lived. Frances tells her doctors that she is “alcoholic and sullen” but “not insane,” and when she says she wants to live alone and have a chance to start her life over again, they call her anti-social, and then they lobotomize her. The film asks, “Who is really ‘mad’?” and this is a topic I will take up further in chapter 4, particularly in my discussion of *Benny & Joon* (1993).

Somewhat like her posthumous cinematic life, Farmer’s life as represented online might be called “The Internet and the Afterlife.” In her memoir, Farmer remarks that “Life is sprinkled with many beginnings linked together in some mysterious chain . . .” (51), and this seems a fitting description of her posthumous existence on the Internet. In the memoir, Farmer presents a critique of her life when inside asylums that rings true

today: “Love died quickly inside the cages, for there was no object worthy of it, and since there was nothing to love, something to hate became the goal. Hate kept one afloat” (144). She remarks, “A ward is a living thing, vibrating life in the midst of death. Scratching for heaven in the hot pits of hell. Struggling to live, it lives, tottering on a jagged precipice” (150). It is understandable when reading comments like these why Farmer has become an activist mentor for many appropriately angry people, some of whom were born years after she died and eventually set up webpages in her honor.

Throughout the memoir, Farmer describes the specific horrors of hydrotherapy, insulin shock, electroshock, and other “treatments” she endured while institutionalized. In an especially vivid segment, she remarks,

Insulin shock succeeded in doing one principal thing to me: It deadened my mind to a point where recall was almost impossible. Electric shock has similar effects, even though the medical claim is that a patient will eventually be able to remember what has been deliberately shocked out of the mind. I cannot challenge this concrete theory, well documented by those involved in psychiatric research, except to ask if any doctor who theorizes has ever survived three months of daily shock therapy. I have. Day after day, until I had hardly any faculties left with which to function, and regardless of what is claimed by those devoted to research, there are blank spots left in my mind that have never been filled. There are months of my life that are gone and they never seem to surface, even in fragments (246).

In “About to Have ECT? Fine, but Don’t Watch It in the Movies: The Sorry Portrayal of ECT in Film” (2004), doctors Garry Walter and Andrew McDonald discuss their concerns with the “prominent convulsive therapy scenes” in Hollywood films, including *Frances* (65). While these physicians are confident that they can help begin to dispel

what they consider to be the mythos around ECT as shown on-screen, antipsychiatric activists continue to maintain (as Farmer also believed) that ECT violates patients' rights and that its practice today is often still barbaric and dehumanizing. As I noted above, numerous websites feature Farmer's story to explain the problems with ECT, insulin shock, forced hospitalization, and psychosurgery, and to otherwise feature the value of the consumer and patients' rights movement.

An excellent example of Farmer's placement in online activism can be found in Katy Maehl's Frances Farmer website. Maehl asks "What really happened to Frances Farmer?" and tells visitors to "follow the stars" through which her story unfolds. The stars lead to other pages, and, when animated by linking, are like virtual doorknobs turning to open various layers of Maehl's version of Farmer's narrative. The link "Who is she?" is followed by the page "Frances Farmer: Trapped and Destroyed by the System," and the words "Frances Farmer" are shown in a signature font format, presumably a reflection of Farmer's own handwriting. This page contains sequential sub-links that chronicle some of the major years in Farmer's life: "1931: it all began with an essay..."; "1935: then stardom"; and "1943: & finally, 'insanity'" (n. pag.). One of the subsequent links includes a series of posters of Farmer that are wheatpasted in a tight row like Andy Warhol's Campbell soup cans or Mao images, and above each of these differently colored pictures of Farmer's face a headline repeats, "Mental Test Ordered for Farmer" (n. pag.).

Maehl later tells visitors that "insanity was their explanation for her individuality"

(“their” meaning her family, society, and the psychiatric establishment [n.pag.]). At the conclusion of her site’s links, she informs us that Farmer “appeared” in “March of 2001” in “Seattle’s *The Stranger* [in an essay entitled] ‘Fractured Seattle: What We Shove Under Comes Back Up’” (n. pag.). By virtue of its subtitle and its unexpected usage of Farmer’s image, which are duplicated on the webpage, this essay about a recent earthquake in the Seattle area suggests to Maehl that “Like Frances in the 40s, we’re still shot down each time we speak up today—but maybe if we get enough voices together now, it’ll be that much easier to get right Back Up” (n. pag.) Maehl’s page has a fake sponsorship by “Tampax,” with the caption “shame/silence/secretcy since 1936” (n. pag.).

Related websites abound, including the aforementioned Cosmic Baseball Association link, “Raped, Shocked and Brutalized,” sponsored by the Citizens Commission on Human Rights, “Don’t Fuck with Frances,” created by “eryn” (whose web domain is “brokenhymen.bestsundaydress.com”), and “A Ravaged Life,” sponsored by the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill of Santa Cruz County, known among antipsychiatric activists as the most leftist of the national NAMI chapters. (Most NAMI chapters advocate for forced hospitalization.)

Tamer websites that differently feature Farmer’s psychiatric history include the Washington History Link Database, an online encyclopedia of regional history, and the comprehensive “Frances Farmer Tribute,” owned and maintained since 1998 by the devoted David Kortegast. Kortegast’s “Tribute” includes articles from 1931 to the present, a biography, book links, contributors’ information, a filmography, multimedia

information, news and updates, photographs, poetry and other written works, printed matter, “post Hollywood” information, a resource guide, theatre details, information about film depictions of Farmer, and a guestbook. Printing out all the information available via the “Tribute” results in hundreds of pages of hard copies.

I am confident that the story of Frances Farmer will continue to be elaborated, perhaps in perpetuity. As such, I think that it is important to continuously address the sociopolitical complexities and variant – and in some cases hegemonic – ideologies that inform these diverse representations, especially as they relate to the materiality of “mentally ill” women’s daily lives.

## CHAPTER 4

### **“I’m Not Completely Insane, I’m Maybe Just a Little Bit Crazy”: Representation in an Age of “Pharmacracry” (1990-2003)<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Introduction and Chapter Overview**

“I’m not completely insane  
 I’m maybe just a little bit crazy  
 there’s no one to blame  
 not ashamed  
 about my game  
 don’t want nobody to save me . . .”  
 – Alana Davis, from “Crazy”

In the wake of deinstitutionalization<sup>2</sup> and an increasingly vocal psychiatric survivors movement, and perhaps in part due to the gains of the numerous human rights and social justice movements of the time, 1960s and 1970s film audiences witnessed the presence of a sometimes interrogating tone in cinematic representations of psychiatry.<sup>3</sup> As I noted in chapter 2, Gabbard and Gabbard (1999) refer to this new era as the end of the “golden age” of psychiatry in the cinema, as the “golden age” was a previous moment in cinematic psychiatric representation that was largely positive and uncritical.

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<sup>1</sup> The quote in the chapter title is borrowed from Alana Davis’s song, “Crazy.” The term “pharmacracry” was coined by Thomas Szasz (2003). Segments of this chapter were previously published, and they have been edited, amplified, or otherwise reproduced – in all cases, with permission from *Scope* – for the purposes of the present discussion. Refer to Appendix A. See my critical film reviews of *David and Lisa*, *Girl, Interrupted*, and *Sylvia*, all of which are cited in the references at the end of the dissertation.

<sup>2</sup> Here, I am only referring to this particular era of psychiatric deinstitutionalization. However, this was not the first time that many individuals were moved out of inpatient settings into “the community,” and faced broken promises on the part of governmental leaders and others who had not allocated enough funds to set up the appropriate services and structures necessary to adequately meet individuals’ needs “outside” of hospital settings.

<sup>3</sup> I am cautiously optimistic about suggesting that social justice movements directly impact and change cinematic and written autobiographical representations. In contrast, Hubert (2002) seems very confident that “Feminism, the antipsychiatry movement, and other revolutionary philosophies had a significant

Gabbard and Gabbard note that the “devaluation” of psychiatry and psychiatrists was visualized on-screen in 1965 and later, and overt “negative stereotypes” of members of the profession were introduced to mainstream audiences in 1966. Of course, these popular criticisms were far from new. While the Victorians were made aware of feminist critiques of psychoanalysis and psychiatry in the written works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Florence Nightingale, and numerous novels on the subject of the 1950s and 1960s likewise “predate[d] the antipsychiatry movement of the 1960s” (Gabbard and Gabbard 120), films and first-person written texts of the 1960s and 1970s brought to bear a different kind of questioning of psychiatric authority.<sup>4</sup>

In *David and Lisa* (1962), *Shock Corridor* (1963), *Shock Treatment* (1964), and *Strait Jacket* (1964), the value of psychiatric treatment was questioned and even (albeit at times cautiously) criticized, while consumer/survivor/expatient (c/s/x) viewpoints and rights were given primacy.<sup>5</sup> The groundbreaking documentary *Titicut Follies* (1967) brought to public attention insiders’ views of psychiatric incarceration, and films like *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1970), *Sybil* (1976), *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1977) and *The Bell Jar* (1979) highlighted the experiences of women coping with

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impact on women’s madness narratives in the late twentieth century. Writers who participated in the antipsychiatry movements or were at least influenced by them were also more likely to resist the tendency to internalize psychiatric oppression. Clearly, the return to negative views of psychiatric treatment could be linked to several factors, including the publication of the critical works of Laing, Szasz, and Foucault, the formation of advocacy groups comprised of mental patients themselves, and the resurgence of the women’s movement” (96-97).

<sup>4</sup> Ken Kesey’s powerful novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962) and its film adaptation (1975) made critiques of psychiatric incarceration readily accessible to many readers and film viewers.

<sup>5</sup> Susan White pointed out to me that in an even earlier film, *Mr. Skeffington* (1944), Fanny Trellis Skeffington (Bette Davis) “gives” Doctor Byles (George Coulouris) “what for.”

“mental illness” without merely accepting the powerful roles of psychiatric practitioners as many (but not all) earlier mainstream films had.<sup>6</sup> While the doctors in *David and Lisa* and *The Bell Jar* were portrayed as fallible but well-meaning, the depictions of the doctors in *Shock Corridor*, *Shock Treatment*, and *Strait Jacket* were more complicated and at times negative.

However, the cinematic representations of the mid- to late twentieth century not only complicated but sometimes reified a positive valuation of psychiatry, due to what may be called a “backlash” against the rights discourses and activist successes of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In particular, Gabbard and Gabbard describe a tendency toward a “reversal” of an antipsychiatric trend during the 1970s and 1980s (137). Harkening to the melodramatic trope of the compassionate, humanized, and unflinchingly well-intended expert healer as conveyed with such success by Dr. Jaquith (Claude Rains) in *Now, Voyager* (1942) and Dr. Peterson (Ingrid Bergman) in *Spellbound* (1945), the films *Lovesick* (1983), *Daniel* (1983), *Agnes of God* (1985), *Return to Oz* (1985), *Night, Mother* (1986), *Nuts* (1987), and *The Good Mother* (1988) differently engage the promises of a hoped-to-be-emancipated patient in the care of a gracious psychiatric practitioner or therapeutic presence. In some of these films, the good doctor or therapeutic persona is intrusive, is otherwise lacking in the “boundaries” department, or

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<sup>6</sup> While reading an earlier draft of this chapter, David Robinson noted that *Outrageous!* (1977) - which he described as an “independent Canadian film about a gay drag queen and his ‘mentally ill’ straight female best friend” - would “work well” with the other films I mention here.

sadly fails in his/her healing quest, and, in some cases, the patient cannot be adequately or effectively helped.<sup>7</sup>

From the 1990s to the present, the varied but often positive film stereotypes of doctors, the varied but often negative film stereotypes of patients - including patients' experiences, and especially their suffering, being romanticized, which I consider negative - and the contrasts and parallels with mainstream film representations that are offered by women's autobiographical writings published during this period, may be read in the context of the pharmaceutical industry's rise to power and prominence. This rise to power has occurred at a time of drastic cuts to mental health and other social service programs, beginning during the Reagan-Bush years and continuing into the twenty-first century.

What some call "revolutions" in psychiatric treatment during this period have far from eliminated ongoing problems with the psychiatrization of women and its attendant stigma, but instead have created different kinds of complex scenarios with which female psychiatric survivors and "mentally ill" women must cope. Thomas Szasz (2003) sees the contemporary mental health industry, and the pharmaceutical industry in particular, as having a central role in what he terms a "pharmacocracy," a political playing field whose workings are the purview of "[t]he bureaucrats of the therapeutic state" (144).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Psychiatrist and critic Harvey Greenberg responds to images of what he calls "celluloid shrinks," especially for the expressed purpose of educating psychiatrists and other mental health professionals about what he perceives to be the dangers of these representations. As he says, Greenberg (2000) relies a great deal on Gabbard and Gabbard to chronicle his useful summary of twentieth century representations.

<sup>8</sup> In an excellent discussion of this phenomenon in the United Kingdom, Beresford and Wilson (2002) critique "[n]ew biogenetic approaches to mental health policy, practice and mental health service users"

Discussing Szasz's perspective and political goals, Hubert (2002) notes, "According to Szasz, the problem stems from psychiatric discourse itself. The question is not whether one is sane, but who determines sanity and insanity, and what happens to those deemed to be mentally ill" (93-94).

In the discussion that follows, as in chapter 2, I present a series of "takes." The six "takes" in this chapter are comparative analyses and close readings of a selection of texts from the 1990s to the present. I begin with Kate Millett's memoir *The Loony-Bin Trip* (1990) in order to discuss the relationships between feminism, antipsychiatry, and the patients' rights movement. In this "take," I use discourse analysis to address the role of Millett's memoir in tandem with Millett's activist work, and I do not perform a textual analysis of the memoir itself. The second "take" is a close reading of Susanna Kaysen's memoir *Girl, Interrupted* (1993) with special attention paid to issues of race. Next, I remark on the film *Girl, Interrupted* (1999), especially the themes of sexuality and race as they are translated from page to screen. Then, I critique *Benny & Joon* (1993), using the 1998 television remake of *David and Lisa* as an intertextual reading device to focus on gender dynamics, class politics, and queer subjectivities. This section is followed by a

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and say that these approaches "give a new spurious authority and legitimacy to a medical model, with their scientific and modernist trappings . . . At the same time, they reinforce any desire or tendency to disassociate madness and distress from the social, political and economic conditions with which there are strongly evidenced associations, including poverty, war, forced migration, inequality, powerlessness and oppression. We must also consider the role of the drug companies in relation to this issue. They already have a massive financial and philosophical investment and key role in the medicalisation of madness and distress. They can be expected to be a key player and have an increasing role in the development of biogenetic discussion, explanations and 'treatments'" (548-549).

discussion of *Sylvia* (2003), the latest “tropification” of Sylvia Plath.<sup>9</sup> I conclude the chapter with a meditation on narrative peregrinations in *The Hours* (2002).

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<sup>9</sup> As I note in chapter 3, by “tropification,” I mean rendering a living or deceased person, concept, or thing into a trope. This term was coined in conversations about this subject with Kathleen Powers. Perhaps others use it, too – I do not know for sure.

**Take One: On Autobiography, Antipsychiatric Activism, and Feminism: Reading  
Kate Millett's *The Loony-Bin Trip***

“So the way that I might not fit in  
Just because I’ve got a mind of my own  
Doesn’t mean it’s a sin  
I don’t ask you to give up  
Don’t expect me to give in”  
– Alana Davis, from “Crazy”

“For Those Who’ve Been There.”  
– Kate Millett, dedication in *The Loony-Bin Trip*

The antipsychiatry movement in the United States and Western Europe - especially in England, where several of the founders are from - has been influential in large part due to the efforts of R.D. Laing, Thomas Szasz, David Cooper, and Peter Breggin. In the late 1960s, early to mid-1970s, and since, these individuals have argued that psychiatry is a form of social control. Szasz and Breggin continue to speak publicly and write works on antipsychiatry,<sup>10</sup> Laing eventually abandoned his antipsychiatric point-of-view during the 1970s, and I am not aware of Cooper’s continued involvement in the movement today. Importantly, these thinkers promoted their critiques as practicing psychiatrists and psychotherapists. Szasz has famously maintained that mental illness is a societal “myth.” Speaking as a devout libertarian, Szasz has also labored for individuals to have the right to legally commit suicide. For these activists, psychiatric medication is a manipulative tool used skillfully by what Szasz (2003) calls the “pharmacocracy” of the nation-state to dictate human behavior and to manage deviance.

The antipsychiatric view espoused by these writers is frequently combated by pharmaceutical company representatives, many psychiatric practitioners (including the “enemy” of antipsychiatry, E. Fuller Torrey<sup>11</sup>), and some mental health clientele. While there have been recent reports in several scientific journals making claims that the use of certain kinds of antidepressants may in some cases increase suicidal risk, and although users of these drugs have at times complained about the drugs allegedly amplifying rather than reducing their depression and anxiety, pharmaceutical companies continue to maintain that their drugs are credible and safe for use in the majority of cases.

In my view, any invocation of an antipsychiatric trend in the mid- to late twentieth century and since, and references to such a trend’s perceived diminution, cessation, or shifts, cannot, do not, and should not be expected to describe “antipsychiatry” as a singular stance, because ideas and practices that may be understood to index an antipsychiatric perspective occur on a spectrum, are historically, culturally, and personally situated, and include an enormous range of points-of-view.

I have observed that various monikers - among them “liberal,” “progressive,” “feminist,” “leftist,” “Libertarian,” and “Marxist” - are frequently tacked onto these stances for a variety of purposes, and these labels are deployed by speakers and writers in

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<sup>10</sup> Szasz and Breggin maintain active websites, as well. See: “The Thomas S. Szasz, M.D. Cybercenter for Liberty and Responsibility” ([www.szasz.com](http://www.szasz.com)) and “Peter R. Breggin and Psychiatric Drug Facts” ([www.breggin.com](http://www.breggin.com)).

<sup>11</sup> Dr. Torrey is a practicing psychiatrist, an author, and an open and unapologetic advocate for forced hospitalization, electroshock, and medication management. He co-wrote *The Invisible Plague* (2002), designed to expose what he calls the “epidemic” of mental illness in modern society. He has also written a variety of texts designed to help families “cope” with mental illnesses. Torrey has been called an “enemy” and deemed adversarial by some members of the antipsychiatry movement.

ways that are sometimes coalitional and sometimes divisive. For example, on its website, The Antipsychiatry Coalition employs the term “democratic” to serve its potent politicized ends.<sup>12</sup> The Coalition describes itself online as a “nonprofit volunteer group consisting of people who feel we have been harmed by psychiatry - and of our supporters. We created this website to warn you of the harm routinely inflicted on those who receive psychiatric ‘treatment’ and to promote the democratic ideal of liberty for all law-abiding people that has been abandoned in the U.S.A., Canada, and other supposedly democratic nations” (*Antipsychiatry Coalition Website*).

A partial summary of what I see as a spectrum of antipsychiatric stances follows:

- a keen suspicion of psychiatry and medicine’s efficacy to properly treat symptoms and/or cure experiences deemed to be or labeled as mental illnesses
- a disbelief in or a refuting of a biological basis or cause for mental illnesses
- an assertive quest for proof of the allegedly biological basis for mental illnesses
- a view - like that of some medical and psychological anthropologists - that sees mental illnesses as social ills that are “culture bound syndromes” with attendant culturally and temporally specific meanings, ranging from acceptance to stigmatization
- a statement that mental illnesses are more than merely culturally specific, socially constructed, or *not* transhistorical, but are also partly or even entirely the fault of a toxic or ill society that produces these conditions among some of its members
- an argument that psychiatric medications are niche-marketed and over-prescribed, in part to support an exploitative pharmaceutical and mental health industry
- a strong opinion that individuals should not be forcibly committed, medicated, or otherwise treated against their will or without their expressed understanding and consent
- a contestation questioning the existence of mental illnesses
- a belief that mental illnesses are the inventions of a capitalist society for the purposes of state sanctioned social control and discriminatory enactments of acceptable violence against those deemed mentally ill or otherwise deviant within that society

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<sup>12</sup> See: <http://www.antipsychiatry.org/>

Jane Ussher (1991) and Elaine Showalter (1987) extensively discuss the complicated relationship between antipsychiatry and feminism. Susan Hubert (2002) and Marta Caminero-Santangelo (1998) have differently elaborated Ussher's and Showalter's analyses in their works on "women's madness narratives." Barbara Smith (2000) observes that Kate Millett (1990), along with the other female authors whose autobiographical "asylum" works she analyzes, "construct their relationships to illness and to the reader differently [than many autobiographers], often manipulating autobiographical conventions to represent experience that has historically been unrepresentable" (dissertation abstract).<sup>13</sup> Hubert notes that,

Showalter has criticized antipsychiatry on the basis of sexual bias. For all the "feminist" promise of Laing's theories, she writes, "antipsychiatry had no coherent analysis to offer to women." Moreover, Showalter describes unethical forms of treatment. According to Showalter, David Cooper "advocates sex with patients" . . . [a] practice of sexual exploitation (103).

Similarly, Ussher powerfully remarks,

The antipsychiatrists and dissenters were not the knights in shining armour they have sometimes been depicted as, ready to transform the institution into a haven, by breaking down the nosological battlements and spiriting the misdiagnosed to freedom. There are many weaknesses and limitations within their analysis . . . one major omission in their work is the analysis of the specific problems and oppression experienced by women. Gender, patriarchy and misogyny were not high on the agenda of the so-called radicals – if on their agenda at all. To read their work one would imagine that the mad person was gender-neutral, when we know that women make up a large percentage of those who are positioned within the discourse of madness. For, since the Victorian era, madness has been synonymous with femininity, and women predominate in both the 'official statistics' and popular discourse . . . It was the feminist critics who redressed the

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<sup>13</sup> While I agree with this assertion, Barbara Smith's study otherwise comes to very different conclusions than does mine, with respect to her analyses of works by Millett, Kaysen, and others.

balance (156-157).

In many ways, though, antipsychiatry and feminism have shared common goals. For example, Caminero-Santangelo addresses the point emphatically made by Phyllis Chesler (1972) and Showalter that, for many feminists, “electroshock [is] inherently patriarchal” (29). Caminero-Santangelo discusses the fact that Showalter acknowledges her ambivalent indebtedness to Laing’s politics because Showalter appreciates much of what he did, wrote, and said, but has angry or mixed feelings about some of his and Cooper’s claims and practices.

As I noted in chapter 2, Caminero-Santangelo explains why she believes that some feminist theorists are no better than some psychiatrists in the ways they “other” women who are labeled and/or who self-identify as “mentally ill.” She finds this parallel especially problematic given the legacy of feminist critiques of psychiatry. Caminero-Santangelo cites feminist theorists who romanticize female “madness” as potentially liberatory, and says these theorists thereby deny women’s legitimate pain and trauma, or relegate them to a nearly mythical status.<sup>14</sup> Caminero-Santangelo also discusses how

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<sup>14</sup> In “The Psychoanalytic Approach to Artistic and Literary Expression,” Jean-Francois Lyotard (1993/1995) provides an anti-romantic reading of mental illness and argues that individuals deemed mentally ill may be capable of creating art “despite” their problems. He cautions against and ultimately refuses a correlation between mental illness and creativity. His stance is precisely the opposite of Kay Redfield Jamison in *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* (1993/1994). (Jamison, a professor of psychiatry, also wrote *An Unquiet Mind* [1995/1996], a memoir of her own struggles with manic-depression. Her perspective works well with the stance adopted by the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention: “Only in the last 25 years has scientific evidence demonstrated that creative people are more vulnerable to depression and suicide, regardless of whether or not they become famous” [“Creativity, Depression, and Suicide Prevention,” <http://www.afsp.org/index-1.htm>].) Lyotard uses medicalizing language and (in this respect, like Jamison, and the AFSP) he relies upon diagnostic categories. His points are intriguing, and have some clear parallels with Caminero-Santangelo’s. Lyotard notes: “Obsession and schizophrenia in themselves no more make it possible to disclose the figure than does health” (7); “It is not true to say that the greatness of his work is in inverse

some feminist portrayals of the medicalization and psychiatrization of women suggest that women have little or no agency, and how if they choose to take medication or comply with other psychiatric interventions, some feminists may label them as sell-outs who are willfully colluding with their own domination by pharmaceutical companies, Western clinical biomedicine, and patriarchy-writ-large (in short, women who make these choices are sometimes seen to be “bad” women and “bad” feminists).

There are pros and cons to all of these stances, of course, whether profeminist, antipsychiatric, or some combination of both. Clearly there are multiple and even at times competing ideologies at work concerning mental health treatment (including medication usage and compliance), gender, and identity that must be attended to by critical thinkers who care about such things.<sup>15</sup> It is important that themes of

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proportion to the intensity of the psychic disorder from which he suffers” (Ibid.); and “. . . from the depths of madness truth may be uttered . . . The converse is not true: intensity of internal disorder is not sufficient to produce poetry” (Ibid.).

<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to Mark Nichter, with whom I have had a number of conversations about the complexity of this topic. There is a plethora of medical anthropology literature regarding the “emotion industry,” with special attention paid to issues of compliance, so-called “problem patients,” pharmaceuticals, doctor-patient interactions, and so on. I am interested in exploring how medication compliance is depicted in female psychiatric survivors’ self-representations versus how this subject is presented in the images and stories about the “mentally ill” that are made by non-psychiatric survivors. For example, in *Girl, Interrupted* (1999) there are scenes of patients “cheeking” psychiatric medication in the asylum. In one scene, Susanna (Winona Ryder) is given a drug that makes her feel sick, dizzy, and out-of-control. Her point-of-view in the film merges with the viewer’s in an overtly nauseating way; the camera is used to put the viewer in her shoes, as it were. In another scene, Lisa (Angelina Jolie) teaches Susanna how to properly “cheek” her medication. While these patients might be judged as “non-compliant,” the film portrayals code them as exerting agency and independence by fooling their doctors and nurses and by refusing to take medications they do not want. (Later in the film, however, Susanna willingly takes medication more than once, and in these scenes the suggestion is made that her choice was a smart one to make if she wants to “recover.”) Another feature of the compliance and agency debates that merits attention is the fact that individuals who take psychiatric medication may have their neurochemistry changed as a result, especially after long-term use. During a conversation we had about this subject, Kathleen Powers pointed out that the issue of neurochemical alterations brings up an important set of questions regarding how individual agency is and can be constituted.

victimization, agency, and choice are more robustly theorized than they often have been by feminist thinkers whose work addresses the terrains of women's "mental illness."

While most members of the "Mad Pride" movement are against forced treatment, some of its members have publicly noted that to blame people for choosing to take medication or to seek psychotherapeutic services (including, in some cases, hospitalization) is unhelpful and further stigmatizes already stigmatized people, many of whom are women (*Mind Freedom Online*).

Kate Millett's work is an interesting entry point for considering the relationship between autobiography, antipsychiatric activism, and feminism. Millett's often cited memoir *The Loony-Bin Trip* (1990) is an unapologetic narrative about institutionalization, medicalization, identity formation, and agency written by a woman who is a renowned feminist activist, writer, artist, art colony facilitator, teacher, and mentor. Importantly, Millett has also been a longstanding and outspoken participant in the American and international patients rights movements, and has openly identified as an ex-patient and psychiatric survivor in a variety of public contexts. In recent years, Millett has been involved in the "Mind Freedom" and "Mad Pride" movement, and has joined her voice with many others who approach psychiatric care from a human rights "watchdog" standpoint. One of Mind Freedom's goals has been and continues to be to compel the American Psychiatric Association to provide "actual proof" for the APA's claim that "mental illnesses" are biological.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For more information about the Mind Freedom perspective, see: <http://www.mindfreedom.org>

On two different occasions, I had the opportunity to talk with Millett when we were both at East Coast feminist gatherings during the early 1990s, shortly after she published *The Loony-Bin Trip*. I did not know at that time that I would definitely pursue a doctorate, or that if I did that it would be on the present subject, but as a mental health clinician and activist I had already established myself as being to the left of center in terms of my views on psychiatric treatment and the mental health industry more broadly. Because I self-identify as a “survivor” of suicide,<sup>17</sup> and have had a great deal of experience with mental and emotional issues of my own, and within my family, community, and professional lives, I was extremely interested in talking with Millett, whom I had admired for many years. During each of our conversations, Millett asked me, “Have you ever been on the inside, Diane?” (direct, idiomatic shorthand for asking if I had ever been “locked up”). It is important that she asked me this question because in doing so she helped me realize that the topic of women’s institutionalization, especially when forced, was something that merited a special kind of activist attention and analysis. She also implied in her remarks and questions, at least as I interpreted them, that I was and am in a different category of “psychiatric authenticity” than she is, due to my never having been “on the inside.”

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<sup>17</sup> The terms “survivor of suicide” and “survivor of suicide loss” are used by some individuals who have survived the loss of a family member, friend, loved one, client, etc. “to” suicide. The national and international suicide survivors movement is quite large and includes support groups, publishing venues, Internet sites, conferences, and various kinds of social networks. Some organizations, like the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, assert that suicide is most often precipitated by untreated or inadequately treated depression and other types of presumably neurobiological “mental illnesses” (see <http://www.afsp.org/index-1.htm>). Suicide prevention activists often seek to delink suicidality from the common societal myth of depressive irrationality (i.e. the “victim” was under a kind of spell and didn’t know what s/he was doing). Many suicide prevention organizations want to educate the public about the dangers of severe depression, whatever its causes.

I see Millett's role as a psychiatric survivor spokesperson to be a central feature of her life as described in her memoir and within other arenas of her existence - arenas in which she does things besides being a writer, like talking one-to-one with someone like me, going to rallies, and doing public speaking. In her analysis of *The Loony-Bin Trip*, Hubert mentions Millett's involvement in "organizations opposed to forced hospitalization" (101) and discusses her role as a psychiatric survivor activist. In my estimation, however, Hubert's invocations of Millett's activist roles do not go far enough in describing these roles as Millett actually assumes them - quite deliberately and consistently - as a writer *and* "outside" of, or in addition to, her life as a writer. Hubert does an excellent job of discussing Millett's investment as a writer in arguing that psychiatric hospitalization is a form of "social control" (109), and, with regard to the memoir, notes that "Millett's account of coercive treatment and forced hospitalization offers a powerful critique of commitment procedures and psychiatric practice" and that "[b]y telling of her own experiences of 'mental illness' and forced hospitalization, Millett advocates new ways of thinking about the mind and its capacities" (106). Yet, Hubert's discussions of Millett's relationship to antipsychiatric discourse make it seem that Millett has been powerfully "influenced" by its proponents, and Hubert does not say enough about how Millett herself is among those proponents as a leader and as a major force to be reckoned with.

Caminero-Santangelo writes, "*The Loony-Bin Trip*, by Kate Millett, is perhaps the most remarkable literary testament to the tension between experience and theory,

between the urge to bear witness and the temptation not to listen” (43). Caminero-Santangelo notes that Millett’s dual role as “a recognized theorist of gender relations” and as a ““woman of the asylum”” are each brought “to bear on her writing about her experience. They do not seem to coexist easily, and they provide striking gaps in the text” (Ibid.). Like Hubert, Caminero-Santangelo overtly acknowledges that Millett is an “antipsychiatric theoretician” in her own right, but she could say more about Millett’s leadership in the antipsychiatric activist world.

According to Caminero-Santangelo, “Millett the author of *Sexual Politics*, the feminist, the antipsychiatric theoretician (she makes explicit references to Laing, Szasz, and Cooper [249]), wins out over Millett the woman who has had a personal encounter with madness, defined not as social deviance but as loss of agency. She herself is ultimately unwilling to listen to the authority of her experience” (44). In this passage, it is clear that Caminero-Santangelo, like Hubert, largely thinks of Millett’s activism in terms of how she “references” the famous men of the antipsychiatric movement in her writing, but does not go beyond this observation to describe Millett’s own role in the movement as a well-known spokesperson.

Caminero-Santangelo also claims that, for Millett and other memoir writers/theorists, “Madness is treated to a remarkable extent as a signifier for socially constructed femininity and/or for protest against it. This assumption, accurate though it may be at times, marks the point where asylum narratives and feminist critiques part company. For whatever social explanations for mental illness are put forth by the

autobiographical texts, the experience of madness ultimately exceeds those explanations and can no longer be contained by them” (46). This commentary sets the tone for the conclusion of this section of her book, in which she ultimately and disturbingly asserts that women are “rendered helpless” by madness, an experience that holds them “in its grasp” (51).

I respect Caminero Santangelo’s point that the female-madness-as-rebellion trope is problematic, and that it often heroizes madness at the expense of acknowledging women’s lived suffering. I also understand that Caminero-Santangelo appropriately seeks to talk against many feminist theorists who have participated in the romanticization of “madwomen” by using the madness-as-rebellion trope in their writings. However, to say that Millett and other women who have written “asylum narratives” cannot adequately perform feminist critiques in their work because mental illness “exceeds” their “explanations” is likewise rather problematic. Moreover, to say that these women are “helpless” in a mentally ill “grasp” from which they cannot escape in fact undermines the complex arguments about agency that Millett and others make in their narratives. Amy Weiss (2000) similarly takes issue with this kind of “silencing” thesis. She remarks, “In the past, feminist discussions of women’s madness have been polarized. Some insist that women’s madness is a form of subversive power, while others contend that women’s madness silences them. This work, however, has often neglected to examine how women describe their experiences of madness” (thesis abstract).

I appreciate Hubert’s and Caminero-Santangelo’s wish to rigorously and deeply

engage women's narratives of "mental illness," and to respond to feminist theorists and the theories they sometimes write about "madwomen." I also believe that it is crucial to consistently situate those writers who as activists do many things for an activist cause other than write, and I do not accept that Millett and other feminist autobiographers are helpless or that they are incapable of adequately explaining their own experiences of "mental illness."<sup>18</sup>

As I noted in chapter 1, being or being labeled "mentally ill" can be difficult in its embodiments, but "mentally ill" can also be adopted as an identity that is strategically useful to those who choose it or otherwise accept it. There is an enormous range of perspectives on what it means to be or to be labeled mentally ill, although I observe that the perspectives as they are rendered by memoirs and other kinds of autobiographical texts are far more limited than the larger range of perspectives that probably exists. Millett's identity as both ex-patient and psychiatric survivor, and her multi-layered antipsychiatric stance, are important and need to be taken seriously. For others who

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<sup>18</sup> I submitted a version of part of this chapter for publication consideration in a peer-reviewed journal and it was evaluated by Caminero-Santangelo, with whom I had an extensive E-mail correspondence following receipt of her feedback (via the journal's editors); she gave me permission to cite her reviewer comments in my dissertation. Caminero-Santangelo maintains that she did not mean to suggest, as I interpreted she had, "that Millett and other women who have written 'asylum narratives' cannot adequately perform feminist critiques in their work because mental illness 'exceeds' their 'explanations.'" Caminero-Santangelo notes that "a great part of the chapter that [Wiener] references from my book is about the feminist critiques embedded in each woman's work. What I wrote is that 'the experience of madness ultimately exceeds' the 'social explanations' that these texts offer (I've added emphasis there). What I was trying to suggest was that the authors undertake to give social explanations for mental illness (e.g. historical limitations on women's roles, etc.); but that, when they were in the grip of the 'illness,' they represent it as something that takes on a life of its own. In terms of the way it is experienced by the women, it is more than just a critique of society, or patriarchy, or what have you. (As I put it in the next paragraph following the one [Wiener] quoted, madness 'comes to outgrow its causes' [46].) The writers depict their illnesses in ways that go beyond a theoretical 'point.' But this does not mean that the feminist critique cannot be undertaken, or that it is 'inadequate' as a feminist critique" (quoted from Caminero-Santangelo's review of my essay).

identify themselves as mentally ill and/or as consumers/survivors/expatrients (“c/s/x”), creating and engaging identities that are nuanced and agentic mark a disability studies perspective which likewise merits sustained attention.

The invocations of and purposes for “a disability studies stance” are also varied and should not be presumed to be singular or monolithic. For example, some c/s/x individuals may engage a disability studies perspective to argue, in agreement with Millett, that psychiatry is a form of social control but that, in disagreement with Millett, being “mentally ill” can still be a productive identity formation. Others may engage a disability studies perspective as a way to refuse to view mental illness as equivalent with “helplessness” and “silencing.” The terms/concepts “helpless” and “silence” are not only problematic and unhelpful, as I have already suggested, but they are so broad that they descriptively flatten the heterogeneity of human experience. Some who choose to adopt a disability studies perspective might consider the complicated lives in which unromanticized mental illness, and its autobiographical representations, may play simultaneously fraught, meaningful, and crucial parts.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Beresford (2000), a professor who writes “from the perspective of a psychiatric system survivor,” strives to draw coalitions between psychiatric survivors and individuals forwarding a disability studies agenda.

**Take Two: Complicating Racial Tropes in Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted***

“Genres are the highest units of symbolic selection and combination susceptible to formalization. The dynamic behind this generic modelling of discourse derives from the tropes, conceived not or not simply as a system of classification, a rule of ornament, or a recipe for persuasion, but as constituting a fundamental cognitive faculty of the mind.”

– Barry Rutland, *Genre, Trope, Gender* (5)

In *Playing in the Dark* (1993), Toni Morrison initially argues that blackness acts as an influencing if not precipitating signifier for mentally ill white women’s awareness of their own “danger of collapse” (vi). I extend Morrison’s frame to suggest that, during these crucial moments, these women may be interpreted as entering the realms of lived experience with their own labeled-as-“crazy” subjectivities. Morrison starts her text with the example of Marie Cardinal’s “autobiographical novel” *The Words to Say It* (1983/1996), a book that is largely focused on Cardinal’s experiences with her own “mental illness.” According to Morrison, Cardinal realizes her own “madness” in the context of her relationship with “blackness.” Throughout *Playing*, Morrison turns her gaze upon various (mostly white male) authors to accentuate her reading of how blackness as sign is “used” by white authors, and how “black people ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis in literature not written by them” (viii). However, Cardinal’s work is the only example used by Morrison that makes reference to women’s “mental illness.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2000), and in their introduction to the edited volume *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability* (1997), David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder point out that disability often enables the flow of narration in literary texts, but that while disability may (or may not) be overtly acknowledged at the start of a given work, it is typically “trumped” by race, class, gender, and other “markers” of “difference.” This seems to be the case with Morrison’s use of Cardinal’s memoir of “madness” to forward her own arguments about race.

Following Morrison, I want to consider the discursive potential of suggesting that the pattern she describes indeed exists and has problematic consequences. Is this usually unexamined trope of blackness so naturalized that it seems to become, as Rutland (1992) puts it, “a fundamental cognitive faculty of the mind”? I adopt a Morrisonian stance to consider race in relation to narrativity, emplotment, and voice in Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted* (1993) and its film adaptation (1999). My discussion of the film adaptation will attend to issues of translation from page to screen, engage questions about the film’s representations of gender, race, and sexuality, and address several extradiegetic elements present in the film.

Kaysen’s text closely tracks her experiences as a not famous, previously labeled as “crazy” woman during her psychiatric institutionalization in the late 1960s. Although Kaysen is a published writer, and her memoir has recently been analyzed by several feminist theorists, her work doesn’t carry the same kind of cultural weightiness as writings by more famous psychiatrically labeled women, like Kate Millett and Sylvia Plath.

According to the first edition flyleaf, Kaysen’s text is “more than a story of young women and madness” but is “a clear-sighted, unflinching historical document” about the late 1960s in the United States. This description intrigues me, since Kaysen’s story is of a deeply socially privileged, white, upper class, teenager locked up in a famous Massachusetts asylum. When I read the book for the first time a number of years ago, I was curious about what this “unflinching historical document” would have to say - if

anything - about racism, classism, and global politics during the United States' post-Kennedy years. As noted above, during that time period, in part inspired by the Civil Rights movements and other social justice movements of the time, antipsychiatry activists and members of a growing patients rights movement began to question the legitimacy and power of mainstream psychiatric ideologies and their material deployments via the use of medications, forced institutionalization, and electroconvulsive therapy (ECT, or "shock treatment"). At 18, Kaysen was locked up during a time of upheavals of various kinds, and she describes some of these changes and challenges as they were uniquely experienced behind the asylum's walls.

I employ some flexibility in identifying how I read for and interpret what Morrison calls "symbolic figurations of blackness" (ix). She discusses "economy of stereotype, metonymic displacement, metaphysical condensation, fetishization, dehistoricizing allegory, and patterns of explosive, disjointed, repetitive language" (67-9). When introducing these categories and her explanations for them, Morrison says that "it may be useful to list some of the common linguistic strategies employed in fiction to engage the serious consequences of blacks" (67).<sup>21</sup> Although any work claiming to coagulate a legitimate recollection (or, as Kaysen's first edition back cover calls it, a

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<sup>21</sup> To set up her argument here, Morrison cites *Figures of Division: William Faulkner's Major Novels* by James Snead (1986). Morrison says that Snead "comments that racial divisions 'show their flaws best in written form'" (66) and she goes on to quote his "helpful categories" (67) before listing her own "common linguistic strategies," from which my citation (67-9) is derived. In using the words "consequences of" as she does, I think Morrison is perhaps describing at least two phenomena: 1) what, according to her, does (or can) happen *to* black characters and people as a result of the "symbolic figurations" to which she refers; and 2) what, according to her, frequently happens within a given fictional work to white characters and black characters as a consequence *of* the way black characters are situated within that particular fictional narrative.

“reconstruction”) can be interpreted as at least partly fictional, a memoir’s special relationship to fictionalization is different than a work of literature’s. Below, I briefly discuss this distinction in order to further situate my close reading of Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted*.

As I suggested in chapter 2, autobiographical scholars, both feminist and non-feminist, have attended to the false dichotomy (and, for some, absurdity) of defining “literature” and literary texts as utterly contrived and imaginative, and “non-fiction” texts like memoirs as fact-based truth. This scholarship is extensive, and has become an enormous academic enterprise in its own right. Many scholars point out that autobiography writers utilize the construct of “authenticity” for various strategic reasons, recognizing that it carries value while also often acknowledging that “authenticity” is an invention. Sandra Frieden (1989) remarks, “Autobiographical structure which resists convention on a formal level (insofar as it is recognizable through external or internal signals as autobiography) has consequences for the ways in which the depicted experience is appropriated. Appealing through ‘authentic’ rather than fictional models, autobiography invites an adaptation of its given notions of self and experience” (184).

Moreover, “authenticity” is not the only principle that is crafted and processually realized in autobiographies. As happens with many kinds of storytellers, an autobiographer’s enactments and definitions of self, identity, and being are likewise invented, flexible, and heterogeneous. Quoting de Lauretis, Frieden explains how some women “rework” autobiography to “directly [address] ‘the subject in division’ [de

Lauretis 1984, 28], revealing the ideologically concealed gaps in subjectivity and memory which inhere in traditional notions of autobiography” (185).

The “symbolic figurations of blackness” in *Girl, Interrupted* are largely framed within a complex system of signification practices that multiply inform the reader of Kaysen’s “madness” via gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and racial stories or metaphors. Recognizing black figurations in the narrative’s characters of color and its description of late 1960s historical events, the reader is also invited to digest a plethora of black semiosis in Kaysen’s personal symbolic structuring, even at the level of word choices. Her text’s pastiche of images, including references to darkness, skin, and night’s textures, helpfully lends itself to a racialized trope reading.

The book begins with Kaysen describing how her Vassar College roommate, Georgina, knew she was experiencing a great change in her relationship to consensual reality. Soon, Georgina and she would repeat their room-sharing relationship inside McLean hospital, the prestigious Boston mental institution where Sylvia Plath, James Taylor, Robert Lowell, and Ray Charles also spent time as psychiatric patients. In part perhaps to convey that Susanna is isolated and is an outsider in multiple ways, the film makes it seem like Susanna and Georgina meet for the first time in the asylum, but this is not the case in Kaysen’s original recounting. Describing Georgina’s descent into madness, and their subsequent conversation about it, Kaysen writes,

She was in a theater watching a movie when a tidal wave of blackness broke over her head. The entire world was obliterated - for a few minutes. She knew she had gone crazy (5).

Here, the use of the term “blackness” is consistent with Western, Eurocentrically coded notions correlating black with fear, the unknown, chaos and, indeed, craziness.<sup>22</sup>

Lisa is a “sociopathic” asylum resident who sings her skin with lit cigarettes, enjoys risk taking, and frequently tries to escape, only to be “caught and dragged back” (20) in several days. The other patients find pleasure in listening to her describe her adventures outside. When she’s found and returned, she’s “dirty, with wild eyes that had seen freedom” (20). This dirty girl with her wild eyes is eerily reminiscent of racist tropes in North American and European literature as described by Morrison. In Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* and Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Jazz*, the words “dirty” and “wild” are used in different ways to invoke mysterious or inaccessible knowledge, or to incite readers to imagine blackness, obviously for dissimilar authorial reasons. Morrison’s invention of *Beloved*’s Beloved and *Jazz*’s Wild are reclamatory examples of how “dirty” and “wild” can be re-appropriated from racist white male narratives to center and carefully relay African-American cultural values and social issues.

Lisa the escapee’s dark, dirty wildness anticipates Kaysen’s later references to Bobby Seale “in chains like a slave” (93). These comments occur when she discusses how the residents became aware of and related to outside-the-ward, global politics in general, and 1968’s movements and shifts in particular, through ward televisions.

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<sup>22</sup> In anti-racist scholarship, it is important to attentively unpack this problematic set of metaphors, especially as they relate to the construction of mental illness. A fine example is Sander Gilman’s seminal essay “On the Nexus of Blackness and Madness” (1985). See my discussion of Gilman’s work in a review of Fernando, Ndegwa, and Wilson’s *Forensic Psychiatry, Race, and Culture* (1998) in *The Disability Studies Online Magazine* (Wiener 2000).

Kaysen perceives that although the “enslaved” girls are without certain freedoms in their psychiatric prison, their lives, unlike Seale’s, lack political prowess. Here blackness is a sign for civil liberties, and is privileged in a non-pejorative, even romanticized way: “We looked at him, a tiny dark man in chains on our TV screen with the one thing we would always lack: credibility” (93).

Lisa is racialized in other ways. Once when she is returned, Kaysen recalls,

. . . they’d taken away her belt. Lisa always wore a cheap beaded belt - the kind made by Indians on reservations . . . they took away the belt so she couldn’t hang herself. They didn’t understand that Lisa would never hang herself (21).

When she gets out of seclusion, Lisa gets back her belt. There are many possible ways to read this segment. Identifying Lisa with Indianness forms potential analogies with indigenous Americans’ political and racial disenfranchisement. However, her “cheap” belt suggests a more complex message, one which may be commenting upon or critiquing the economic discrimination faced by Native Americans, or one which insults them, blaming them for their own difficulties. Moreover, since Lisa is called wild and dirty, is labeled a sociopath, and is thus supposedly unpredictable, what does literally and metaphorically connecting someone like Lisa with “cheap Indian belts” say about her, and about the “Indians” who supposedly made the belt she wears? American Indians have long been stereotyped as wild, dirty, unpredictable and sociopathic, according to “the white man’s” standards. Kaysen’s language, whether or not she intended it to do so, reinscribes racist beliefs about Native Americans. By racializing Lisa in this way, Kaysen insults Native American identity, since if one is wild, crazy, dirty and owns a

cheap Indian belt, she is (in this reading) likened to an Indian, or perhaps to a tourist. Although Kaysen may have intended her description of Lisa and her belt to be a positive social commentary in support of Native Americans, I do not think that her comments come across in this way.

Georgina's boyfriend Brad, whose presence enunciates the ward's sexuality, is "dark and good-looking in a flat, all-American way" (28). Connecting "darkness" with the sensual world is no new trick. Brad's paranoid ideation (as a professional therapist might put it) includes obsessing about his father, whom he thinks is a spy who invaded Cuba (29). Kaysen's references to post-revolutionary, Castro-led, late 1960s Cuba are a seedbed for racial tropes, as is the "all-American" fantasy of invading (and successfully colonizing?) Cuba.

Daisy, who comes to the asylum seasonally and is often near death from anorexia, lives her mysterious life in a room where it "was too dark to see anything" (33). Sneaky Lisa concocts a plan to get a peek inside of Daisy's room, and succeeds. Daisy is marked from the start as an erotic character, and her dark, seemingly unknowable life and room support this marking. Kaysen "noticed that Daisy was sexy" (32) and a character who self-identifies as "the Martian's girlfriend was in love with [Daisy] too" (33). In my reading, I do not just picture a dark room housing a sexy girl, but a racially marked narrative in which darkness and blackness are eroticized and white characters are transfixed upon sneaking into the seductive room of darkness.

Sometimes, Kaysen describes her environment and her own "madness" in frank,

dialectically racist, even Orientalized terms. When discussing a staff-to-client ratio for lucky people's supervised excursions outside, Kaysen says "there were one-to-ones: a nurse and a patient bound together like Siamese twins" (49). Some of the non-ward experiences included visits to a local ice cream parlor: "The floor of the ice cream parlor bothered me. It was black-and-white checkerboard tile, bigger than supermarket checkerboard. If I looked only at a white square, I would be all right, but it was hard to ignore the black squares that surrounded the white ones. The contrast got under my skin" (52).

Predicting a later vignette, "velocity vs. viscosity," when she says "insanity comes in two basic varieties: slow and fast" (75), Kaysen illustrates how being overstimulated by her environment contributed to her awareness of her own "madness": "I was having a problem with patterns. Oriental rugs, tile floors, printed curtains, things like that. Supermarkets were especially bad, because of the long, hypnotic checkerboard aisles" (40-1).<sup>23</sup> Kaysen's unreflective descriptions of rugs, floors, curtains and shopping excursions edify her bourgeois status, and the complexity of her access to buying or owning not only food but Oriental rugs is left unquestioned. In these examples, race and class markers are inexorably intertwined, as they are elsewhere in the book. Indeed, the book's flyleaf remarks that McClean is not only known for its famous former clients, but "for its progressive methods of treating those who could afford its rare sanctuary."

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<sup>23</sup> The passage "Velocity vs. Viscosity" was reprinted in Rebecca Shannonhouse's (2000) collection of women's narratives of mental illness. In Shannonhouse's introduction to the passage, she notes that Kaysen "describes the sensations of insanity" (116).

I suppose it is safe to assume that these people could also afford more than a cheap Indian belt.<sup>24</sup> This further complicates both why Lisa wears one and why Kaysen chose to describe it with such detail and emphasis. Most published memoirs that detail American women's "madness" narratives are written by privileged, middle class, white women. Meri Nana-Ama Danquah's *Willow Weep for Me* (1998) is a notable exception. The political economy of memoir publication in the United States, including who often gets published, who typically chooses to and can publish, and who usually has the financial means and time to write memoirs in the first place, merits critical consideration.

Kaysen asserts that although Taylor, Plath, and Lowell all stayed at McClean, "Ray Charles was the most famous ex-patient. We all hoped he'd return and serenade us from the window of the drug-rehabilitation ward. He never did" (48). While Mr. Charles is inaccessible, and Bobby Seale and "black people, young people, Vietnamese people, poor people—some dead, some only bashed up for the moment" (92) appear on the girls' television, there are three times when African Americans, who Kaysen personally encounters, are described in the book.

One is a fear-inducing boss for whom she worked, pre-lockup: "I was terrified by the supervisor. The supervisor was an elegant and attractive black man who roamed all day among the aisles of typists, watching us work. He smoked while doing this. When I lit a cigarette, he pounced on me" (131). The black man is allowed to smoke, and she is not. Although Kaysen is antipathetic toward the Vietnam War and seems like she thinks

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<sup>24</sup> In the film, Cynthia (a patient) picks a lock to help a group of patients access a passageway. Another patient says it is a good thing that the asylum has "a sliding scale" so they can all mingle with "the trash."

she is pro-Civil Rights, her allegedly progressive politics are more centrist than left. Alternately, re-reading the passage above, she might be saying something about misogyny, but it is so enmeshed with her race markers that the reader (at least this one) is left feeling disturbed by this segment's messages.

Like Ray Charles, some of the black people mentioned in the text are depicted as embodiments of hoped for nurturing or actual caretaking.<sup>25</sup> Kaysen's description of the ward's working class aides links Irish and black women, and unblinkingly considers both groups by using ethnically fraught mothering stereotypes: "The night staff consisted of three comfy big-bosomed Irish women who called us 'dearie.' Occasionally there was a comfy big-bosomed black woman who called us 'honey.' The night staff would hug us if we needed a hug. The day staff adhered to the No Physical Contact rule" (88).

At the end of the book, Kaysen sees Lisa again after a long absence:

A few years after Georgina went west, I ran into Lisa in Harvard Square. She had a little toast-colored boy with her, about three years old. I hugged her. "Lisa," I said, "I'm so happy to see you."

"This is my kid," she said, "Isn't it crazy that I have a kid?"

She laughed. "Aaron, say hello." He didn't, he put his face behind her leg.

She looked exactly the same: skinny, yellow, cheerful.

"What have you been doing?" I asked.

"The kid," she said. "That's all you can do."

"What about the father?"

"Later for him. I got rid of him." She put her hand on the boy's head.

"We don't need him, do we?" (162-3).

Lisa was an addict upon placement in the asylum, and prided herself by continuing self-identification as a drug user for the duration of her asylum stay. One message suggested by the passage above is that, shortly after discharge, Lisa got pregnant after having a

relationship with another addict, who happened to be black, kept the child and was dumped or left by the guy. Obviously, this abounds with stereotypes and conflicting messages, and they get more complicated:

“I’m a suburban matron in Brookline. I’ve got a kid, I take the kid to nursery school, I’ve got an apartment, I’ve got furniture. Fridays we go to temple.”

“Temple!” This amazed me. “Why?”

“I want-” Lisa faltered. I’d never before seen her at a loss for words. “I want us to be a real family, with furniture, and all that. I want him to have a real life. And temple helps. I don’t know why, but it helps.”

I stared at Lisa, trying to imagine her in temple with her dark-skinned son (163).

In the asylum stories, Kaysen sentimentalizes Lisa’s character for her sociopathy, anger with order, and sheer nausea in response to a bourgeois way of life. Above, Kaysen tries to cope with anti-establishment Lisa as the mother of an interracial child who now accepts “family values” and, with the help of religious normalization, seeks “the best” for her little son. Here, Kaysen at least tries to address interwoven race, gender and class markers.

I began this discussion by questioning and expanding the notion of blackness as a signifier for white women’s madness. Morrison doesn’t consistently articulate how and by whom blackness and its markers are determined and defined. Her own citations often suggest that blackness symbols are established via black cultural codes, like jazz writ large, Louis Armstrong’s musicianship, soul food, or black orderlies in a rich white’s environment, as she lists them in her own text. In some ways, Morrison’s somewhat limited definitions potentially essentialize blackness in a not very helpful way. I believe blackness is a complicated semiotic category. In my reading, I have aimed to avoid

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<sup>25</sup> I further address this point below in my discussion of the film *Girl, Interrupted*.

essentializing blackness, and I have attempted to critique Kaysen for her practices in this regard. Yet, I am aware that my own reading practices may too essentialize blackness as the “Other.”

I want to talk about this material without reinscribing the primacy of whiteness as sign or othering blackness as sign. Of course, in Morrison’s dialectical formulation, it is truly blackness as sign which has (at least initial) primacy, not whiteness as sign, since blackness “invents” or “informs” whites’ own experience of themselves, as is Said’s thesis in *Orientalism* (1994). Morrison wants to address racially appropriative practices, but I am concerned that her project and my undertaking its application may unwittingly minimize or simplify the complexity of what makes anyone know or do anything. How one (in the case of *Girl, Interrupted*, a white woman) arrives at an awareness of her own “madness,” how it is “known,” is clearly more complex than a set of blackness signification practices. Blackness is one signifier, and, like all signifiers, it is not singular, but multivalent and generative.

It is not good enough to solely track and document blackness as it relates to white women’s “madness” or any other white story event. Scholarly readers need to continuously address matrices of signifiers, including blackness, whose interrelatedness informs whiteness as sign. I am in no way suggesting that blackness should be shelved as a closed topic, since this would be far from helpful. Instead, although it is crucially important to engage with blackness, race (as it is more broadly construed), class, sexuality, ability, gender, ethnicity, and so on must also be incorporated into trope

analyses, although this may be easier to say than to do. What are the mutually constitutive, coalescent, and/or linguistically chained signifying clusters that live and breathe with blackness as sign for whiteness as sign? What are the ideological state apparatuses that are most effective in clouding the correspondences between these constitutions, so that they and their relationships are rendered unexamined, unmarked? Reading white women's "madness" narratives for blackness signifiers, or following blackness as a trope in the context of finding other signifiers in white women's "madness" narratives (many of whose discursive machinations, along with blackness as sign, feed racism, classism, and patriarchy) is important, and it is worthwhile to keep looking and countering, learning to re-read and un-read as we read.

**Take Three: *Girl, Interrupted* from Page to Screen**

“Autobiography offers an alternative to patronizing and marginalizing (mis)representation by others; it thus provides a medium for counterdiscourse that challenges stereotypes and misconceptions. An important aspect of its counterdiscursive potential is that in autobiography disability is likely to be represented as a fact not a trope, a ‘living condition’ not a metaphor for some undesirable moral status, which is too often the case in fiction, drama, and film. It may even be seen as a condition that is not only culturally constructed but constructive of distinctive culture.”

– G. Thomas Couser, Introduction to “The Empire of the ‘Normal’: A Forum on Disability and Self-Expression” (305-306)

*Girl, Interrupted* (1999), James Mangold’s adaptation and embellishment of Susanna Kaysen’s 1993 memoir, stars Winona Ryder (Susanna), Angelina Jolie (Lisa), Clea DuVall (Georgina), Whoopi Goldberg (Valerie) and Vanessa Redgrave (Dr. Wick). The film’s ensemble cast displays Little Orphan Annie-like antics that vacillate between pointedly and tritely rendering inpatient psychiatric traumas lived during the late 1960s, a time of social and political upheaval and friction. In *Gracefully Insane* (2001), a history of McClean, the famous New England institution in which Susanna Kaysen, and, as noted above, many other “mad” celebrities were locked up, author Alex Beam refers to the late 1960s, and, by extension, to Kaysen’s diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder as “hippiephrenia.”

Kaysen’s story of psychiatric institutionalization during the tumultuous late 1960s was a bestseller and quickly joined the ranks of American mental health literary classics like *The Bell Jar* and *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, as the memoir’s and film’s reviewers are pleased to point out. Like the memoir, the film wrestles with many critical mental health issues, including: what it means to be mad in a mad and maddening world;

whether or not diagnoses are reliable or even real; how gender, class, ethnicity, and psychiatric labeling practices act in relationship to each other; and how recovery often occurs outside of (and sometimes despite) the arenas of medication and therapeutic monitoring.

Winona Ryder is often given the task of portraying outsiders, and in *Girl, Interrupted* does her finest job since *Beetlejuice* (1988), despite the fact that *Girl*'s audience cannot be expected to believe that she is supposed to be eighteen years old. Ryder's dual role in the film (as actor and co-executive producer) may also be discussed extradiegetically, in terms of her life outside of the film. While the film was in production, in interviews with the media Ryder strategically mentioned her own "battles" with emotional problems, and included in her descriptions the fact that she admitted herself to a psychiatric hospital when she was 20 because of "anxiety." She noted on more than one occasion that she could "relate" to what happened to Kaysen. Although Kaysen was the film's associate producer, there are mixed reports in the media about the level of contact Kaysen and Ryder had with each other during filming.<sup>26</sup>

Veteran Redgrave and flexible Goldberg give the film its spine, lending a firm backdrop for Jolie and Brittany Murphy, who are the film's star and best kept secret, respectively. Murphy splendidly portrays impudent and depressed hoarder Daisy, adding

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<sup>26</sup> See: "Girl, Interrupted: Behind the Scenes" ([www.unitic.com/GI\\_bts.html](http://www.unitic.com/GI_bts.html)). In this piece, it is reported that Kaysen and Ryder had little to do with each other. However, it appears that the writer and the actor met more than once during production of the film. In an interview segment in *HBO First Look: The Making of Girl, Interrupted*, included among the DVD's special features, Kaysen makes clear that she not only wanted Ryder to feel supported and "trusted" in Ryder's portrayal of her, but that she "felt very close to [Ryder] – a strange kind of kinship."

to her list of “madwomen” roles, since she played Lisa in Oprah Winfrey’s 1998 remake of *David and Lisa*. Jolie’s portrait of sociopathy won her a deserved Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, upping the ante from a comparable but far less developed role as Legs in *Foxfire* (1996). Jolie also played a character struggling with emotional and sexual dilemmas in *Girl* (1998).

Notwithstanding its success at summoning pivotal questions about psychiatry, the movie is more romanticizing of madness than the memoir. The film’s sentimentality hinges upon sexual and racial devices that engage the audience, and that are completely distinct from the book’s storyline.<sup>27</sup> Looking at the film’s sexuality messages proves both distressing and exciting. Lisa scathingly refers to Redgrave’s Dr. Wick as “Dr. Dyke.” This label plays upon the audience’s recognition of Redgrave in *Julia* (1977). When a secondary character, Cynthia (Jillian Armenante), asserts that she, like Lisa, is a sociopath, Lisa meanly chimes in, “No, you’re a dyke.”<sup>28</sup> The book does not allude to

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<sup>27</sup> In a recent essay in the online Flemish cultural studies journal *Image and Narrative*, Donata Meneghelli (2004) interestingly grapples with the ongoing question of “fidelity” in film adaptations of literary texts.

<sup>28</sup> This interaction takes place during a scene in which the group of female patients breaks into Dr. Wick’s office in the middle of the night. Showing off as the leader of the pack, Lisa hands each young woman her confidential case file to review. They discover what has been written about them, including their diagnoses (referred to by Lisa – and, later, by Susanna – as “diagnonsense”). The film comments on “compliance” by encouraging viewers – at least in this scene, and in some others – to applaud the women’s “inappropriate” behavior and autonomy, since, in addition to their breaking into the private office of an expert doctor, they are not allowed to access their privileged psychiatric records. Cynthia and Lisa exchange their remarks in this context, as Lisa is unwilling to share what she believes to be her prestigious status as a “sociopath” with a “dyke.” Lisa chides Cynthia after saying that “we” (sociopaths) are “rare” and are usually men. In the film’s trailer (and in the “making of” feature included on the DVD), Lisa’s retort is “No, you’re gay.” (The *Internet Movie Database* includes this information under “Alternate Versions” of the film. Perhaps “dyke” rather than “gay” was used in the final cut because it is more graphic?) In a deleted scene included on the DVD, fellow patient Polly (Elisabeth Moss) dines in the cafeteria with Susanna during her first day in the asylum, and gives her introductions to each of the characters. Cynthia is coded as queer from the start: she is first shown yelling at the food service providers, as Polly explains to Susanna that Cynthia is in the asylum “because her parents don’t like the way she dresses.”

eroticism between intimate friends Susanna and Lisa. In contrast, Ryder and Jolie's heightening on-screen sexual tensions culminate in a less-than-naive kiss on the mouth, achieved while smoking marijuana during an escape-from-the-asylum scene. No aspects of this scene exist in the memoir (no running away, no pot, no kiss).

The kiss scene is a hot topic for audiences wondering about Hollywood's ongoing fascination with lesbian chic, and the mainstream film industry's appropriation of queer sexuality to sell images. Jolie's reputed bisexuality<sup>29</sup> adds to the steaminess and irony of her portrayal of a flirtatious woman who enjoys verbally bashing "dykes." Jolie's Lisa has been potently received by audiences of various likes and persuasions, including those viewers who celebrate her as Jon Voight's daughter, given that Voight's role in *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) has gay cult movie status. It is important to emphasize that Susanna's kissing of Lisa is rationalized within the film through the use of an illicit drug, thereby disclosing the film's apparently phobic reaction to consenting homosexuality. *Girl, Interrupted* simultaneously downplays and invokes (or markets) lesbianism.<sup>30</sup>

The film's racial messages are even more problematic than its charged opinions about sexuality. As noted above, the memoir's black characters include the father of Lisa's post-hospital life child, absent from the film's attention, since only Daisy's and

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<sup>29</sup> The popular press has had a heyday with this subject. One of my favorite examples is Sarah Warn's July 2002 piece on the queer media and culture website AfterEllen, which is amusingly entitled "The Angelina Jolie Phenomenon: Bisexual Poster Girl?"

<sup>30</sup> In an interview segment in *HBO First Look: The Making of Girl, Interrupted*, Winona Ryder notes that (in the film) Susanna "kind of fall[s] in love" with "captivating" Lisa.

later Susanna's discharges are highlighted in the movie.<sup>31</sup> While the memoir mentions the presence of multiple African-American individuals (albeit secondary to the story's nucleus), the film has only one: Valerie/Goldberg, also invented for Hollywood consumers - head nurse Valerie in Kaysen's memoir is white.

As discussed above, per Toni Morrison, white people symbolically and tangibly rely on black individuals to define themselves; according to Morrison, whites often cannot know their "true" selves in the absence of comparison to what many scholars call "the Other." Morrison's logic is prominent in the translation of *Girl, Interrupted* from page to screen. Valerie/Goldberg is inscribed throughout the film as a character that is time-bound and historically trapped. She wears a tacky poncho and has a huge afro, while Susanna/Ryder looks like she could step off the screen at any moment into a scene from *Reality Bites* (1994). Goldberg as Valerie is a coalescence of all the black women staff members mentioned in the memoir. An essentialized, primary caretaker for the large number of upper middle class, young white women around her, Valerie is the film's concocted black stereotype who literally tells Susanna who she is and who she can be.

After Susanna refuses to get out of bed, Valerie carries her to the washroom and, in an act of tough love, puts her in a tub full of cold water. Susanna protests, calls the asylum "a fucking fascist torture chamber," and Valerie responds strongly, "No, see, I've

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<sup>31</sup> Daisy's horrific post-discharge end on-screen bears no resemblance to the memoir's story, in which her death is calmly reported to her former fellow inmates by the asylum staff. In the film, Susanna and Lisa spend a night in Daisy's apartment after running away. Lisa is cruel to Daisy, and the next day she is dead. Susanna finds Daisy hanging in her bathroom, with blood on her hands. Perhaps melodramatic plotlines that feature suicide augment the rewards filmmakers reap beyond those abetted by homophobic titillation. If this is the case, it is an understatement to say that highlighting a suicide is perilous and troubling in a movie of this type.

worked in state hospitals - this place is a five star hotel.” Susanna racially mocks Valerie, who says, “You know, I can take a lot of crazy shit from a lot of crazy people, but you - you are not crazy.” Susanna continues to mock Valerie, and asks her to explain her “diagnonsense.” Valerie replies, “You are a lazy, self-indulgent, little girl, who is driving herself crazy.” Valerie is then met with more of Susanna’s racist speech: “Is that your, um, medical opinion? Huh? So that’s what you’ve learned in your advanced studies at night school for Negro welfare mothers? . . . You pretend you’re a doctor . . . youse ain’t nothing but a black nursemaid.” Valerie maintains her equilibrium, and continues with her original line of thinking, as she responds, “And you’re just throwing it away.”

In a later scene, after Daisy’s death, Susanna confides in Valerie, “I know what it’s like to want to die . . . [to] hurt yourself on the outside to try to kill the thing on the inside.” Valerie replies, “It’s all well and good to tell me all this, but you got to tell some of this to your doctors.” Susanna continues, “How the hell am I supposed to recover when I don’t even understand my disease?” and Valerie responds, “But you do understand it – you spoke very clearly about it a second ago . . . put it down, put it away, put it in your notebook, but get it out of yourself, away, so you can’t curl up with it any more.” Susanna takes these comments as inspiration to write more, and apologizes for having racially attacked Valerie, her emblem of sanity in a crazy place. While she is not tragic like *Imitation of Life*’s (1934) Delilah, Valerie can be interpreted as a late 1990s version of a Hollywood “mammy,” who tells Susanna “Do not drop anchor here, understand?”

Goldberg's Valerie is exceedingly sensitive, ultra-mothering, and hyper-real. Her strong portrait is aided by viewers' familiarity with her roles as Guinan, the empathic hostess who intermittently appeared during five seasons of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, as *Ghost's* (1990) healer/medium Oda Mae Brown, and as *Jumpin' Jack Flash's* (1986) compassionate political helper, Terry Doolittle. Her role as The Grand Banshee, the fairies' shapeshifting bird leader in the television production *The Magical Legend of the Leprechauns* (1999) is parallel to her character in *Girl, Interrupted*: as *Leprechauns's* sole black character, who is surrounded by and oversees white juniors, Goldberg's head changeling responsibilities are unquestionably central to the tale.<sup>32</sup>

Susanna and Lisa's shared Jewish ethnicity is altogether absent from the film, and therefore cannot be easily read as one reason among many for their fervid bond. Valerie's influence vis-à-vis Susanna, despite what is depicted as her utter difference from her, makes it possible for Lisa's power over Susanna to be incomplete. Valerie/Goldberg as the catalyst for Susanna's recovery is therefore the film's driving force.

It is compelling to think about the film's "life" in the DVD world. I am interested in the special ways that DVDs may potentially affect audience reception, especially given that the price of DVD players is far less prohibitive than when they were first issued.

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<sup>32</sup> After I had made these observations about Goldberg's role when I initially saw the film in 1999, I was interested to discover much later that Krin Gabbard had made some similar points in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* piece published in February 2000. He notes that the film "once again reassur[es] white audiences that good-natured African-Americans only want the best for sensitive, affluent white people. Goldberg has lent such support in the part of a housekeeper in *Clara's Heart* (1988) and *Corinna, Corinna* (1994), and as a spiritual medium in *Ghost* (1990). So why not as a psychiatric nurse? Never mind that there is no such character in Kaysen's memoir" (B10).

Thus, DVD players are now a plausible technology-commodity for many among the general public (even if the prices of the disks themselves typically continue to be high, the rentals of DVDs have skyrocketed over the past several years). The created “titles” for the various “scenes” on a disk that one can specify for viewing via the DVD player provide interesting fodder for discourse analysis, as does a DVD’s packaging. The “titles” emplot characters and scenes for viewers in a new way. The DVD release of *Girl, Interrupted* includes an internal disk label that is teeming with spilled aspirin (Susanna Kaysen overdosed on aspirin as part of her suicide attempt).<sup>33</sup> The DVD insert features a “split face” image - half the face is Winona Ryder’s and half the face is Angelina Jolie’s.<sup>34</sup> I believe that this “split face” image plays upon misunderstandings and stereotypes to attract audiences, as it highlights the famous conflation of “madness” with a “split” personality.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> During a conversation we had about the film, my friend Ericha Scott (who happens to be a psychotherapist) cleverly observed that how the *Girl, Interrupted* DVD “spins” is worthy of contemplation. I believe that this point is especially important given the disk’s portrayal of a toxic level of aspirin and the physical and psychic results (including “spinning”) that apparently arose for Kaysen (and Kaysen as portrayed by Ryder) in consuming this suicidal quantity of painkillers.

<sup>34</sup> Susan White helpfully reminded me that this image is similar to the composite photograph advertising Bergman’s *Persona* (1966). This kind of image has been used to market other films as well.

<sup>35</sup> For a useful discussion of media conflations of “madness” (especially “schizophrenia”) with a “multiple personality,” see Wahl (1995). He is against conflation, and supports the “correct” use of medical terminology. Alas, Wahl uncritically accepts that these diagnostic labels effectively describe certain “real” psychological “conditions.”

**Take Four: Sam, Benny & Joon meet Oprah Winfrey's David and Lisa**

“**Mad**, *adj.* Affected with a high degree of intellectual independence; not conforming to standards of thought, speech and action derived by the conformants from study of themselves; at odds with the majority; in short, unusual. It is noteworthy that persons are pronounced mad by officials destitute of evidence that themselves are sane.”

– Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary* (77)

Watching *Benny & Joon* (1993) multiple times since its release, and reading many reviews about it, I am not convinced that the film is simply committed to demonstrating complicity with standard American ideas about deviance or pathology, and normalcy or health. I also do not believe the film only highlights a paradigmatically blissful heterosexual union that hinges on domesticity, as many of its reviewers have implied. Instead, I perceive that *Benny & Joon* confounds commonly received notions of madness, and questions gender and sexual norms, by presenting complex relationships between characters who defy easy categorization. Below, I use the 1998 television production *Oprah Winfrey Presents: David and Lisa* as an intertextual device to read the psychiatric, sexuality, class, and gender stereotypes that are played out but also questioned by *Benny & Joon*.

In my reading stance toward this film, as with other films discussed in the dissertation project, I join and hopefully add to what I see as ongoing conversations about madness and cinema, film as an ideological state apparatus, queer interpretation, and feminist theory. My contention is that while *Benny & Joon* seems at first glance to privilege heteronormative, misogynistic, psychiatry-as-powerful views, with a closer look the film can be interpreted to be ambivalent about, and even critical of these convictions.

I am less curious about whether or not the film's director and producers intended to participate in a set of discursive practices that both reify and undermine these beliefs than I am intrigued by the possibilities of multiple readings.

*Benny & Joon* is the story of a young woman, Juniper, or "Joon" (Mary Stuart Masterson) who suffers from emotional difficulties and ostensibly cannot live without the ongoing supervision provided by her guardian, her older brother Benny (Aidan Quinn). Joon's "illness" is not clearly labeled or diagnosed within the film.<sup>36</sup> She takes medication and sometimes hears voices. Joon receives psychiatric care because her brother and fellow community members are uncomfortable with her raging fits and other kinds of seemingly uncontrollable outbursts. These outbursts sometimes lead her to set fires or cause property damage, or otherwise place her at risk. In one scene, she stops traffic while wearing a snorkeling mask and wielding a ping pong racket.

Benny has been taking care of his sister since their parents died in a car accident when she was a child and he was a young man. Joon's psychiatrist Dr. Garvey (C. C. H. Pounder) thinks Benny should put Joon in a group home and get on with his own life. Benny is a car mechanic who runs his own shop. He is a workhorse whose promises of a wholesome life and sexual fulfillment are continuously interrupted by his ongoing need to intervene in his sister's life - in his view, he must rescue her from danger and risk, and

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<sup>36</sup> Although the film is quite vague about Joon's "actual" diagnosis, some of the film's reviewers nevertheless diagnose her with "schizophrenia." Oddly enough, even Gabbard and Gabbard (who ought to know better, I think, given the scope of their project) participate in this curious and disturbing convention. Moreover, the Gabbards make the slippery error of saying that the actor who plays Joon has this condition, not Joon. Discussing the rarity of black mental health providers being depicted in mainstream films, they remark, "An occasional exception appears, such as a sympathetic black female psychiatrist who treats Mary Stuart Masterson's schizophrenia in *Benny & Joon*" (143).

protect her from herself. Joon's illness etiology is mysterious and vague; as viewers we are not sure if her parents' traumatic deaths precipitated her many problems, or if she was deemed "mentally ill" while they were still alive.

Benny's one ongoing pleasure is regularly playing poker with his working class chums. Before one of his poker nights, he comes home from work and learns from Joon that their housekeeper has quit, and she is only the latest in a long line of fed up part-time caregivers who tend to become overwhelmed by Joon's unique behaviors. Frustrated and disappointed, Benny drags Joon along to his friends' gathering, and when he leaves her alone for a little while with the guys, she joins the game. Joon acquires a player's cousin, Sam (Johnny Depp), as a consequence of her losing hand. Sam cannot read, likes to sit high up in trees, has no job, pretends to be Buster Keaton, and is obsessed with silent movies. Sam's cousin took him in under family pressure and is delighted to be given the opportunity to be rid of his weird relative by placing him as a poker bet, an action unquestioned by undersocialized and impulsive Joon. By the time Benny finds out the extent of his sister's losses, the game is long over. Benny argues with his friend about not wanting to take Sam home, and ineffectually deliberates the absurdity of Sam having been placed as a bet in the first place.

Sam waits outside while the game takes place, and Benny and Joon don't meet him until it is over. Joon recognizes him as the man who stared at her from a tree that she and Benny drove past on their way to a previous poker game. During that game, Joon and Benny first hear that Benny's friend has a relative to dump. Aware of Joon's history

of “scaring away” all of the housekeepers he hires who attempt to watch over her when he is at the garage, Benny decides Sam can stay with them, as long as Sam cooperates with Benny by acting as Benny’s surrogate, and agrees to be Joon’s new caregiver. Sam and Joon become entranced with each other, and the film depicts their love story and its repercussions in their and Benny’s lives.

This is a cursory, seemingly up-front presentation of the film’s main narrative. I have deliberately set up unabashed parallels with the heterosexual, comedic story told about the cutesy, “loony” film on its own videocassette box, in order to question these simplified presentations and under-analyzed assumptions. Here are some highlights from the video box:

Johnny Depp (*Edward Scissorhands*), Mary Stuart Masterson (*Fried Green Tomatoes*) and Aidan Quinn (*Avalon*) star in this unique romantic comedy, hailed as “the best date movie since *The Cutting Edge*” (Joe Leyden, *Houston Post*).

Joon is a smart and pretty young girl who just happens to be a little unbalanced. . . Sam [is] a whimsical misfit who soon charms his way into Joon’s heart with his Buster Keaton/Charlie Chaplin-like antics. Now if they can only find the perfect mate for her overprotective brother. . .

A funny and heartwarming story full of romance and magic. . . A “. . . charming, loony love story. . .” (Susan Granger, *CRN/American Movie Classics*), it’s the perfect movie for all audiences.

To begin to complicate what MGM/UA advertises as both a date movie and family entertainment, I will discuss Oprah Winfrey’s 1998 television production *David and Lisa*, because it clearly illustrates some of the troublesome effects of contemporarily engaging longstanding, gendered stereotypes of madness and recovery. I compare Lisa

and David to Joon and Sam, and address Benny's placement in the Sam and Joon equation. I will also discuss why I believe Joon and Sam, unlike Lisa and David, contribute to new ways of decoding cinematic images of psychological difference.

*David and Lisa* is a love story about two mentally troubled teenagers who meet in a residential facility for the "disturbed." Both the 1962 film and the 1998 television broadcast are based upon psychiatrist Theodore Rubin's fictionalized case study, *Lisa and David*.<sup>37</sup> Even though Dr. Rubin referred to them as "exceptional children," the difficulties David and Lisa face are beyond those of childhood and clearly fall into the purview of adolescent angst. Frank Perry, who directed the 1962 film, accentuated this distinction, and it is also strongly emphasized in Oprah's production. *David and Lisa* is imparted as a coming-of-age story, with more than a hint of honesty about adolescent sexuality.

ABC-TV says on its webpage, "David and Lisa: The Inside Scoop,"

Oprah Winfrey Presents: David and Lisa is a classic love story updated with a '90s twist. A moving tale of hope and triumph, it follows two teens who are living at a school for disturbed youth. As the pair slowly fall in love, they find in each other the power to rebuild their lives (n. pag.).

The site includes the "Spotlight" video hyperlink, "Oprah on making David and Lisa," which is introduced by the text, "Find out why she wants to share this timeless love story with a whole new generation" (n. pag.). Oprah's well-intended pop psychology thesis lies in her chosen theme song for the production. This syrupy sweet tune, "Touch is

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<sup>37</sup> Eleanor Perry wrote the screenplay for the 1962 production *David and Lisa*, and co-wrote the screenplay for the 1998 television remake.

Love,” expresses David’s longstanding problem with being touched, and how it is cured as he forms intimacy with Lisa.

*People* magazine echoes Winfrey’s good-feeling rhetoric. Reviewer Mike Lipton calls the television movie “a case study in how to rejuvenate a screen classic,” and describes “three riveting performances” by Lukas Haas as David, Brittany Murphy as Lisa, and Sidney Poitier as the doctor who monitors their care (28).<sup>38</sup> The remake is not very different from husband and wife team Frank and Eleanor Perry’s film (which also featured distinguished acting). Other than having David call Lisa “disassociative” rather than “schizophrenic” (as he did in 1962), resituating the story in sunny California, and the obvious differences in cinematic style permitted by modern lighting and editing, the 1998 television production is annoyingly apolitical, and its “timeless” quality is disturbing.

Frank and Eleanor Perry’s *David and Lisa* addressed the psychiatric ideal that existed in mainstream American culture and was depicted in films during the late 1950s and early 1960s. As I noted above, in their book *Psychiatry and the Cinema*, Glen and Krin Gabbard call this period the “Golden Age of psychiatry in the cinema,” when movie-based and corporeal psychiatrists were the “authoritative voices of reason, adjustment, and well-being”(75). The “golden age” ended in 1962, and *David and Lisa* was one of the key threshold films that was released during the transitional period at the end of the golden age and before the subsequent on-screen and off-screen critiques of psychiatry.

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<sup>38</sup> Sidney Poitier played the first on-screen black psychiatrist in *Pressure Point*, released in 1962, the same year as Frank and Eleanor Perry’s *David and Lisa*. See: Gabbard and Gabbard, 89.

The Gabbards explain, “Made outside the studio system, films such as Robert Wise’s *Odds Against Tomorrow*, John Cassavetes’s *Shadows*, and Perry’s *David and Lisa* attempted to abandon the old Hollywood myths and seriously examine themes of the family, love, and human communication. Although *David and Lisa* appropriates psychoanalysis in the same spirit as the old classic films . . . it nevertheless brought a new, less sensationalized image of mental illness to the screen” (86). *David and Lisa* was radical when compared to its predecessors because of the way it realistically examined stigmatized lifestyles, and suggested that health does not arise only as a result of effective clinical practices. Despite its reflexivity, the film ultimately hailed the merits of psychiatry by emphasizing the positive value of psychotherapy and institutionalization.

*New York Times* writer Caryn James (1998) remarks that Oprah Winfrey’s remake “barely acknowledges the changes that have taken place in the study of psychology in the last three decades” (n. pag.). She quips, “like an extension of the ‘Oprah Winfrey Show,’ this is television as therapy” (n. pag.). James notes that she does not encourage the “growing Oprah backlash.” Instead, James says that while she generally supports Oprah’s projects, she questions Winfrey’s re-creating *David and Lisa*, which she claims “comes from the Oprah Winfrey who joins with her audience in group therapy, which is not one of her better roles” (n. pag.). It is interesting to think about what ideological frameworks Oprah was participating in when she decided to remake and barely change an almost forty-year-old story that commented upon mainstream psychiatry when it first appeared.

As noted, Oprah's production employs gendered stereotypes of madness. Rubin's fictional account and its adaptations all present David as less pathological and less damaged than Lisa. David and Lisa do help each other, but it is David whose recovery is featured by the case study's storyline, and both its film and television adaptations. The relationship's recuperative powers are realized in a masculinist narrative that is present in both the 1998 television production and in the Perrys's 1962 classic.

Like both versions of *David and Lisa*, *Benny & Joon* suggests that romantic love can sometimes be more effective than medicines and myriad therapies, or at least that affiliations outside of the bounds of psychiatric practice are essential to mental health and must work as psychiatry's helpmates in order for a person to approach recovery. In contrast to *David and Lisa*, only *Benny & Joon*'s female protagonist is labeled mad, while her lover Sam is perceived to be offbeat. He too may be mad, or perhaps neither of them is mad, especially when they are together. Like Lisa and David, Joon and Sam are each improved by the power of love. Unlike Lisa and David, Joon and Sam equally (but differently) benefit in terms of their changed ability to relate to others. The narrative does not privilege Joon's recovery over Sam's, or vice versa.

Both *Benny & Joon* and *David and Lisa* are framed by complex familial dynamics. Benny and Joon are parentless, and, as mentioned above, their problems largely stem from this situation. Sam is estranged from his mother; Joon helps Sam write a letter to her. The film is unclear about whether or not Sam has a father. Parenting and deprivation themes inform the gendered connections between these characters. Benny,

Sam, and Dr. Garvey act as Joon's parents; David, and Lisa and David's psychiatrist act as Lisa's.

In the 1998 version, Lisa has a female social worker whose function in the story parallels both Dr. Garvey and Ruthie (Julianne Moore), who eventually becomes Benny's girlfriend. In *Benny & Joon* and the 1998 version of *David and Lisa*, an unusual woman who is labeled unstable is parented by two men, with a helpful female (or two) on the storyline fringes. The males maintain and control the definition of female instability, while this instability in turn defines the males as parent replacements.

Benny can be read as paternalistic due to his overprotectiveness, his perpetuation of a male savior role, and his support of the psychiatric profession, but he is clearly opposed to institutionalizing his sister and never does this to her. David is both mistrustful of psychiatry and indebted to it, and it is he, more than the doctor and therapists, who helps Lisa, even though he ultimately gets more out of the bargain than she does. David also feels conflicted about institutionalization in both his and Lisa's lives.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> In the 1998 version of *David and Lisa*, David's role as a therapeutic expert who helps Lisa is complicated when he discusses her "case" with their psychiatrist (Poitier). He violates her boundaries in other ways in order to increase his rapport with her. The Gabbards provide some interesting examples of cinematic doctors' therapeutic violations. An example that they could not cite, since it appeared after their book was published, is in *K-PAX* (2001), when Dr. Mark Powell (Jeff Bridges) brings his psychiatric patient Prot (Kevin Spacey) to his family barbecue on Independence Day. Although David is not a real doctor, and thus his ethics are different than would be the case if he were, his therapeutic behaviors echo other film portrayals. In *Now, Voyager*, fellow patient Charlotte "presents" Tina's case to Dr. Jaquith, and he both teases her about being after his job and appreciates her special interest in the troubled younger female. Winfrey's *David and Lisa* also resembles *Now, Voyager* in a scene when doctor and patient roam the grounds to talk about David's dream – in *Now, Voyager*, Charlotte and Jaquith wander outside in the greenery, and address her dreams. Another cinematic connection (pointed out to me by Kathleen Powers) is that Allison Janney, who plays the catatonic military wife in *American Beauty*, plays 1998 David's emotionally distant mother.

Comparing David and Sam to Lisa and Joon, an experienced viewer may recognize the familiar media stereotypes of the brilliant but odd man and the hysterical women. David and Sam are somewhat rational even in their craziest moments. The audience is also confronted with David as an eccentric man, Lisa as an incoherent woman, Sam as a sensitive man, and Joon as a blatantly oversensitive woman. Anxious David is wacky, intelligent, creative, detached, and aggressive, and is disconcerted by trying to express himself emotionally. Babbling Lisa is petulant, confused, and helpless, and has infantile communication skills. In contrast to Lisa, Joon is a stronger, more intricate character than the 1962 gender stereotype who barely changes in 1998.

Joon is so tough and strong that even Benny can't always manage her. At first, Sam can't either, but eventually Sam establishes skillful ways of communicating with Joon, and is often better at it than Benny. Before Sam, Joon has frightened away all of the housekeepers who act as her caregivers. She violates both major media stereotypes of the crazy woman: she is neither pathetic and sniveling, nor psychotic and murderous. Joon throws things, paints and sketches, makes clever remarks about her surroundings, dons bizarre costumes, sets things on fire, hides in the quiet dark, and weeps openly to her brother. Joon can be read as a coalescence of David and Lisa, as she encompasses multilayered gender roles that elude simplistic classification.

Sam is a transgressive figure who helps Joon transition between madness and non-madness. He is a strange and unique person who finds creative ways to negotiate cultural and social space. Like Peter Pan, Sam is perpetually immature, charming, and

boyish. In an interesting contrast to the way proudly juvenile Peter Pan is mothered by Wendy Darling, Sam acts as a mother substitute for Joon, and Benny is like her new Dad. Since Benny needs Sam's help to care for Joon, the viewer knows who wears the pants in this bizarre household, at least at first.

While his style is utterly distinct from hers, Sam, like Joon, does not comply with gender norms. Sam is a character who "turns the world upside down."<sup>40</sup> He makes grilled cheese sandwiches with an iron and mashed potatoes with a tennis racket, loves to clean and does so with unwavering grace, lounges in trees, is often wordless, achieves catalytic conversions of seemingly unresolvable pain, straddles mailboxes, and flies with ropes and pulleys outside of psychiatric ward windows. His being able to be placed as a bet and won in a game makes Sam unusual indeed.

Sam is a trickster, whose physical comedy and public performances as a street entertainer are both archetypal and merely human. Sam's clowning, position as an intermediary, and odd gender plot him as a liminal figure. His repeated appearance near a mailbox is an example of his liminality, since mailboxes contain communication in transit between "here" and "there." Victor Turner (1969/1995) states,

The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention . . . (95).

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<sup>40</sup> I am grateful to Barbara Babcock and Victor Turner for this turn-of-phrase.

Sam is a misfit who ritually clowns within the confines of modern society, and his usage of carnivalesque easily joins him to Joon, an outsider by virtue of socially defined madness. Together, in public and in private, they are insiders for each other. Unlike Lisa and David's connection, Joon and Sam's partnership problematizes both the question "So, who's really mad?" and the idea of heteronormative coupling.

Benny is a mostly gentle working class guy who spends more time under the hood than between the sheets. He is committed to embodying values of fairness and integrity. Benny isn't tough enough to prevent Sam's cousin from winning the poker game, but more than not being tough enough, he knows he must take Sam home because he understands that this behavior is morally correct: in some odd way, Sam was "won" fair and square. Benny believes he is ethically obligated to honor his friend's bet according to their social codes.

Benny's history of not getting much between the sheets action is changed by Sam. By trusting Sam with Joon, Benny participates in an exchange. He trades Joon for the opportunity to go out on dates, and Sam and Joon share sex while Benny is out of the house. In his controlling big brother role, Benny symbolically evokes a form of impotence that is somewhat curable but can never be totally resolved. If he upholds his self-appointed task as Joon's supervisor, Benny will always be at least partially celibate since he cannot have constant access to sex. His erotic impotence is contingent upon his far from complete power in overseeing his sister's life.

Initially, Benny doesn't imagine Sam will become physically intimate with Joon,

and when he discovers they are having sex, he feels angry and betrayed. Benny kicks Sam out, and Joon has a severe tantrum. Feeling guilty after their fight, Benny drives off at night to get Joon her favorite dessert (which he winds up getting wrong). While he is gone, Sam appears at the door. Joon and Sam leave together on a bus. She behaves in a way that a psychiatrist might call a “decompensation,” and Sam winds up riding with Joon in the ambulance that takes her to the hospital. Later, Benny forgives Sam, and asks for his help to gain access to Joon, who in her anger at Benny refuses to see him while she is an inpatient.

Sam and Benny devise a scheme to sneak into the locked psychiatric ward - they cannot legitimately visit Joon because she tells Dr. Garvey that she does not want to see anyone. Benny realizes that Joon needs to be on her own, and tells her this when he accesses her hospital room. Dr. Garvey chooses to offer a consultation instead of having Benny arrested, and the trio decides that Joon is ready to have her own apartment. Benny is no longer willing to relinquish his freedom to be a sacrificial brother. If he resumes his overprotective role, and succeeds in making Sam and Joon abandon their sexual alliance, he would have to give up the increased possibility of sex that he now has with Ruthie. More importantly, Benny admits to himself that Joon is a grown woman who can make independent decisions about her own body. In this way, the film advocates for “mentally ill” and other “marginal” people’s rights to freely express their sexuality. This view is notably in direct opposition to those mental health residential program policies dictating the typical (and heterocentric) separation of “the sexes” to avoid fraternization of any

kind after hours.<sup>41</sup>

Joon and Sam can be called “queer” because they resist banal labeling practices, and frequently transgress gender and sexuality norms. In addition to referencing “queer” as it is often deployed in queer theory scholarship, here I also take up an older meaning of the term “queer” to mean strange or different, and am using it to describe madness and eccentricity as queer, too. Sam and Joon are multiply queer, by virtue of their anti-normativity and nonconformity. In “Tremble, Hetero Swine!” queer theorist Cindy Patton describes “[the] problem of messy analytic categories” (175) within her discussion of identity, strategic essentialism, and politics. My use of the term queer participates in “messy analytic categor[y]” making, for what I hope are beneficial or at least provocative effects.

According to Patton, postmodernist rejections of subjectivity and questions of identity at times magnify the difficulty of creating interventions that disrupt the heterosexist status quo. Patton states, “If deconstructive readings of identities have produced anxiety for those who need them in order to make practical political claims, then reinterpreting identities as strategic systems with pragmatic purposes and unintended effects may make it easier to forge new strategies (with or without ‘identities’), and certainly make easier alliances between styles of queer practice” (175). I believe that

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<sup>41</sup> These forms of sexual “prevention,” forcible separation, and their historical legacies, often conveyed in the falsified guise of “for your [and *our*] own good” epithets, may be interpreted in part as extensions of a longstanding eugenics and social control orientation that frowns upon, severely discourages, and even at times punishes mating and reproduction between stigmatized, socially “deviant,” or otherwise “undesirable” individuals. The scholarly literature on this subject is extensive. For a notable example, see Briggs (2000).

“reinterpreting [the] identities” of atypical Hollywood representations like Joon and Sam, and evaluating *Benny & Joon*’s media deployments, including actor interviews, video box commentaries, and film reviews, can help “forge new strategies” that potentially “make easier alliances between styles of queer practice.”

Although I have highlighted the film’s counterhegemonic promise, *Benny & Joon* cannot be read as utterly emancipatory. The vague usage of and complicity with psychiatric discourses - in the film’s explanatory absences regarding Joon’s illness etiology and diagnosis while showing her “treatment” - evidence a fraught agreement with conventional psychiatric ideology as naturalized and right, yet the film’s uncertainties could also be viewed as a critique of this ideology’s truth claims. Put differently, the film communicates in both these directions simultaneously, and this layering may have both positive and negative consequences for its potential to educate or otherwise influence a viewing public about emotional difference.<sup>42</sup>

The film conjures the following questions: Who has permission to be eccentric versus “mad” in mainstream society? Who carries the cultural cachet of eccentricity versus the stigmatic burden of lived madness? Clearly there are gendered messages within the film. Sam’s public displays are seen as the work of an odd but talented street performer, and he is rewarded with applause. Joon’s public displays are seen as disorderly and socially unacceptable, and she is either rescued, arrested, or sent to the

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<sup>42</sup> Chapter 5 includes a discussion of some of the debates concerning the “impact” that films and television programs are often said to have upon their audiences, including those stigmatized and “othered” people represented by the stories that are imaged and otherwise told about “them.” A significant amount of attention has been paid along these lines to representations of “mentally ill” individuals—and “deviance” more broadly—in the media.

hospital against her will. Sam plays at being “crazy” on the psychiatric ward, as a distracting device to help Benny get to Joon’s room, but even in this extreme situation he isn’t kept locked up.

Before she moves into her own apartment, Joon’s supervision in Benny’s and her home can be considered an enactment of domestic institutionalization. While her limited freedoms are surely better than the life she would likely lead as a perpetual psychiatric inpatient, my “alternative,” anti-heteronormative reading of the film does not alter Joon’s inability to be wholly free, nor does it change the fact that Joon’s gender, despite its bent qualities, incriminates her as mad within the film *and* extradiegetically (in other words, she would be similarly incriminated if she existed as a real person outside of the film).

While Benny and Sam parent Joon, Joon also participates in a mutually constitutive bond with the men in her life. Joon has a part in her own recovery, and in the ways she heals men. Recovery takes place by means other than sex-as-health, as when it is achieved through intimacy-as-health. One way Joon and Sam heal each other is by how they share a home. Before they meet, Joon has a sibling’s love and Sam has no one. Once they meet, they share love. In my view, *Benny & Joon* privileges monogamy as curative, rather than a heteronormative lifestyle for what I claim are queer players. Both Joon and Sam have permission to be deviant, if they are together and in a safe home. While this stance is differently conservative than one which centers unmarked or assumed straightness, it is politically useful to read *Benny & Joon* as a cultural product that depicts queerness alongside monogamy, rather than only seeing the film as a

conventional, heterosexist mating narrative.

**Take Five: Sylvia: The (Latest) Tropification of Sylvia Plath**

“The distance and sometimes contradiction between one’s own image and one’s own life in terms of events can be a powerful utopian force. The dialectic between myths and experiences is fruitful and alternatively stirs up or is fed by the energy of emotions and affections.”

– Luisa Passerini, “Women’s Personal Narratives: Myths, Experiences, and Emotions” (196)

“The Sylvia Plath story is told to girls who write  
They want us to think that to be a girl poet  
Means you have to die  
Who is it  
That told me  
All girls who write must suicide?”

– Bikini Kill, from “Bloody Ice Cream”<sup>43</sup>

“I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart.  
I am, I am, I am.”

– Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (199).

While there was attention paid to her - however inadequate it may have been - during her short lifetime, since the famous death of the actual person Sylvia Plath in 1963, there has been a plethora of complex and often competing “Sylvia Plaths” that have been re-presented and at times offered up in quasi-ritualistic fashion to members of consuming global audiences through the workings of media images, autobiographical and literary analysis, and feminist theories of various orientations and persuasions.

Sylvia Plath was apparently familiar with the potential ambivalence attendant to her own representation when she wrote her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. As has been argued in myriad texts, in *The Bell Jar*, like in many of her earlier works and diaries, Plath also seemed keenly aware of her fraught and

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<sup>43</sup> Many thanks to Lane Van Ham for introducing me to this song.

not uncommon positionality as a conflicted, intelligent middle class woman living in a suburban landscape during a time of trenchant gender expectations in England and the United States (Evans 2000). These particular aspects of her persona are disturbingly but befittingly highlighted in the latest Plathian cinematic rendering, Christine Jeffs's *Sylvia* (2003).<sup>44</sup>

As Jeffs's *Sylvia* indicates, Plath's posthumous symbolic potential is seemingly endless, as is the range of its instantiations - Plath (or, rather, her re-presentation) has become, among other things: an icon for the generationally varied dissatisfactions and difficulties in being a mid- to late twentieth century and early twenty-first century (middle class) "wife and mother" who also has aspirations as a "career woman"; a poster child to demand societal aid for suicidal parents; a theoretically strategic straw (wo)man for some feminist critics and teachers who are understanding of and/or angry at her choice to end her life, and who assertively seek out and want "better role models" than Plath for young women in the academy and elsewhere; a seething commentary on the tragedy of premature death and abandoned children; and a wholesale plea to combat gender inequity. Many of these paradigms are suggested or evidenced in Jeffs's film.

Judith Butler (1993) remarks, "It is one of the ambivalent implications of the decentering of the subject to have one's writing be the site of a necessary and inevitable expropriation" (241). Symbol, icon, poster child, straw (wo)man, commentary, plea, and so on, the gathering of stories fashioned out of "Plath" - a collectivity of "decentered,"

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<sup>44</sup> New Zealand director, editor, and writer Christine Jeffs was born in 1963, the year Plath died. I am disinclined to interpret this fact, but do wonder about its significance, if any.

ongoing, and complex discursive interplays between Plath's self-told story in her own writing, her truncated life, and her death - like her novel *The Bell Jar*, is constructed from stretched out and varied pluralizable narratives, which in turn may be read as sites or illustrations of "expropriation."<sup>45</sup>

Sympathetic viewers and readers may wonder how the embodied, material, or real person Plath might respond if she could to *Sylvia*, as well as to the other images and tales made of or woven about her. Moreover, the obsessive curiosity - and perhaps sometimes the well-meaning empathy - revolving around Plath's legacy may be extended to ask how her children have fared, and how they feel today in the wake of the perpetual interpretive hype surrounding (or ensnaring?) their mother's memory, to which I am now also contributing.

In the latest of these mainstream image set incarnations, Christine Jeffs's *Sylvia* at times plays rough and dirty with the perception that Plath indeed surrendered her rights entirely when she put her life to pen and then took that life but not what she had written about it. In Jeffs's film, it is as if Plath did not just take her own life one cold day and

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<sup>45</sup> Butler's underscoring of "expropriation" invites the question of how to ethically engage with and honorably interpret film narrative adaptations of people's lives and written life stories. Bringing a version of Plath's story to a new generation of viewers and readers may seem to be a "good cause," but at what cost? In "Truths," the conclusion to their 1989 essay collection, the Personal Narratives Group editors remark, "*Interpreting Women's Lives* has also grappled with the question of who owns Truth. In positing the centrality of the interpretive act, we recognize the possibility that the truths the narrator claims may be at odds with the most cherished notions of the interpreter. *Personal narratives cannot be simply expropriated in the service of some good cause, but must be respected in their integrity.* What are the rules governing their interpretation? . . . [Some of the authors of the essays herein] do suggest the need to recognize both the agenda of the narrator and that of the interpreter as distinct and not always compatible. And they once again remind us that feminist scholars, by simply criticizing the distortions inherent in disciplinary criteria for validation, have not released us from all institutional constraints upon our own use of these stories or from political agendas that shape our interpretations of them." (264, emphasis mine).

thus terribly absent herself forever from the wretchedly depicted Ted Hughes and their children, friends, and family. In addition to all this, Jeffs's film suggests that "Plath" (as trope and person) in her unwitting and non-consensual ironic endlessness is being simultaneously honored and punished in paradoxical ways for taking herself away from "us," the expectant and voyeuristic viewers, the public world.

The film's deeply uncomfortable nude scenes exemplify this honor and punishment framework, and they are accomplished with creepy skill by Gwyneth Paltrow (as Plath). The unsubtle and largely predictable scenes are offered for our consumption by means of melodramatic excesses, using a familiar blending of low lighting and mournful, dramatic music. The brief scene of Plath naked and alone on her couch is teeming with well-rehearsed stereotypes and presumptions regarding her isolation, sense of rejection, and resigned state of unrelenting pain and injury.

The scene of Plath alone on her couch immediately follows and is explained by a sexually explicit scene between Plath and fed-up, openly unfaithful Ted Hughes (Daniel Craig), who is visiting at her desperate request but from whom she is already separated. The film explains that Hughes has understandably abandoned her in his impatience and defeat because she is so difficult to live with, and he has sought the love of another woman whom he refuses to leave because she is pregnant with his child. After he and Plath have had sex, he unblinkingly explains his reasoning for his choice not to leave his lover, and it is implied that he will not return to Plath. Hughes's admission is uttered after he first confesses that he has "missed" Plath when, while lying in his arms on the

couch, she has naively explained to him how she and he are destined to be together forever.

During and after the sex scene, Hughes as seen from Plath's point-of-view has engaged in a "pity fling," while Plath is depicted as having pathetically tried to win him back. In the two nude scenes, which occur shortly before the suicide scene, Hughes's demonization is presented to heroize and honor the victimized and wronged Plath.<sup>46</sup> This victimization is specifically emphasized in the scene of Plath alone after Hughes has left her yet again. However, the film also unequivocally and differentially genders Paltrow's sexualized body as "negative" and Craig's sexualized body as "positive." Paltrow as Plath is coded as weak, frail, and submissive in close-ups and medium shots both on her own and in contrast with Craig. Conversely, and not surprisingly, Craig as Hughes is exoticized as strongly muscled, virile, and "hunky." The dialogue, sequencing, bodily messages, and manipulative lighting and music deployed in these scenes are both honoring and punishing of Plath.

The entire film and the nude scenes in particular index a representational chasm between two sets of tropes and truisms: Plath as a living private person with a multifaceted existence who happened to take her life; and Plath in her posthumous life as it has been maneuvered and partially taken from her by a morbidly fascinated viewing public. As suggested above, among those who are familiar with Plath as both a person and a presence, there has of course always been a range of reactions to and feelings about

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<sup>46</sup> Jackie Danicki's "chicklit paper jam" analysis of Plath and Hughes is similarly disenchanted with the overly simplistic victimization of Plath and demonization of Hughes in much popular discourse.

her and her brief life's end. Some members of this film's audience probably feel unforgiving, angry, upset, intrusive, ravenous, and just plain judgmental. Others in this imagined audience perhaps understand and have a modicum of sympathy for Plath, and a few may have mixed feelings, too.

In its conclusion, the film problematically stakes a disturbing ideological claim: Hughes's abandonment and betrayal of and refusal to return to Plath were the ultimate precipitating factors in her decision to commit suicide. Hughes is convincingly portrayed by Craig as having a nuanced combination of qualities including frustration, disappointment, compassion, and exploitative, selfish meanness. The film's screenplay was largely influenced by what has been described by critics as Hughes's "response" to Plath in his accounting of their life in *Birthday Letters* (1998). Thus, a specific version of the Plath story is perpetuated by the end of Jeffs's project: Plath was a victim, in her deliberate death she victimized her children, and we as audience members should be upset at how she suffered and was betrayed, but ought not to forgive her for the ghastly decisions she made in the wake of her pain.

Earlier scenes in the movie allude to Plath's relationship with an abusive father and effectively bear witness to the impossibility of her pleasing her difficult mother (played by Paltrow's mother, Blythe Danner). The film likewise attempts to create a picture for the audience of Plath's inner worlds by showing her frustration with her domestic entrapment, her dissatisfaction with a sexist literary environment, her history of despair, and the problems attendant to living with a pushy, charismatic, selfish, dishonest,

unhappy, and ultimately privileged husband. Unfortunately, Jeffs eventually lets us down by letting us know that it was “really” (and mostly) Plath’s failed marriage that did her in. Despite the potential for a complicated set of audience reactions that exist on a spectrum, and the ways that the film does portray the variegated course of Plath’s rich life, Jeffs ends with and encourages a troubling stance toward Plath and her remembrance that is as disrespectful as it is simplistic.

**Take Six: A Meditation on Narrative Peregrinations in *The Hours***

“To look life in the face, always to look life in the face and to know it for what it is. At last to know it. To love it for what it is, and then to put it away. Leonard, always the years between us, always the years, always the love, always the hours.”

– Virginia Woolf to Leonard Woolf, in the suicide letter that she left for him as depicted in *The Hours*

“I begin to have what happened to me.”

– Muriel Rukeyser, “Children’s Elegy” (99)

A uniquely layered portrait of women’s “madness,” *The Hours* (2002) presents its viewers with many opportunities to consider emplotment, narrativity, and voice in relation to temporality and themes of coherence. As I noted in chapter 1, expressions of identity that are (or can be) socially coded as deviant or incoherent have long been experimented with and critiqued by filmmakers, visual and musical artists, poets, as well as by other kinds of narrators. In its representations of “mental illness” and usage of non-linear time, *The Hours* joins other creative endeavors that complicate culturally widespread definitions of coherence versus incoherence and competence versus incompetence.

Like a well-used and brilliantly colored sample from an origami instructional manual, *The Hours* folds and refolds the interconnected stories of three women living at different times, from the 1920s to the present, who are each affected by profound emotional anguish, by their own suicidality or the suicidality of someone very close to them, and by Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Film critic Peter Travers (2003) summarizes the film as follows:

Nicole Kidman de-glams herself with a fake nose to play suicidal author Virginia Woolf, but there's nothing fake about her performance. Kidman's acting is superlative, full of passion and feeling. Woolf is the focus of Michael Cunningham's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1998 novel, which David Hare has adapted into a film that sometimes stumbles on literary pretensions. In the 1920s, Woolf lives in the London suburbs with her protective husband (the superb Stephen Dillane) and battles demons of the mind as she writes *Mrs. Dalloway*. That novel will affect the lives of Laura Brown (Julianne Moore), a housewife and mother living in 1950s Los Angeles, and Clarissa Vaughan (Meryl Streep), a modern New Yorker planning a party for a former lover (an off-key Ed Harris), a poet dying of AIDS. Director Stephen Daldry interweaves these stories with uncanny skill (76).

The three narratives are not merely "interwoven" as Travers remarks. Moreover, Woolf's novel does much more than cleverly bridge the three narratives: it acts as a catalyst for each woman's pained self-awareness and complicated interpersonal alliances. *Mrs. Dalloway* strongly influences the relationships between the women and the characters near them within each of their respective temporal landscapes. Even more interestingly, like the Cunningham novel upon which it was based, the film uses the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* to create relationships that exist between the three women themselves, sometimes in a brave and overt dismissal of linear time.<sup>47</sup>

Laura Brown's son Richard (Ed Harris), who calls Clarissa Vaughn "Mrs. Dalloway" because of her party hostess role and her emotional orientation, says good-bye to Clarissa before killing himself in front of her. Richard tells Clarissa shortly before his death that she is "always giving parties to cover the silence." Clarissa has been planning

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<sup>47</sup> In the second volume of *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur discusses *Mrs. Dalloway* and remarks, "Overall, may we speak of a single experience of time in *Mrs. Dalloway*? No, insofar as the destinies of the characters and their worldviews remain juxtaposed" (112). He refers to a "monumental time" in the novel "resulting from all the complicities between clock time and the figures of authority" (Ibid.).

a party for Richard, and, as she tells him, has invited “a group of people who want to tell you your work is going to live.” After Richard dies, Laura comes to New York and meets Clarissa, who is destroying all of her party preparations in a symbolic act of resignation, anger, resentment, and relief in the wake of her friend and ex-lover’s tragic death. Laura had been estranged from Richard but is treated with kindness upon her arrival by Clarissa, Clarissa’s lover Sally (Allison Janney), and Clarissa’s daughter (Claire Danes). In the overlap between these characters in this section of the film, linear time is preserved rather than questioned, since Laura is elderly in the present time that is Clarissa’s. This is not the strongest or even the most interesting part of the film narrative, however, since throughout the film Laura Brown and Clarissa Vaughan are already linked through themes of grief and sexuality that extend beyond the fact that at different times they each have had a relationship with Richard, and eventually meet each other in person.

Lesbian intimacy – and the frequent inability to freely express it – is a predominant theme in this film, but the most intriguing lesbian characters are not Clarissa and Sally, the “out” yuppies with a great brownstone who live comfortably in the early twenty-first century. Clarissa and Sally seem to have it all, yet Clarissa is aggrieved by Richard (when he is still alive and later), for whom she is and has been a primary caretaker and with whom she may still be in love. Clarissa seems trapped in the past, emotionally dead inside herself and, for all appearances, to her lover. Aware of the deep trouble she is in, Clarissa makes comments like, “I seem to be unraveling.” Richard also

has an awkward relationship with time and memory in part because of all the medications he is taking. At one point he thinks that he has already received a literary prize (the occasion that explains why Clarissa is throwing him a special party), and when Clarissa gently corrects him, he says, "I seem to have fallen out of time."

The first real queer intrigue in the film lies in considering Laura Brown and her friend Kitty (Toni Collette) who awkwardly and passionately kiss in Laura's suburban kitchen while her young son Richie (Jack Rovello) waits in the wings. Kitty has just tearily told Laura that she has to have a "procedure," and needs Laura to feed her pet, and in sharing comfort their lips meet. Laura kisses Kitty full on the mouth, and stands over her (Kitty is seated), a very temporarily actualized lesbian. Kitty's desire is vivid and obvious, but her response when the kiss is over is to say "You're sweet," thus denying anything really important has transpired between them beyond the bounds of what occurs in a caring friendship. In a parallel scene, Virginia kisses her sister Vanessa (Miranda Richardson) on the mouth at the end of an awkward family visit, and asks Vanessa if she (Virginia) seems better, emotionally speaking.

In one of the most troubling and effective scenes in the film, Leonard (Stephen Dillane) tells Virginia that she has "an obligation to [her] own sanity," as they debate the merits of psychiatric expertise and medical treatments for her "illness." She says that her life has been "stolen" from her, and that she is "living a life [she has] no wish to live." She wants to leave their country house and go back to London, where it is vital and busy. Virginia tells Leonard, "You cannot find peace by avoiding life." This is essentially the

same sentiment that Richard expresses to Clarissa.

Richard consistently asks Clarissa to stop living her life for him, and he is aware that his death will free her, a fact that she resents. He asks her, “Who’s this party for?” and says, “I think I’m only staying alive to satisfy you.” Unsurprisingly, after Richard dies, Clarissa’s passion for life indeed re-ignites, and she embraces Sally with warmth and feeling, probably for the first time in many years. In a dimly lit room wherein they closely face each other, Laura narrates her life choices to Clarissa, including her decision to leave her children, although she does not overtly make mention of her sexual orientation: “It would be wonderful to say you regretted it. It would be easy. But what does it mean to regret when you have no choice? It’s what you can bear. There it is. No one’s going to forgive me. It was death. I chose life.” It is implied that Clarissa somehow knows what Laura went through on every level, and Laura’s admissions therefore not only precipitate her own increased but still limited emotional freedom, they likewise help Clarissa come into contact with her own desires for freedom which she then expresses to Sally.

Laura is fed up with her 1950s suburban life in part, of course, because she is a trapped woman who cannot freely express her sexuality. Pregnant and miserable, Laura does not want to abandon her family, but she considers ending her life by taking pills. Instead of committing suicide in a hotel room alone, she waits until her second child is born and then leaves her family and moves to Canada, and as viewers we do not find out this information until Laura enters Clarissa’s visual field, as I just described. We do

know that Richard has somehow lost his mother, and some viewers may figure out early in the film that Laura is Richard's mother, but how soon this is realized is surely variable. It is quite possible that this crucial detail is not completely clear until, shortly before his death, we see Richard crying as he admires a picture of the mother who eventually abandoned him. The sensual black-and-white photograph of Laura in her wedding dress is a chilling moment of well-placed melodramatic excess in the film. Because of his age, it is not clear if Richie knew as a little boy that when his mother was reading *Mrs. Dalloway* she was thinking of abandoning him and of killing herself.

Despite the poignant and often disturbing tone of the film, some reviewers joked about its content, perhaps because of its sometimes heavy-handed dramatic flourishes, or perhaps because women's depression and the larger topic of suicide makes some people very uncomfortable. Using sarcastic terms that may have been designed to amuse, film critic Will Dana (2003) refers to the themes of lesbianism that underscore the film and acknowledges his quasi-homoerotic fantasy as it is enacted between the three major actresses:

Nearly 100 years of exquisite female agony, not to mention lots of pretty flowers, picturesque suicides and Virginia Woolf. The real drama comes in watching three screen goddesses — Kidman, Moore, Streep — gun for the Oscar. Kidman plays Woolf, slowly losing her mind. Moore is a miserable 1950s L.A. housewife, Streep a present-day New York lesbian. The movie ingeniously weaves their three stories, but at heart it's a fairly unconvincing melodrama. It would have been more fun to watch these girls just mudwrestle for the statuette (79).

In a related vein, Jeff Giles (2002) sardonically puns,

The film opens with Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman, plus nose) weighing

her coat down with stones and wading into a river with no intention of going for a swim. Yes, “Billy Elliot” director Stephen Daldry is diving into dark waters here, but if he pulls off “The Hours”—and an early screening suggests he has—it’s sure to be one of the most moving, and gorgeously acted, films of the year . . . It’s wrenching stuff, but Kidman, Streep and Moore should be laughing all the way to the Oscars (55).

Other reviewers simply disliked the film and were far less generous in their remarks than Giles, Dana, or Travers. Richard Schickel (2002) scathingly notes, “One can imagine this intricate intertwining of historically and geographically separate lives working as a literary conceit” (72). He wonders “why [the filmmakers] turn Woolf, a woman of incisive mind, into a hapless ditherer. Gentlemen, she was only a part-time madwoman. Most of the time, she possessed one of the most interesting sensibilities of her century” (Ibid.). Schickel adds that “this movie is in love with female victimization,” and “despite the complexity of the film’s structure,” it

all seems too simple-minded. Or should we perhaps say agenda driven? The same criticisms might apply to the fact that both these fictional characters (and, it is hinted, Woolf herself) find what consolation they can in a rather dispassionate lesbianism. This ultimately proves insufficient to lend meaning to their lives or profundity to a grim and uninvolved film, for which Philip Glass unwittingly provides the perfect score—tuneless, oppressive, droning, painfully self-important (Ibid.).

Schickel’s blunt article is accompanied by photographs with the captions “Deadbeat Mom: Moore plays a 1950s matron who abandons her young son,” and “Mournful Muse: Streep suffers” (72). Reviewing the film during its television premier, Leah Rozen (2003) also found it smug and patronizing:

Watching Hours, one feels smart . . . “Aha!” you say to yourself as you make the connections between what Woolf says in one scene (someone in

Dalloway will die “so that the rest of us shall value life more”) with what happens in another scene (a suicide). What’s sacrificed is emotion. Only the final scenes prove affecting and then more on an intellectual level than a heartfelt one (29).

While *The Hours* received mixed reviews, I am interested in its promise as a theoretical text. As I explained in chapter 2 (in relation to *Marnie*), for me, a promising theoretical text is a sophisticated piece of cinema that merits analysis whether or not it has been “panned” (or received mixed reviews). Like *Marnie*, *The Hours* is useful for discussing many social issues of relevance in our society. As I noted above, the film speaks volumes about temporality, narrative structure, emplotment, and voice in representations of “mentally ill” women. I will draw some comparisons with *Girl, Interrupted* and other films in order to highlight *The Hours*'s unique visual features and narrative structure.

The film *Girl, Interrupted* moves between numerous features of Susanna’s life through creative temporal manipulations. Of course, many films for many years have used time in various ways in their narratives. Recent (and fairly recent) films like *Night on Earth* (1991), *The Red Violin* (1998), *Run Lola Run* (1999), *Memento* (2000), and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) each use time in especially daring and at times disturbing ways. *The Red Violin* engages parallel narratives in time and is sometimes like a record needle playing the same concept album at different spots, within different songs. *The Hours* in some ways resembles this film, but questions time in a way *The Red Violin* does not. *Night on Earth* features one night in the lives of a variety of

people who live in different places, and who supposedly do not know one another. The characters are connected by their shared temporality that night, despite being in diverse time zones.

Discussing *Eternal Sunshine*, film critic Roger Ebert (2004) remarks, “The movie is a radical example of Maze Cinema, that style in which the story coils back upon itself, redefining everything and then throwing it up in the air and redefining it again. To reconstruct it in chronological order would be cheating, but I will cheat . . .” (n.pag.). While all of the films mentioned here repeat themselves in special ways and rely on multiple narratives, memories, and points-of-view, *The Hours* uniquely reckons with simultaneity and points to the possibility of concurrent emotional universes that transcend apparently separated times, spaces, and other dimensions.

The film *Girl, Interrupted* uses non-linear time sequencing and flashbacks in order to describe Susanna’s emotional perspective while in the asylum. Susanna’s confusion, sadness, and anger, particularly in relation to her family and her (at times) defiant placement within a changing society at war, are depicted through a variety of cross-cuts in the film between periods and scenarios in her life. For example, an early scene shows Susanna in an ambulance immediately after her suicide attempt, but the viewer soon discovers that this event has already happened in the overall film narrative, and the scene can be read as a comment on Susanna’s experiences of displacement.

Addressing the memoir, Susan Hubert notes, “Kaysen employs several ‘postmodern’ narrative techniques in *Girl, Interrupted*. The novel is a pastiche of sorts,

containing Kaysen's personal narrative, various documents associated with her hospitalization and diagnosis, and stories about other patients" (99). Although I would not call the book a "novel" (as Hubert does), there are clear correspondences between the written text and its film adaptation in terms of the usage of "pastiche." The film structure in some ways echoes the book's design.

Temporal manipulation in the film *Girl, Interrupted* is often accomplished with the use of "checks." The psychiatric nursing staff does routine "checks" in each of the rooms in the asylum to make sure everyone is stable and sleeping safely in bed at night. Susanna dreams of or perhaps actually sees people when she is awake (who are not the nurses) at her asylum room doorway, but these individuals were really at the doorway(s) in her past. She sees events and people literally open and close with the movement of her door, often associated with the time when she lived with her difficult parents. As Susanna's situation improves, and she gets closer to being discharged from the hospital, the number of scenes of her writing and proceeding forward in time increases, and these scenes also become faster in tempo than other scenes. The frequency of flashbacks and dreamy temporal cross-cutting lessens, implying that Susanna's feeling better is signified by a progressive developmental movement into her own future and away from her fraught past.

The "checks" are used in the film *Girl, Interrupted* to move back and forth in time and to create empathy with Susanna's pain, disorientation, and ideas about dependency and independence, but these shots and scenes do not overtly encourage viewers to

question the existence of flat, linear time itself, as is the case in *The Hours*. Rather, *Girl, Interrupted* manipulates time to show how Susanna can be and is “cured,” and once she has become re-oriented to a normative daily life, normative (linear) time is restored.

In contrast, *The Hours* creates webbing of time that layer upon each other, and while some characters eventually meet and interact in a shared present, temporal resolution is not a primary goal of the film. By the end of the film, I was left with the impression that the three narratives are tied like strings in a single game of cat’s cradle, and that perhaps there is no present, past, or future either between the characters or for the film audience who might care for them in “real” life. Rather, time, whatever it is, is somehow deeply immediate, and it lives in the experiences of trauma and pleasure in the here and now. As depicted in the film, Woolf notes within *Mrs. Dalloway* that a woman’s entire life can be said to happen metaphorically in a single day. In watching the film, smug or not, one is encouraged to practice the adage of *carpe diem* (“seize the day”). The here and now also has its own changing and changeable shapes, and tributaries in *The Hours* seductively draw the viewer into a wormhole of pain and curiosity in order to face its simultaneously embodying and existential framework.

Evidence of Ricoeur’s idea of three-fold time is manifest throughout the film. The stories in *The Hours* can be seen as necklace links, wherein each seemingly separate time segment and woman’s individual story exists as its own link, and the three stories are also chained together on one necklace around the viewer’s neck, cold and very near the throat, and may be felt as fresh, crisp, threatening, and, most of all, intimately

peregrinating. When Virginia Woolf again walks into the deep water after all these years after her death, a visual palimpsest is invoked, as the traces of Woolf's death and life have been remarked upon in perpetuity. This is another instance of the sort of "tropification" to which I referred earlier in this chapter. As Woolf and her peer characters are co-emplotted, viewers bear witness to their suffering and may call into question how we as collective members of a society and as individuals ethically address (or do not address) suicide and depression. *The Hours* creates a visual-emotive landscape that one can repeatedly visit, as Woolf's death and life are and have been repeatedly "visited."<sup>48</sup> When we watch, assess, and talk and write about the film, we help create and retrace palimpsests in a seemingly infinite regress of linked memories and experiences that problematize an idea of time being limited to any one life.

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<sup>48</sup> In a special "filmmakers' introduction" to the DVD release of the film (2003), director Stephen Daldry invites his viewers to watch *The Hours* again and again, now that it is available on DVD. He says that he knows that they will find new and intriguing things to consider with each viewing. (For what it's worth, I agree with him.)

## CHAPTER 5

### **“I’ve Always Been Crazy, but it’s Kept Me from Going Insane”<sup>1</sup>: Emergent Words and Images; Plans for the Future**

“I’ve always been different with one foot over the line  
 Winding up somewhere one step ahead or behind  
 It ain’t been so easy but I guess I shouldn’t complain  
 I’ve always been crazy but it’s kept me from going insane.”  
 – Waylon Jennings, from “I’ve Always Been Crazy”

My father was “depressed” for most of his life, as I now understand but probably only knew instinctively as a child. As a professional counselor I often cringe at the casual use of the word “depression” in our society, since I find that some people use this word when they really want to say “devastated,” “always unhappy,” “lonely,” “dejected,” and so on. In my view and experience, depression is an avoidance of or movement away from feelings.

Most people who die by suicide are labeled depressed, but my father (and, I think, many others who commit suicide – or who “complete” their suicide attempts) hardly pushed his feelings down or avoided them, but was, in fact, pretty up front about them, as I recall now, knowing as I do that memory is a mutable thing. Martin, my father, will be dead 25 years in May of 2005, shortly before I receive my Ph.D.

Whether he would have said his feelings and so-called problems were biological, culturally constructed, or some complicated combination, my father was a self-identified melancholic person who by the time he was 50 (and I was nearly 14) didn’t want to stay on the earth any longer than was necessary, as he regularly told me. He was in therapy at

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<sup>1</sup> This title is borrowed from the song by Waylon Jennings.

the time of his death and obviously couldn't be or maybe "refused" to be helped. How does agency work in these situations?

I don't accept that he was either a weak person for not facing life's challenges, or that "it took guts" to die the way he did. These are both mythical constructs and are too simplistic to describe what it must have taken for him to throw himself off a 19 story building in broad daylight while people were watching, and he knew his wife and young daughter were at home waiting for him. I have always been sad and angry that he in some ways stole part of my childhood, leaving when he had the obligation and, I suspect, the wish to protect and love me as a consistent fathering presence. However, I also believe that he had the right to do what he did for himself, and there is nothing anyone could have done to stop him, short of locking him up, had they known how "close" he was. Yet, when he got out, he probably would have tried to die again, anyway.

Telling people that I lived through my father's suicide is like coming out of a closet, to adopt a phrase. It is a politicized choice, to speak the truth. The socially popularized perspectives about "depression" and its treatment within our society are among the reasons why the stigma and emotional struggles surrounding my father's death were, and in some ways continue to be, "arresting" for me as a survivor of suicide.

I tell this story to highlight that my dissertation project has always been a labor of love, a frequently painful engagement with subjects that are in some ways too personal, too close to home. Growing up in a family system in which the specter of what is often called "mental illness" frequently loomed and has likewise cast a long shadow, I found

and continue to try to find creative – and sometimes good – ways to function and cope.

I ran a peer counseling center during my senior year of college, and spent a lot of time involved in social work networks since I was 18. As a young woman I became a clinical social worker, believing at 22 that I could make the world a better place. The often troubling scenarios that I faced in that capacity encouraged me to become a local union leader, and to enter New York City’s social services activist arenas in general and the feminist antipsychiatry movement in particular.

Despite the many excellent clinicians I met, my overall confusion about and dissatisfaction with numerous features of what I perceived to be a largely oppressive mainstream mental health care system eventually led me to leave it, as I surely needed a break, and I likewise wanted to further critically engage with the subject of “madness” by pursuing graduate training in interdisciplinary studies, with the hope that I could find new ways to make a difference as a teacher, researcher, and writer. To quote Clifford Geertz (1973), my stance is and has often been one of serious, “deep play.” And, to quote Ruth Benedict (1947/1974), it is with this “habit of mind”<sup>2</sup> that I conclude my dissertation.

In 1992, the journal *Social Science and Medicine* published a special issue entitled, “The Cultural Construction of Diagnostic Categories: The Case of American Psychiatry.” The introduction by anthropologist Charles Nuckolls is aptly titled “Reckless Driving, Casual Sex and Shoplifting: What Psychiatric Categories, Culture and

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<sup>2</sup> During her 1947 presidential address to the American Anthropological Association, Benedict said, “Long before I knew anything at all about anthropology, I had learned from Shakespearean criticism—and from Santayana—habit[s] of mind which at length made me an anthropologist.” Her address, “Anthropology and the Humanities,” is reprinted in Margaret Mead’s *Ruth Benedict* (1974). Thanks to Barbara Babcock for providing me with this reference.

History Reveal about Each Other.” This issue contains the now famous essay by Atwood Gaines, “From DSM-I to III-R; Voices of Self, Mastery and the Other: A Cultural Constructivist Reading of U.S. Psychiatric Classification.”

Gaines asserts that psychological difficulties that are not seen by mainstream clinical practitioners as biological faults “may be interpreted as a ‘failure of mind,’ that is, as a lack of responsibility, a lack of the exercise of control or a lack of the will to control” (16). Control has long been known to be a central feature of what might be termed “good health” in the psychiatric paradigm. Controlling one’s feelings, thoughts, ideas, and, ultimately, just behaving properly – according to social conventions – is expected and required for psychological success.

As Gaines observes, “it should be noted that psychiatry casts a shadow of suspicion over most phases and events of women’s lives” (16). Progressive social and cultural theorists have critiqued the racialization and gendering of psychiatric discourses. Gaines adds to this body of knowledge by helping his readers critically view psychiatric discourses, and the medications, methodologies, and diagnostic categories that they influence and perpetuate, as reflections of Western ethnopsychology, rather than as scientific truisms. Gaines suggests that “nosological entities . . . are not discovered; they are culturally constructed. They derive their existence from interpretations of defined abnormality encountered in medical and nonmedical contexts” (4).

Differentiating between self and other in Western ethnopsychology is principal to mainstream psychiatry’s ongoing goals, even as it aims to heal and serve the “sick” and

those labeled with and/or reporting to have “clinical” and “biological” difficulties. It is important to note the persistent ways that deviance is socially coded as a deficiency. Psychiatric diagnostic categories, while unquestionably helpful to many, are likewise illustrations of the ongoing theoretical construction of the unmarked and privileged self (in egocentric and sometimes sociocentric loci) dialectically defining itself via its other, its “not me,” in this case the normal knowing its normalcy by labeling the so-called crazy.

In *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (2002), disability studies scholar Lennard Davis remarks on the range of recent and ongoing film representations of and grisly news stories about the disabled that are presented “for the examination and comfort of people who believe themselves to be able-bodied” (117). He says that

society groans on in singling out disability as the Other by which it defines itself . . . As Leriche suggests, the sick person must be studied to “advance knowledge about the normal,” or, one might add, to create the normal person. Indeed, Freud’s fascination with psychopathology laid the foundation for a superstructure describing mental health. Freud’s interest in deviant minds created the framework for his psychology of the normal mind (Ibid.).

As I have noted, a crucial but troubling issue that merits insertion in these critiques is that the mental health industry at times exploitatively uses psychological difference to amass funds. At the risk of offending many of my colleagues in the social work field, and perhaps some psychiatric survivors as well, one might say that a “class” of people are labeled “mentally ill” because such a categorization is ultimately profitable

for capitalism, and our “insane” society understandably makes people “crazy.” Referring to a spectrum of resilient antipsychiatric views, as I have done in this project, is not a generally popular approach to take in an era of pro-medication and searches for the biological causes of “mental illnesses.” As I have said, it is also important to keep in mind that there are many emotional sufferers who believe in patients’ rights and who participate in self-advocacy movements as they assert bravely that knowing and embracing the diagnostic names for their troubles helps them – as agents within their own lives – feel validated and understood, and that medication makes their lives possible and livable. I do not wish to undercut anyone’s lived experience or point-of-view, and I sincerely respect individuals who feel this way about themselves.

One way among others to respect often stigmatized individuals is to bear witness to the relevance of their narratives.<sup>3</sup> The *National Women’s Studies Association Journal* recently published a special issue on Feminism and Disability (2002). In her essay in this issue, Elizabeth Donaldson cites Caminero-Santangelo (1998), and, like Caminero-Santangelo, she believes that “when madness is used as a metaphor for feminist rebellion, mental illness itself is erased” (102). Donaldson discourages this metaphorization because of its potential to “limit our inquiry into madness/mental illness” (101). In her work, Caminero-Santangelo notes that it is crucial to center (adequately and consistently) the myriad viewpoints, stories, and experiences of “mentally ill” women.

Summarizing G. Thomas Couser’s work in his groundbreaking disability studies analysis, *Recovering Bodies* (1997), Smith and Watson (2001) say, “Couser considers

how . . . narratives, in such forms as memoirs, diaries, photo documentaries, and essays, address the stigmatizing of disability and work to reclaim bodies from cultural marginalization, including those imposed by medical practice” (148). Contemplating these kinds of narratives, Madonne Miner (1997) writes,

when negotiating this relatively unanalyzed terrain, storytellers bring their bodies – with all of these bodies’ complex rhetorical and cultural histories – along with them. Arthur Frank says, “[t]he stories that ill people tell come out of their bodies.” It is up to disability scholars to show how varied the discourses shaping these bodies, and their stories, really are (293).

Arthur Frank wrote *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995).

As I have aimed to show in this project, there is an advantage to applying interdisciplinary lenses by using devices such as Smith and Watson’s (2001) “tool kit” to advance a respectful while critical understanding of the embodied experiences of women living with “mental illnesses,” or those labeled as “mentally ill,” and the stories they tell about themselves. I have found that combining feminist media and autobiography theory with medical and linguistic anthropology and disability studies in order to compare films and first-person written narrative accounts yields very interesting and valuable results. As I explained in chapter 1, I am curious about how popular cultural films can potentially influence societal perceptions and definitions of narrative coherence and what is referred to as incoherence, as they are represented in the life stories of “mentally ill” women translated on-screen.

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<sup>3</sup> See essays by Hershenson and Ridgway.

Female psychiatric survivors are increasingly telling their own stories in individual and coalitional writing venues – in books and online – and imaging their own lives via independent media projects. Independent cinematic, textual, and online autoethnographic representations reflect and shape models of psychological wellness and trauma differently than mainstream films and books reflect and shape such models. The politicized issue of women – particularly female psychiatric survivors and members of other historically stigmatized groups – “taking back” the camera and other representational devices merits attention. While I eschew an unrealistic obsession with seeking “truth” or authenticity, and I believe that all representations and enactments of identity formation are at least partially discursively produced, I likewise believe that it is crucial that “crazy” women, in representing themselves, are indeed “talking back” to mainstream society when they “take back” the camera, the pen, the keyboard, etc.

Therefore, in addition to the vast array of historical and recent mainstream media representations and written first-person narrative accounts that are currently available to a viewing and reading public, emergent forms of autoethnographic representation, including collected written first-person works, cinematic autobiography and family biography, and Internet self-representation and oral history projects, present wonderful opportunities to deepen clinical and activist work that is done “in the field” with psychiatric survivors. Additionally, these resources can be used to expand curricula and therefore to creatively train educators and clinicians. I have a number of ideas for ways that I might “apply” my dissertation project to academic curriculum development,

therapeutic practice, and mental health activism. For example, in my post-dissertation life, I intend to conduct interviews and perhaps make a documentary with female psychiatric survivors about their perceptions of the differences and similarities that exist between their lives and the film images, and online and written stories that “depict” them.

Allie Light’s award winning documentary, *Dialogues with Madwomen* (1993) is a great resource for teaching social workers and other therapeutic practitioners about narrativity, emplotment, and voice in the world of some female psychiatric survivors.<sup>4</sup>

I have in mind to develop a course – or a unit as part of a larger course – entitled “Taking Back the Camera, the Web, the Keyboard, and the Pen: Female Psychiatric Survivors and Contemporary Autoethnographic Discourses.” If I had the opportunity to develop such a course or unit, Light’s film would be among my showcase texts.

Light’s *Dialogues* presents the stories of seven female psychiatric survivors in San Francisco, and includes her narrative of her own institutionalization. A segment of Light’s own story is reprinted in Shannonhouse’s *Out of Her Mind* (2000), and is entitled “Thorazine Shuffle.” As some of its reviewers have noted, *Dialogues* “breaks” from conventional documentary formats and does not rely even remotely on third person accounts. Like other “personal documentaries,” Light’s endeavor instead presents a combination of devices including interview segments, illustrations, re-enactments, voiceover techniques, and archival footage to draw in viewers. Light’s usage of re-enactments is especially courageous, since the women who narrate their lives in the film

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<sup>4</sup> Many thanks to Bev Seckinger for introducing me to this crucial cinematic text.

often perform the re-enactments of their own stories, rather than having actors perform these roles.

In the film, Light does not mention the women's names until the closing credits, with the exception of Karen Wong, who was raped and murdered before the film was finished. Wong's tragic death and Light's feelings about it are explained to viewers by Light at the end of the film, as rain falls heavily on-screen. Up until this point, Wong has spoken for herself and viewers have no idea that she has died. With the exception of Light's understandable intervention into Wong's story's at the end of the film, each woman introduces herself in turn, and if she uses her own name in a self-referential way, viewers then know the name of the given speaker – otherwise, we don't know their names.

I think that Light's point in not privileging the nominal seems to be to deepen the way that these stories are interwoven and collectively overlap. Crucially, Light presents a diverse set of perspectives on "mental illness" and does not seek to conflate her narrators' experiences. The stories are presented in segments, with the women "taking turns" sharing their ideas and feelings, and the women's explanations are drawn together by Light into sequences that are cleverly edited. Some of the women subscribe to an antipsychiatric stance (including, it seems, Light herself), while others use and accept diagnostic categories and are grateful to take medications like Lithium.

For example, one narrator tells an insightful story about how one day she was reading Quentin Bell's biography of Virginia Woolf and she experienced a profound

identification with Woolf, as described by Bell. She says she realized at that moment that she “didn’t want to die” like Woolf had, that her “depression was not me” but had “taken” her over, and she then decided to take Lithium – immediately – and has felt much better ever since. This narrator acknowledges that it was and is hard to give up her “imaginative aspects” as she experienced them when she was “manic,” and she cries as she describes wanting someone to love who understands her and the ways she uniquely sees the world.

Light tells a story about how when she was hospitalized, she was walking one day in the hospital corridor with her psychiatrist, and a fellow patient ran by and screamed with horror that the president had been killed. The psychiatrist turned to Light and, in a comforting voice, told her not to worry about his “hallucination” and “paranoia.” It turns out that John F. Kennedy was assassinated that day. Light narrates how during one of her intake experiences the examining psychiatrist stood behind her as she waited, naked, for him to question her. He asked her if she liked kissing her husband’s penis, and she says that until this day she has no idea why he asked her that. She describes feeling afraid that no matter how she responded, whether negatively or affirmatively to his question, she could have been pathologized (as a queer or as a nymphomaniac). Light does not perform her own re-enactment of this scene. Instead, while narrating what happened to her, she shows a woman standing naked in an examination room as the camera peers slowly and closely at the small of her back.

Many of the narrators describe horrendous and violent abuses that they sustained

at the hands of family members and strangers, including sexual assault and physical harm of various brutal kinds. Graphic illustrations by children (as might be created during art therapy sessions) and slow motion black and white sequences are used to highlight the terror these women endured. At the beginning of the film, there is such a strong emphasis placed on these traumatic features of the women's lives that viewers might incorrectly but understandably assume that the entire film will be about surviving trauma and enduring victimization. By the end of the film viewers realize that this is untrue.

Lesbianism and spirituality are prominently featured in the film's depictions.<sup>5</sup> One narrator, who wears a T-shirt with a brightly colored fish during all of her interview segments,<sup>6</sup> tells Light and the audience at the end of the film that she thinks that with decreased fear, the need to maintain rigid boundaries also decreases. She notes that if more people had lessened boundaries, they too might have "visions." She says that she "would love to be a fish," and is depicted walking into the ocean, carrying a suitcase, after having just explained in an interview segment that she will be walking "after Sappho." Her imaginative entry into the Pacific Ocean is in direct opposition to Virginia's Woolf's own deathly water immersion, as the narrator's entry is about embracing life and is a refusal of rigid boundaries and suicide. This woman's stance is framed by the exposure of the film's production: viewers are led inside the filming of the scene in which she is featured with the water, and all the people involved, and their

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<sup>5</sup> For an interesting engagement with the spiritual and religious "dimensions" of psychiatric recovery narratives, see Fallot (1998).

<sup>6</sup> After I screened the film with Gary Gibson and Abby Clouse, we discussed it together, and Gary, who is a filmmaker, highlighted this important visual detail. Thanks to him for his keen insights - and visions.

cameras, microphones, and stage directions, are rendered visible. Light's metanarrative comment on "visions" is a reflexive attempt to further diminish the already pretty slim distance that exists between the viewer, filmmaker, and narrators in this cinematic experience.

*Dialogues* is featured on the website, *The Bright Side*, geared to help individuals cope "with depression, grief, suicide, mental illness" and other emotional challenges (n. pag). *The Bright Side* includes a reprinted interview between Light and *Bright Lights Film Journal* editor, Gary Morris, introduced as follows: "What does it mean to be a 'madwoman' and an artist in American society? A review of Allie Light's documentary on the subject, along with an interview, try to answer that question" (n. pag.).

*Dialogues*, unique in its own right in terms of its first-person stances and cinematic techniques, is among an emerging set of documentary projects on the subject of "mental illness," including films made by family members and other interested parties. Recent documentary projects by the family members of "mentally ill" individuals – and by others – include: Dempsey Rice's *Daughter of Suicide* (1999), the story of her mother's depression and suicide; Lichtenstein and Peoples's *West 47<sup>th</sup> Street* (2001), which "follows the lives of four people with serious mental illness, over three years" (*Internet Movie Database*); Lila Pine's *My Aunt Lila: A Mad Documentary* (2000), a "journey through family secrets" (Pine, ii)<sup>7</sup>; and Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* (2003), a home movie style tale of his mother's Lithium overdose and psychiatric history, and his

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<sup>7</sup> Lila Pine subsequently expanded her documentary into an art installation and an interactive broadcast project in Toronto. See: [http://www.imagearts.ryerson.ca/lilapine/frames\\_project.htm](http://www.imagearts.ryerson.ca/lilapine/frames_project.htm).

reckoning with his family. Caouette, now in his early 30s, has been tracking his life on film since he was eleven years old. *Tarnation*'s official website, "i-saw-tarnation.com," gives visitors an opportunity to leave feedback and to dialogue about the intriguing film.

In seeking to develop creative curricula and to expand activist and treatment options by using documentaries, Internet resources, and collective written works, I find Jeanine Grobe's collection *Beyond Bedlam: Contemporary Women Psychiatric Survivors Speak Out* (1995) to be especially instructive. Grobe, a psychiatric survivor, gathered a variety of first-person accounts from the United States, Canada, Mexico, and England to fashion her text, which includes manifestos, poetry, diary-style entries, and other written formats. *Beyond Bedlam* in some ways resembles the vibrant *Madness Network News Reader* (1974), a collection published by antipsychiatric activists in San Francisco, except that Grobe's text is specifically representative of – and geared toward – women. Kathryn Church's *Breaking Down/Breaking Through: Multi-Voiced Narratives on Psychiatric Survivor Participation in Ontario's Community Mental Health System* (1993) is a good companion for these resources.

Charles Winick (1978), Suzanne Veilleux (1980),<sup>8</sup> Otto Wahl (1995), Harvey Greenberg (1993), Irving Schneider (1987), Fleming and Manvell (1985), Gabbard and

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<sup>8</sup> Veilleux's dissertation compares what she terms enactment and narrative films of cancer and "mental illness" (here I maintain my own convention, as mental illness is not put in quotation marks by Veilleux). She discusses differential effects and potential differential effects on viewers as observed in the study. Veilleux includes an appendix on "social distance and the work situation factors for each item included in the Mental Illness Opinion scale." She finds that "both types" of films were "persuasive" but notes that "even if the enactment films were rated as more vivid than the narrative films, there was no evidence suggesting that audio-visual communications presented through a dramatic enactment have more direct persuasive impact than similar communications presented through an expert's narrative, although indirect effects were found" (dissertation abstract).

Gabbard (1999), David J. Robinson (2003), Jacqueline Zimmerman (2003), Gibelman (2004), Freeman and Valentine (2004), and others are concerned with the impact of representations of “mental illness” in the mainstream media, and the roles that these representations may play in potentially promoting misconceptions about psychotherapists, psychiatrists, and social workers, and in maintaining or heightening stigma around psychiatric clients and mental health consumers/service users. Greater attention to first-person cinematic representations, and other kinds of independent documentaries about “mental illness” would further enrich an analysis of these concerns.

Hesley and Hesley’s *Rent Two Films and Let’s Talk in the Morning* (1998) is a good recent example of an old therapeutic trend (often called “reel therapy”) that is now resurfacing. This tactic involves using mainstream images and other kinds of cinematic stories to help heal, teach, and critique individuals and society. For many years, films and autobiographies about “mental illness” have been used for teaching purposes in “abnormal psychology” courses, in rehabilitation circles, in medical schools, as well as in some clinical settings.<sup>9</sup>

The enormous variety of first-person narratives available on the Internet can helpfully accompany mainstream films, documentaries, and traditionally published individual and collective accounts of “mental illness,” to be used in therapeutic, educational, and advocacy situations. The Kenneth Donaldson Archives for the Autobiographies of Psychiatric Survivors, the Support Coalition International’s Oral

History Project (maintained by *Mind Freedom Online*), the National Empowerment Center's Consumer/Survivor History Project, 1<sup>st</sup> Person Mental Health Magazine, and a host of other organizationally and individually operated websites thankfully exist for interested readers.

In sum, carefully selected films and written narratives – in print and via the Internet – can prove useful for developing insights and for doing progressive work among social workers, doctors, other therapeutic practitioners, clients and consumers, educators, activists and advocates, policy makers, and students. I look forward to a long and productive engagement with these materials in my own teaching, research, clinical and community practice, artwork, activism, and personal life.

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<sup>9</sup> See: Fritz and Poe (1979); Norcross, Sommer, and Clifford (2001); Sommer, Clifford, and Norcross (1998); Sommer (2003); Clifford, Norcross, and Sommer (1999); Sommer and Osmond (1983); Thornstrom (2004); Marshall (2001); Hornstein (2002); and Bresie (1984).

**APPENDIX A**

PERMISSIONS (E-mail correspondence indicating permission was granted)

Date: Sun, 13 Mar 2005 19:16:52 -0700 [Sunday March 13, 2005 07:16:52 PM MST]  
From: "Diane R. Wiener" <dianew@email.arizona.edu>  
To: Julian Stringer <Julian.Stringer@nottingham.ac.uk>  
Subject: Re: permission to include material in dissertation

Thank you very much, Julian, for your message, your approval of my use of my previously published works, and your very kind words.

I think the new site looks great, and I am extremely proud to be involved with the journal and its many valuable contributions.

Best,  
Diane

Quoting Julian Stringer <Julian.Stringer@nottingham.ac.uk>:

> Hi Diane  
>  
> Many thanks for your message and for informing us of your use of previously published  
> material from \*Scope\*. All sounds in order. Many congratulations on completing your  
> dissertation! - and of course thanks for your ongoing and valued support of the journal. (Hope  
> you like the new site!).  
>  
> best  
>  
> Julian  
>  
> Dr. Julian Stringer  
> Lecturer, Institute of Film Studies  
> School of American and Canadian Studies  
> University of Nottingham  
> University Park  
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> England  
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> Tel: +44 (0) 115 951 4846  
> Fax: + 44 (0) 115 951 4270  
> <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/film>

>>>> "Diane R. Wiener" <dianew@email.arizona.edu> 03/10/05 10:13 pm >>>

> Hello,

>

> I have proudly been published in SCOPE five times over the last several years, including in the  
> current issue (the film review of SYLVIA). In my dissertation, which is about to be officially  
> "filed" and copyrighted via UMI, I include material that previously appeared (in whole, in part,  
> or in a slightly different form) in SCOPE. I have explicitly noted this information in the body  
> of the dissertation (via footnotes), and have also included complete references for all my  
> relevant SCOPE film reviews in the works cited pages at the end of the project. According to  
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> advise you of my intentions and usage - which is why I am sending this email to you. Is there  
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> Diane Wiener, SCOPE contributor

> --

> Diane R. Wiener, L.M.S.W.

> Doctoral Candidate

> Comparative Cultural and Literary Studies

> University of Arizona

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