

TIME RIVER BLUE MOUTHS INFINITE ABSENCE: MADNESS, GRIEF, ART

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MADNESS, GRIEF, ART

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## ABSTRACT

My partner Zoë was killed in October 2013. We worked together as arts educators, mostly with people involved in the Canadian mental healthcare system. This thesis explores social conceptions of madness, drawing on theorists such as Tobin Siebers, Sara Ahmed, Lynne Huffer and Ann Cvetkovich, and engaging with works of art by people who have been involved in mental healthcare in some way. There is a simultaneous exploration of my process of grieving Zoë's death, drawing on the tradition of autocritique by writers such as bell hooks, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and others. Chapter one looks at poetry produced by the Workman Arts Group and a zine by Anna Quon, investigating the impact of diagnoses of mental illness on the reception of art and artists, as well as the history of silencing and confinement of mad bodies. Chapter two explores the memoirs of Bobby Baker and Merri Lisa Johnson, emphasizing the impact of diagnosis on those not already marginalized by society, and drawing attention to the kinds of communities that memoirs produce, as well as the connection between community, capitalism, and the grievability of life. Chapter three looks at the paintings, performance art and installations of Yayoi Kusama to complicate the connection between madness and celebrity power, as well as Kusama's own engagement with death and infinity. I conclude by looking briefly at the deaths of Michael Brown and Robin Williams, and again at my own grief one year after Zoë's death.

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For Zoë

Thank you to Sarah Brophy, who kindly helped shepherd this thesis to completion during my most difficult year. And thank you as well to everyone who looked after me when I was unable to take care of myself, during your own challenging grief. Your many moments of support, big and small, show the best of what it is to be human.

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## Introduction: Making Madness

### A Rare Flower

I stare out the window of my cabin at the tidal river in the distance, which twice daily swells with salt water and twice more fades to a trickle surrounded by vast muddy banks. I am trying to recall the first time I was touched by madness in my life. How close had it come, before now?

My brother's depression arrived in high school, long after I'd left our family home, and he leapt into it through a window of late-night pool halls and hazy pot smoke. I wasn't around to notice. His second long darkness came in university and he called me to say he couldn't get out of bed, couldn't read, couldn't eat. I was again away from him, spending time by the ocean while he boiled in a humid Ontario summer.

At that point I'd been teaching art for a few years, painting and sculpture and poetry. My partner Zoë and I began running a workshop at the East Coast Forensic Hospital in Dartmouth, a prison for people with a criminal conviction who are diagnosed with mental illness, but the harsh treatment and seemingly infinite rules and restrictions there made creativity as impossible to feel or contemplate as freedom. A series of grant applications led to a more extensive workshop with a group of recovering drug addicts in a halfway house, which in turn became a drop-in community arts program that aimed to include primarily people involved in some way with the mental health system. Hearing

my brother talking over the phone, I already knew how long the struggle with depression can be. Equally keenly, I knew that even if I said all the right things he might never hear them, perhaps even couldn't hear them coming from me. Not that I knew what the right things were, “right things” existing in some mythical realm of instant cures alongside rare flowers blooming on mountaintops, and the spring of eternal life in the Amazon.

We'd always felt, Zoë and I, that the label of a diagnosis was the least important thing. When people came to make art with us we never asked why they were there or how they'd heard of us. The most important thing to emphasize was that making art is hard. Hard equally for everyone. Talent, prior experience, schizophrenia, youth – none of them were an advantage. We also didn't suggest that making art was therapeutic. Sometimes making art can also make you feel better, but that was an unintended side-effect rather than the goal. For us the lure of creativity was its never-ending challenge, a wall you could throw yourself at over and over again. That was what we aimed to teach. The value of struggling, the hook of dissatisfaction, the way each finished piece stood as a temptation to make the next one better somehow. It seemed, talking to people who'd been in and out of treatment at the hands of psychiatric institutions, that they were always carrying the weight of a label of illness that made them aim low and feel lower. We wanted to hold out the promise of something difficult, something so difficult that whatever stories they had about their inabilities were made irrelevant. Here was a monster to wrestle your whole life, a monster so large that being “normal” or “sick” wasn't a

factor. When people took up that impossible challenge, their identities and labels tended to drop away for a time.

### River

The river is unbearably cold most of the year, and even at low tide when the ocean has run far away, the water is salty from the mud. The retreating ocean leaves its mark on the riverbed, the wet earth taking the rippled impression of small waves. Sometimes I imagine the time-scale of prehistoric fossils forming in that clay, sometimes I imagine a shifting climate that dries out the rivers or lifts the ocean up over the banks to erase the road and houses running alongside the waterway. In high summer, when the ocean comes back in over the hot mud, there is a brief window of warm water to float in. I head down, perhaps harried by a deerfly or mosquito, and quickly strip off my clothes to jump into the welcoming arms of the current.

Last fall Zoë was killed by a drunk driver. This is another river I'm caught in, a dark tide whose ebb and flow won't release me. Now when I walk to the river I talk to her, and each small moment of beauty in the day becomes a knife. The low moon at dusk, the curved flight of a swallow plunging into our barn, the spring mint in our garden, makes me ache with grief. Our love, which I believed in so deeply, has become a thin shimmer of feeling I can never hold close enough.

I wonder where grief sits in the pantheon of madness. The Stoics allowed for a period of mourning, saying that even mother cows shed tears for their lost calves. But too much grief or grief too long or absent grief all indicate an illness tending towards insanity. From outside, the mute unresponsiveness of grieving, the places I am carried to, seem impossible to distinguish from madness.

Once I had a summer job as a support worker for a young man diagnosed with schizophrenia. He responded to questions, if he responded, with either a yes, a no, or a maybe. Often he would stare out the window, eyes fluttering rapidly and fingers twisting around themselves, and not engage at all. My job was to get him outside for walks, and to talk to him. He did love the outdoors. Being outside, it was the case occasionally that a topic of conversation seemed to wake something inside him and he would speak. For hours I would share details of my life with him, tell him stories, pepper him with questions, hoping for that rare combination of elements that would summon his voice.

I remember going there on a rainy day, rain so heavy that a walk was impossible. We sat on his couch, I put on some music but he didn't like it. After a brief while he turned to the window, his stare feeling this time like a rejection. I got angry, resenting my time with him, and told him I was leaving early. He still didn't respond. So I put on my shoes and coat and stepped outside. On the porch the rain seemed even heavier, and as worked up as I was I didn't want to walk out into it either, so I decided to sit. I searched the rain drops for signs that the shower would end, arms in tight to my body for warmth,

waiting for an unknown signal to tell me to go. I thought about my job, the mirrored image of fluttering eyelids on a couch inside, and wondered why I had the right to leave him and be “normal” while he was trapped on the other side of the window, and who could tell the difference between us through a telescope.

Now that thought comes back to me every time I walk along streets where Zoë and I once spent time, as I tell her how I feel or scream out my agony or beat my fist against my chest in a rage against the uncaring universe, against myself for letting her jog in front of that car, against her for leaving me to deal with her death alone. Why can't she come back to help me? Why won't she tell me how good I'm being? On which side of the thin line of sanity am I standing?

### Time Machine

I want to tell you who I am and what I'm struggling with before I begin talking in more detail about mental health and art, because I want there to be a connection between us. I believe these issues, which are of such importance to me, require as much feeling as thinking. And it seems to me that if I want anyone else to feel alongside me, the best way to extend that invitation is to be as open about my own suffering and uncertainty as possible. The story of my grief as it exists today, then, is one possible way for us to “break open the bone,” as Jennifer Poole and Jennifer Ward put it (100). They borrow that phrase from disability activist and scholar Eli Clare, but they also credit their

discussion of the connection between storytelling and grief to Indigenous scholars Cyndy Baskin, Lynn Lavalée, and Brenda Wastasecoot (Poole and Ward 102). All of these thinkers talk about the power of storytelling to resist the pathologizing narratives and frameworks of Western psychiatric grief studies, and to reveal simply what is.

But what exactly does "breaking open the bone" look like, feel like? It is not the recitation of a series of facts, which when taken together produce a tragedy. Because the phrase comes from a long tradition of storytelling, it seems instead to be describing an interaction. Breaking open the bone is something that occurs between people. It's also contingent, in the sense that telling a story to someone isn't guaranteed to feel like you've broken yourself open in some way. There is, too, an element of trust, of openness, of listening -- of authenticity. Authenticity is easier to grab hold of in a face-to-face interaction, and the oral storytelling tradition that Poole and Ward are borrowing from is acutely tuned to live audiences. Poole and Ward do not believe that it is absent from print though, and I'm inclined to agree. I'm telling you about the way my grief looks five months after Zoë's death so you know that I am committed to that openness even now. I want it to break something open inside you as well. And I'm addressing you directly because I don't want you to sidestep yourself in this interaction we're having, at this very moment, through the time machine of printed words.<sup>1</sup> I should acknowledge my position here too, as someone who is grieving and also trying to think about grief. Is it possible to

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<sup>1</sup> The interweaving of voices I am attempting in this thesis is drawing on the blending of critique and autobiography adopted by scholars such as Nancy K. Miller (and her mode of "getting personal"), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Gerald Vizenor, Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks and others (see Smith & Watson 156).

feel my sadness and try to do something with it at the same time? I'm worried the end product will be unappealing, with large seams running between broken honesty and the effort of thinking. Yet it seems important that we both try to do that thinking and feeling work together right now, and the risk of opening those seams is an integral part of the process.

### Locations

My fears about the end product of personal writing are shared by Ann Cvetkovich, who reflects on the tensions between memoir and academic theory in her book *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Cvetkovich's early academic life began when there was a wariness of confessional writing in feminist circles,<sup>2</sup> and she acknowledges that this produced an ambivalence within her even as she came to value the expression of emotion and saw its collective impact (76). In particular, she gestures towards the link between memoir and queer subcultures (as an entry point into larger literary public spheres), AIDS activists and other medicalized subjects (as a way of reclaiming agency), and histories of trauma (as a resistance to the silencing in histories of slavery or genocide). Cvetkovich clearly wants to avoid making memoir into a monolithic force, however, and keeps the critical tension and ambivalence alive within herself (74-5). This ambivalence is best articulated by the book's structure, which is divided into two parts: a preliminary memoir of

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<sup>2</sup> Rita Felski, for example, critiques confessional modes because in her view they attempt to articulate an authentic core self that can never be attained (89) (“On Confession” in Smith & Watson *Women, Autobiography, Theory* pg 89)

Cvetkovich's struggles with depression over a series of years, followed by three theoretical essays on some possibilities contained within depression as an affect. A short reflection piece divides the two sections, and in it she recounts both her uncertainty about including her episodic autobiographical writing, and her ultimate decision to view that writing as a research method. She wants her story to resist the medical models adopted by other accounts of mental health struggles, which she feels tend to glorify pharmaceuticals, and also to resist the details of her family history, which she feels tend to de-emphasize the social causes behind mental illnesses (not just in her memoir, but in memoirs in general). Instead, she wants to focus on the daily life experiences of anxiety and depression, in particular their flatness and interminability. This lack of affect is paired with the ordinary routines that she feels helped her through her mental anguish, and her conviction that creativity encourages “the hunches, intuitions, and feelings that intellectual analysis can restrict with a taboo-like force” (81). I see a linkage between the inarticulable leaps of a creative process, the powerfully direct address of storytelling, and the rupturing voice of madness, in their ability to challenge the restrictions of intellectual analysis and Reason more broadly.

Taking my cues from Cvetkovich, Sedgwick, hooks, and other practitioners of autocritique, I attempt in this thesis to explore madness in a number of different locations and textual registers. I aim to draw on my work history and experiences engaging with people already caught up in the medical model of psychiatric analysis, my research into a



variety of critical perspectives on madness within an academic community, and my own engagement with the trauma and grief of Zoë's death – an event that permeates my life and thinking as deeply as her life did.

### Cases/Points

The second through line of this writing is art, both my art practice and teaching art to others, which is what brought Zoë and me together and also led to my engagement with the mental health system through the Sea Change art program and The Spot.<sup>3</sup> My first chapter takes a close look at *All That Is Real*, a book of poetry produced by the Workman Arts Group, an organization in Toronto that provides art training and support for people who have been involved in the mental health system at some point. Paired with a zine written by Anna Quon called *Mental Illness Poems*, these two publications are rooted in the power of testimonial to reclaim agency. They work actively to de-stigmatize mental struggles while also communicating and doing justice to the reality of the people caught in those struggles. I am interested in the cultural position of those kinds of testimonies, and also the ways in which the effort to articulate a voice from within the marginalizing and stigmatizing label of “mental illness” is met with resistance by the art world, which rarely takes the art of those with mental health struggles seriously when that art is produced within a medical context, even as it retrospectively fetishizes madness as a link

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<sup>3</sup> These two programs were the product of partnerships between the Nova Scotia Sea School, Capital Health, Connections Halifax, Gambling Awareness Nova Scotia, and Halifax Regional Municipality.

to genius. As Tobin Siebers points out, “genius remains the unspecified platform on which almost every judgement in art criticism is based” (19), but the link between genius, intention, inspiration, and autonomy made by those critics is vague at best. Siebers provides examples of sculptures by artists Judith Scott and Marc Quinn to indicate how intention is divorced from aesthetics, and how critics often turn discussions of disability within art into personal attacks on people with disabilities (42). In the case of Judith Scott, because she was born deaf, mute, and with Down syndrome, she was considered incapable of anything. A chance visit from a fibre artist at the Creative Growth Art Center (where she was taking classes) led to the discovery of Scott's abilities as a sculptor – she takes everyday objects and cocoons them in thread to produce startling and powerful shapes. As Siebers emphasizes, the undeniable resonance of Scott's work is hard to reconcile with critics' need for clear intention on the part of the artist, since her capacity to articulate her intentions is so limited. Marc Quinn's sculptures, and in particular his piece “Alison Lapper Pregnant,” are discussed by Siebers to show how quickly images of disabled bodies become personal attacks. Alison Lapper herself is an artist, born with no arms and shortened legs. When Quinn displayed his piece on the Fourth Plinth at Trafalgar Square, the discussion of it centred on critics' distaste for Lapper's body instead of on Quinn's abilities as a sculptor. In both cases, the connection between disability and the art product are elided or de-emphasized.

My next chapter engages with two memoirs, the visual memoir *Diary Drawings*, by Bobby Baker, which details her diagnosis and treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder, and *Girl in Need of a Tourniquet*, by Merri Lisa Johnson, who has also struggled with BPD. Baker is a successful British performance artist and playwright, and Johnson is a professor at USC in South Carolina. Both of these books challenge some of the common tropes of autobiographical writing, while both authors are creating from a place of greater power and social capital than the fledgling writers of the Workman Arts Group. Baker and Johnson grapple with the possibility of delegitimization through the label of an illness, as well as holding the power to contest and critique the labels imposed by psychiatric institutions. My chapter explores the effects of and cultural responses to the label of madness when it's applied to writers and artists who already have successful careers and places from which to speak, as well as some of the difficulties surrounding the creation of communities of resistance organized around madness.

My final chapter looks at the installation art of acclaimed Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama. Over a fifty-year career, Kusama has presented a singular vision to the world, which she traces back to a series of mental health crises as a child. She became famous for her paintings, installations, and performance art in New York in the sixties and seventies, before returning to Japan to check herself in to a mental health facility. She continued her work there, and once again received international critical acclaim in the nineties. In dialogue with Kusama and her critics, I consider the interaction between fame

and the label of mental illness, and in particular to explore why and how Kusama managed to avoid stigma and marginalization despite her frequent public articulations of her own madness.

### A Void

In *Madness: A Brief History*, historian Roy Porter attempts to document the shifting conceptions of madness and its treatments over time, but without the polemical tone of many other histories and archaeologies (such as Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*). Porter clearly states that he is not attempting a definition of madness or speculating about the cultural causes of madness, but simply providing a distanced account of a flow of events (9). Still, this flow points to shifting definitions of and treatments for mental difference so varied that it is nearly impossible to accept the current approaches put forward by the psychiatric and medical community uncritically. Porter concludes his history with a brief discussion of the current state of affairs, stating that “more people than ever swallow the medications, and perhaps even the theories, which psychiatry prescribes ... Yet public confidence in the psychiatric profession is low, as is evident from the ubiquitously distrustful images in the arts and reports in the popular press” (217-18). The conflict between psychoanalysis and psycho-pharmaceuticals, alongside the patients' rights and decarceration movements (linked both to the radical Left and neoliberal

government policies<sup>4</sup>), produces an overall effect of controversy. As the editors of *Mad Matters* put it, even while “psychiatry has globalized its operations in this era of transnational communication” there has been increasingly vocal activism and critical scholarship around the world (*Mad Matters* 6-8).

Porter claims to adopt an unbiased tone, which is dubious considering how many social factors and considerations he brackets out of his book. He offers a critical take on Foucault and other radical challengers to the medical frame such as Thomas Szasz and R.D. Laing, suggesting that their emphasis on the culturally fabricated dimensions of mental illness is simply a piece of a larger history that is accepting of the medical establishment. However, I believe the challenges levelled by Foucault and others are important to attend to. For while Porter deliberately excludes broader cultural considerations, Foucault and others make the dimensions of culture that produce madness central to their arguments.

Foucault in particular adopts an archaeology of madness in order to view the history of practices of confinement, and more broadly to trace the interplay between the forces he calls reason and unreason. For Foucault, the medieval vision of madness was as a manifestation of the face of unreason, which bore “imaginary transcendences” and the

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<sup>4</sup> Decarceration is called for by anti-psychiatry protesters, who feel that the existence of psychiatric institutions leads to the labelling and abuse of those struggling with madness. They instead call for alternative community solutions to support those people who are currently contained within psych wards and other government institutions. Decarceration is also encouraged under the banner of neoliberal austerity, where issues of health and wellness are downloaded from governments to individuals. Neoliberal decarceration tends to reject the need for alternative community solutions, valuing cost-saving and rejecting the social connections favoured by the anti-psychiatry movement.

stigmas of “the world of the irrational” (58). But in the Renaissance, which Foucault calls the classical age, madness shifted to become a visible indication of uselessness or a rejection of the “bourgeois order” linked to the emergence of a work ethic. Confinement of the mad alongside other dimensions of unreason (such as criminality or poverty) was a way of silencing the forces of unreason, but despite being confined madness was allowed to “speak” in a certain fashion. It gave voice both to “animality” and to the power of divine Redemption (78, 82). But despite this capacity for speech, madness and unreason more broadly still break with society and thus must be hidden to preserve order and reason. As he puts it, “madness in the classical period ceased to be the sign of another world, and that it became the paradoxical manifestation of non-being” (Foucault 115). Again, leaping back to Siebers' questioning of notions of genius and intentionality in cultural considerations of creativity, I suggest that Foucault's conception of madness as a manifestation of nothingness, in relation to the coherent something that reason always addresses and masters, troubles and complicates the medical tendency to see madness (and creativity) as an individual process, something controlled and manageable, the risk of breaking open bones or coming undone at the seams pushed down and contained.

Although he does not address the modern era of psychiatry in detail or depth, Foucault is clear that Freud and the field of psychoanalysis take the power structures of asylum confinement and transfer them to the doctor (278). Consequently, while doctors may decipher certain forms of madness, they will not be able to understand or explain

unreason as a larger force. It is that larger force which always stands outside of the systems of cultural control even as those systems produce the necessity for that force, and in standing outside takes those systems to task and challenges them to justify themselves.

Significantly, in his conclusion Foucault turns to art as a contemporary manifestation of unreason. He declares here that madness and art have become opposed, in the sense that once someone has been declared “mad” their art no longer registers culturally except as a psychiatric document (287). Yet in this moment where art becomes dismissed, “by the madness which interrupts it, a work of art opens a void...where the world is forced to question itself” (288). Thus, the world must work to restore reason and order from the challenge presented by art. While he appears to claim that madness and art are incompatible, then, Foucault is instead suggesting that through their simultaneity they take the world to task and force it to re-justify itself. Madness and art have the capacity to summon the authenticity of an immediate interaction, standing in the broken-open space of a face-to-face encounter, full of risk and promise.

### Vandalised

The link between madness and art is pursued by disability theorist Tobin Siebers in his book *Disability Aesthetics*, although he reduces Foucault's broad category of unreason to mere “mental disability.” He also seems to take at face value Foucault's claim that madness ruptures or dissolves art, rather than seeing the underlying suggestion that both

madness and art, in their capacity as the voices of unreason, hold a common challenge to the world at large. Despite this, Siebers articulates many important critiques of how we evaluate art, and in particular he details the conflicting attitudes towards disability present in contemporary art and art criticism. He draws attention to the increasing preoccupation with disability in the art world, noting that “modern art's love affair with misshapen and twisted bodies [and]...intense representation of traumatic injury and psychological alienation” (4) point to the hidden factor of disability behind contemporary aesthetics, so much so that disability has “an aesthetic value in itself” (10). As this quote makes apparent, Siebers is unwilling to make a distinction between physical disability and madness, and so he considers physical and psychological trauma, injury, or difference as united under the common category of disability. Dimensions of this common vision are problematic, in particular the way in which cognitive disorders (and their attendant physical explanations by modern medicine) are used synonymously with varieties of mental anguish like Borderline Personality Disorder, whose causes and conditions are seemingly irreducible to physical difference. Yet this common vision allows him to advocate for an aesthetics of disability that “prizes physical and mental difference” (19) broadly and equally, and in doing so invites us to critique terms like genius, intelligence, or intention as requirements for artistic success. In the works of art I examine more fully in the following chapters, I apply Siebers's description of disability aesthetics to works of



art that circle around madness and mental difference, in the hopes of allowing those works to continue to speak from the voices of unreason they manifest.

His argument is at its strongest and most complex when he considers the variety of reactions in the art world towards art vandalism. Siebers is clear that his vision of disability aesthetics is not simply to suggest that disabled bodies are beautiful, or to advocate for purely positive representations of mental anguish. Instead, he wants to advocate for an aesthetics that shows “disability made stranger, not prettier” (87). Indeed, he feels that this art “might be as difficult to accept as the fact of disability” (87). It is for this reason that he turns to art vandalism, which seems on the surface to be taking whole/perfect/complete works of art and wounding or disabling them in some way. He points out that paintings splashed with acid or sculptures smashed by hammers are talked about “as if they were wounded human beings” (90), while the perpetrators are talked about as lunatics or criminals but never as artists (97).

This confluence of reactions indicates how deliberate defects in an art object (Picasso's distorted faces for instance) are seen as beautiful, while similar flaws in the real world (facial deformities caused by a genetic disorder) are considered ugly. Conversely, a vandalised painting (Siebers provides by way of example Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait*, which was splashed by acid in 1977) is simultaneously ugly/damaged and strangely modernised. Siebers points out that vandalised art becomes inserted “in an aesthetic tradition increasingly preoccupied with disability” (10), but he wants to be clear that he is

not endorsing vandalism of art objects in the name of disability aesthetics. And so we are brought to a strange dilemma, where he is unwilling to claim outright that vandalism is an act of artistic creation and yet it is clearly the case that vandalised works of art do produce or create something, a response in the audience at least that opens a space for the consideration of the values of disability. As Siebers puts it, “given the sometimes startling resemblance between vandalism approved as aesthetic and outlawed as psychopathological, it is nevertheless hard to avoid asking whether prejudices against mental disability are essentially tautological” (97). We return again to Foucault's articulation of unreason as manifesting a challenge to the world at large -- and to the microcosm of the world of medicine, art, and therapy -- forcing it to justify its own irrational prejudices and exclusions in the face of madness, art, the criminal, the Other.

### Ghost Image

I'm sitting in a cabin in Cape Breton reading the concluding chapter to Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*. The cabin is musty, and the dried bodies of last summer's flies lie in piles on the sills. The last time I was here was six years ago, with Zoë and her parents. Her mother was alive then too, and I feel the weight of carrying my memories of them both. I see myself and Zoë standing under the old apple tree in the yard watching the sun dip behind the highlands. But it's a younger her and a younger me. We both don't exist any more. This double image is disorienting and swells the shadows with sadness. Ahmed

talks about moments of disorientation as an unsettling that shatters the “belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life feel livable” (157). While she points out that such shatterings “might persist and become a crisis,” they are also “vital” because they help to reveal what has been taken for granted (157). Ahmed takes us through an ordinary moment of disorientation, the shifting of attention from one dimension to another – reading a book and then looking up when someone calls your name. My grief is a disorientation, my entire future and sense of self in connection to Zoë shattered by her death in the instant she was broken by that car. In this way madness also becomes a disorientation, one often persistent enough to be labelled a crisis or felt as a crisis.

The significance of this spectrum of disorientation is the way that it allows us to step away from a binary vision of madness and sanity. The brief moments of disorientation that happen to us daily are connected to the shattering disorientation of grief, even if they feel like different categories. However, it's easy to leap from the awareness of a spectrum to the conclusion that disorientation is a prerequisite of existence. Ahmed takes a more nuanced approach, writing that she wants to “think about how queer politics might involve disorientation, without legislating disorientation as a politics” (158). This effort of thinking resonates with the emphasis on neurodiversity articulated by Mad Studies, as an attempt to talk about the many and varied ways that human brains operate. The idea of legislating or creating rules around madness (as a way

of being that breaks rules) seems ludicrous, and yet there must be some ways of involving the experience of madness productively. For Ahmed, one important involvement is that we don't need to talk about “whether we experience disorientation (for we will, and we do), but ... what we do with such moments of disorientation, as well as what such moments can do” (158). Do they open up new spaces and directions, ones that hold out hope? Built into this shift in focus is the awareness that moments of madness and the insights offered by a mad perspective are inevitable, even if they are labelled as simply a momentary disorientation. From there, Ahmed suggests that instead of mandating disorientation or merely trumpeting its existence, we instead attempt to work with it to expand our ability to connect with the world and with others. It is this connective capacity produced by an awareness of disorientation (either as momentary or as deep crisis) that allows us to see links between queer politics and madness, and indeed of other non-normative cultural positions. To be clear, I am not trying to use queerness and madness as metaphors that explain each other, but as embodiments of phenomenological alternatives to the “straightness” of the status quo.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on Ahmed's argument that queerness asks us to expand our conception of reality by turning to what is overlooked, I believe that madness too gestures to ways of being and thinking that stand outside of the prescribed reality of reason.

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<sup>5</sup> The embodied alternative represented by madness is taken up in detail by Shayda Kafai in her article “The Mad Border Body.” There, she argues for viewing madness as a non-binary state, and furthermore that if society recognizes that “individuals can exist simultaneously in states of sanity and madness, then it must also question the belief that sanity is stable” (Kafai).

In searching for ways to describe the proximities between queerness and madness -- not just their historical conflation as articulated by Porter, Foucault, Huffer and others, but also their theoretical proximity -- I am drawn to the language that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick uses in her book *Touching Feeling*. There, she advocates for thinking that emphasizes *beside* over *beneath* or *beyond* as a way of imagining the interrelation of objects and ideas. For her, this avoids the language of origins and goals, and encourages the more visceral and pluralistic language of physicality and phenomena, which undoes the dualism of binaries in a tangible way, which she describes as ecological (Sedgwick 8). Similarly, she searches for ways to discuss queerness that allow for reparative rather than paranoid positions to emerge, meaning for her a de-emphasis on sexual difference or sameness, and instead a more expansive and contingent reading of events and the world (Sedgwick 146-7).

This particular approach is important for me because art too is not a broad concept or category but a tactile process involving materials and bodies, which Ahmed invites us to remember through her emphasis on phenomenology. When Ahmed talks about disorientation, she points out that it can be an experience of being outside of the normative directions, spaces, and grounds of the world – thus race, as well as sexuality, might be experienced as a disorientation. Many types of difference serve to disorient straight spaces, disrupting their habitual givenness (160). Her phenomenological approach here resonates with Foucault's articulation of unreason's capacity to take the

world to task, but she grounds this in daily lived experience instead of a genealogical history. Ahmed also invites us to consider not just the way madness speaks to the world, but the way the world speaks as well. She shows how disorientation is mobile, it is both the world becoming unfamiliar to us and us becoming unfamiliar in the world. There is a resonance between an internal and an external sense of difference, an unfamiliarity that she links to an experience of wonder, which she says “allows the familiar to dance again with life” (Ahmed 164). Let us dance together for a moment.

### Three Objects

We begin every art program with an exercise we called Object Arranging. It is something I want you to do with me now. The first step is to find a large blank piece of paper and set it in front of you on a table. Once that's done, aimlessly wander around the space that you're in – your house, your backyard, a park, a library, an office – and find three objects that usually rest beneath your notice. So not your favourite rock but a stapler, not a beautiful feather but a bottlecap. When you've gathered three objects, return to your paper and close your eyes. Pick up one of the objects, and ask yourself if it is lighter than you imagined or heavier. Is it smooth or rough, or smooth with rough patches? Does it have a smell? Does it make a sound? Attend to the object for as long as you need to, remembering to breathe and to really pay attention to it. And when you're ready, open

your eyes and quickly! place your object on the paper, without thinking or deliberating at all.

Repeat this process with the other two objects, remembering each time to close your eyes and trace the outline of the object, press it to your cheek, feel its weight in one hand or in both, find the parts of it that surprise you. Then place it on the paper without thinking.

After all three objects are down, stand back and look at them on the ground of the paper. Ask yourself if you like them where they are. Do they relate in some way to each other? Are they facing away from each other instead? Would you move them around if you could? Does their placement on the paper reveal their secret hearts you discovered with your attention, or does that fade away again when they're looked at? If you've done this exercise with a partner, you can look at their paper as well, and maybe talk about what you noticed in your objects.

This is an exercise in productive disorientation, as Ahmed might say. For us, it helps to wake up a willingness to be in a state of wonder, and in particular to realize that wonder is connected to the everyday and the overlooked. It also removes anxieties about talent or technique when it comes to art-making. If there is any skill it has more to do with letting go than with holding a brush. What's being let go of is the straight line, the assumed trajectory, the givenness of things. So we see art, madness, queerness, linked in their attention to the oblique. Yet this letting go, which is attention, can also be tactile.

Ahmed pays attention to the “queer nausea” (164) of hands holding on and letting go, and how “a queer object hence makes contact possible” (169) by bringing together paths assumed to be parallel. Again there is a resonance between comings and goings, internal and external worlds, proximity and distance.<sup>6</sup>

If, as Ahmed puts it, queer phenomenology is a “disorientation device” (Ahmed 172) which lets things slip away and thus clears new ground, madness too can be seen as a part of this device. Here, “queer” isn't a sexual orientation that is other but thinking that is other. The links between queerness and madness are not only theoretical, but also historical. As Porter indicates, the academic and medical tendencies towards “taxonomizing the mental disorders” (213) led to the American Psychiatric Association's creation of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (known as the DSM), which established large categories of various disorders; up until 1975, homosexuality was considered one of those disorders. Porter mentions this as evidence that “politico-cultural, racial, and gender prejudices still shape the diagnosis of what are purportedly objective disease syndromes” (214), not to mention that the DSM has grown from a mere hundred pages to over nine hundred in barely sixty years, which speaks to an increasing trend towards pathologization. Lynne Huffer, in *Mad for Foucault*, provides an alternative view of this historical link between queerness and madness, not as proof of society's prejudices but

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<sup>6</sup> A similar description of the value of touch is given by Sedgwick in her introduction to *Touching Feeling*, where she observes that an experience of texture and touching “makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity” (14), and for her signify their irreducibly phenomenological nature (21), shifting the conversation away from epistemology and performativity and towards affect.



from a Foucauldian angle, where various “figures of sexual alterity” are incorporated “within the frame of madness” (xiv). She sees this as the emergent site of Foucault's queer ethics, where the objectifying dimensions of reason and science are linked to “bourgeois structures of moral exclusion” (xiv). In turn, for Foucault, sexual experience might become an alternative “ethics of eros” that emphasizes the body as a location of both pleasure and death (xvi). As Huffer articulates it, drawing on Foucault, “in its premodern form, madness as unreason stood in for that bodily dimension of human experience: the cosmic, tragic presence of life and death” (xvi). On Huffer's reading, the link between queer sexuality and madness is not about a mistake in labelling, the way Porter wants to present it. Instead, it is a vital link to a way of ethical engagement that rejects the constraining morality of the society we find ourselves in.

Rather than viewing society as a collection of constraints on queerness, madness, and other non-straight bodies, Ahmed emphasizes how society chooses not to support bodies that resist the status quo. This lack of support by society produces a feeling of groundlessness that may open up new space in a potentially supportive way, but it also needs its own versions of support. As she says, “queer does not reside in a body or an object, and is dependent on the mutuality of support” (170). The emphasis within mad communities about the need for connection, storytelling, and shared experiences as tools to dismantle the isolating effects of incarceration speak to the vital necessity of community support networks for all non-straight bodies. So too, Ahmed emphasizes that

while “disorientation requires an act of facing ... it is a facing that also allows the object to slip away, or to become oblique” (171). The confinement practices of the medical model of treatment for mental illness work to eliminate the face of madness while simultaneously refusing to let mad bodies slip away. In this sense, it refuses both to look at or let go of madness. Queer phenomenology, by contrast, invites us to expand our sense of “what counts as a life worth living” (178) and thus to expand the behaviours towards and visions of madness as something tolerable, even integral to existence.

Alongside this theoretical advocacy for queer and mad ways of living, there are efforts to shift the language that surrounds discussions of madness both within the medical community and within society at large. In her essay “A Rose By Any Other Name” Bonnie Burstow emphasizes that medical language in the area of mental health has the quality of what J.L. Austin called a performative utterance – it is the voices and declarations of doctors that simultaneously name and create the reality of someone's health or illness (Burstow 80). She advocates for a language of resistance that emphasizes the fabricated nature of the medical framework. For example, a “mental hospital” becomes a “psychoprison,” a “hallucination” is simply “seeing and hearing what others don't see or hear,” “diagnosis” is “label” (Burstow 83). There are also shifts in language that work to change broader cultural assumptions, not just the language within a medical context, such as replacing slang words like “insane” with “unreal,” “crazy” with “unbelievable,” or “bipolar” with “moody.” There have also been terms created to refer to

mad people, such as c/s/x (referring to consumer/survivor/ex-patient), Mad, and psychiatric survivor. Shaindl Diamond traces the shifting history of these terms within the Toronto community in her essay “Mad People's History, Evolving Culture, and Language,” which explores in great detail the nuances of these terms and their political and cultural ramifications. These terms point to different approaches within mad constituencies in Toronto, some of whom want to acknowledge the positive difference psychiatry has made in their lives, others who seek to create a Mad identity and pride in that identity, and others who want to abolish the psychiatric institution in its entirety (Diamond 72).

As a result of this shifting and contested language, my thesis also uses a variety of terms depending on context. I tend not to capitalize “mad” unless it is in the context of someone who is working to build an explicitly Mad community, as is the case with Mad Studies. I similarly attempt to stay away from the term “mental illness” unless it is in the context of someone having that label applied to them, as I am attempting to explore the cultural construction of illness as a metaphor. Instead I opt to refer either to neurodiversity or mental suffering, which I think work to emphasize the ways in which thinking differently can be experienced without resorting to metaphors of health and illness. As a result of the historical explorations by Foucault, Porter, and others, I tend to refer to either “madness” or “unreason” as a historical category that exists without the contemporary nuances of the communities that Diamond identifies. As Diamond says,

“madness is constructed differently in various historical and cultural contexts, and ... there is no real basis of inherent or natural characteristics that define an eternal Mad subject” (74). Consequently, my goal with the language I use is to be clear and direct without unquestioningly reproducing contemporary cultural assumptions, and to allow for a wide range of voices and subjects to emerge. Hopefully, the effect is one of both clarity and productive disorientation.

## Chapter 1: Asylums, Art, Treatment, Silence

### Several Clouds

Yesterday Sadie and Peter came to visit me, with their daughters Ace and Mica. Ace was two when Zoë died, and Mica not yet born. Zoë was so excited to meet her. Ace and I walk into the garden to look for flowers, we find yellow mustard, purple clover, small white thyme, and bright red explosions of beebalm. She loves bees and watches them come in and out of our hives, and she leaves the flowers she picked in front of them so the bees have something to eat. After they leave I put the flowers in a bowl of water on my table to keep me company while I clean the dishes and scrub baby puke off the floor. The moon is low and full. I am in love with my friends, their family feels like the promise of a future I want for the world. It is also the most painful feeling for me, being so intimately entangled with something I can never have with Zoë. As well as an evening Zoë would want to be a part of. Her absence coats the walls along with the moon. I think this is the world showing me its sadness, what Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa calls “the genuine heart of sadness” (34).

Zoë and I attempted to give only positive feedback when our students showed us their finished pieces, for a very specific reason. It's easy to feel like the point of making art is to make good art – despite the extremely subjective nature of the word “good,” and the knowledge that not everyone likes the same things. This comes hand in hand with the

fear of making bad art, and the end result is often a kind of paralysis or the temptation to give up. So when I was asked for my opinion on something, I would say: “Good. Now make another.” To me this was a way of gesturing towards what I feel like the point of making art is. Not to make good art, but to consistently make art for a lifetime. The value judgements get made by other people, in a process that is not in the artist's control. Artists are just in control of making things.

This doesn't mean that artists shouldn't be self-critical. But that wasn't something I was worried about, because it happens automatically. And if I was pressed for a reaction of some sort, I was willing to talk about my sense of some qualities within the work. The delicacy of a line, the sense of mass in a sculpture, a phrase or moment in a poem when the words seem to take flight. But any positive qualities, just like any negative ones, I wanted to treat like clouds in the sky -- things that have drifted through the field of the artwork for a time, but not anything permanent to hold on to. I want to see my sadness with the same impermanence, but if that impermanence is true I can't feel it yet.

#### Four Openings

When I began to read through the Workman Arts anthology *All That is Real* the years I spent teaching with Zoë came to mind quickly. The collection of artistic voices it holds reminded me of the group art exhibits we organized at the end of every program we ran. The anthology contains the work of 33 different poets, who took workshops with

Canadian poet bill bissett over a period of 3 years. It is easy to sense the teaching and workshopping dimension in the collection because there are clusters of poems with the same title or theme or key word, like *asylum*, *invincible*, or *friendship*. There are also moments of deep and raw power that burst out, and there are many significant poems in the collection.

Before I turn to some of them, though, I want to talk about the front matter of the book. It begins with four separate introductions. One by Lisa Brown, the Founder of Workman Arts; one by bill bissett, the poet in residence; one by Catherine Zahn, the President and CEO of CAMH (the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto); and one by James Roach, the Chairman of the Canada Post Foundation for Mental Health, which supported the training component of the poetry workshops. Already this speaks to the presence of multiple interests going in to the creation of the anthology, and different emphases placed on the importance of its publication. For the funders, the anthology represents on some level the return on an investment, so that the process of art making or the content of the art is less significant than the anthology as a manifestation of objectives being met. This is in tension with the perspective of the teachers and writers, who care about the written words and the learning behind those words rather than a set of funding goals. The heads of the partner organizations are an interface between these two perspectives, needing on the one hand to assure the funders that their money was used

well, and on the other hand to make the artists feel that their unique contributions and voices are more than simply statistics.

Lisa Brown begins her introduction by saying “This book is a gift. A gift from the gifted writers at Workman Arts” (*Real* vi). She admits to finding poetry “elusive,” and includes a definition of poetry as part of her introduction, something that strikes me as both brave and generous. Brave because she is willing to admit her difficulties with the content of the anthology, and generous because by including a definition she invites or includes an audience that may have similar struggles. It means that the book is not intended only for people who already enjoy or are familiar with poetry. It is also clear that her goal is to emphasize the fact that this is an anthology of poetry written by talented writers, rather than emphasizing the adversity of their diagnosis or struggles with mental health. Taking this in tandem with the inclusivity of her approach, it seems that her goal is to build as broad an audience as possible, and for that audience to focus on the talent and the diversity of poetry represented in the anthology. She is not looking to engage with the smaller and more critical realm of Canadian poetry circles, for instance, or to draw attention to the goal of the Workman Arts program in general.

There is a different emphasis in the introduction by Catherine Zahn, who as the President of CAMH, is involved with Workman Arts as a partner organization. She highlights the structural goals of both organizations, describing Workman Arts as a place “for artists living with the challenges of mental illness and addiction” (*Real* viii). Despite



drawing attention to (and hence legitimizing or at least accepting) the medical diagnoses that have affected the lives of the poets in the anthology, she goes on to say that both organizations “have worked to foster the creativity of extraordinary minds, to overcome prejudice, and to empower individuals” (*Real* viii). She wants the anthology to be seen in this context, as something that can work to overcome prejudice by proving the artistic capacities of people struggling with mental illnesses, and which simultaneously empowers them by giving their voices a wider scope, and encourages their creative impulses. The shift in language from one of illness and health to the descriptor “extraordinary” also indicates her alignment with the language of neurodiversity encouraged by Mad Studies, and takes her presumed audience from that diagnostic frame into a larger and more positive one. As Geoffrey Reaume et al. write in the introduction to *Mad Matters*, a collection of essays on the state of Mad Studies in Canada, “madness has come to represent a critical alternative to “mental illness” or “disorder” as a way of naming and responding to emotional, spiritual, and neuro-diversity” (*Mad Matters* 10). Zahn's introduction enacts the shift towards this critical alternative, and in doing so invites her presumed audience to absorb that alternative perspective as well.

Zahn continues this trend of positivity and support through the rest of her introduction, emphasizing the originality and experimental nature of the poetry, and the range of emotions present within it. She says the poems are “lyrical, edgy, humorous and moving” and will “surprise, console, amuse and challenge,” all of which she hopes will

leave readers “inspired by the creativity and vision you find” (*Real* viii). Her tone here suggests that her presumed audience might be inclined towards criticism, and that some might know a bit about poetry but that others do not. She does not take for granted either an accepting and supportive attitude, or a purely critical and negative one. Either way Zahn also seems to be looking for a kind of mainstream cultural acceptance, rather than an engagement with a poetry community or establishment. Nonetheless, mainstream acceptance is also predicated on the poems in the anthology being seen as creative and original, and thus legitimate. Ultimately, then, she and Brown arrive at a similar position in their introductions, despite their different starting points.

Unlike Brown and Zahn, the brief introduction by James Roach, representing the financial backing of the Canada Post Foundation for Mental Health, emphasizes what he sees as a “sense of hope” in the anthology (*Real* 1). He states explicitly that he's glad to have played a role in reaching a “larger audience,” whom he cautions to “keep in mind the determination and spirit of those who wrote it” (*Real* 1) when reading the anthology. This larger audience seems quite nebulous, but somehow also inclined to be potentially critical of the work and the project itself, hence needing a reminder of the humanity of the writers. It also positions those writers as somehow vaguely not so much artists as struggling victims. This shift is in marked contrast to the other two introductions, both of which look away from that portrayal of mental illness as an unbearable or devastating

burden (even as they acknowledge the potential for that assumption on the part of some readers).

The introduction by bill bissett, in contrast to these other three, speaks the most about the pedagogical and poetic approaches that were taken in the workshops. bissett writes in his characteristic voice that “thees ar all amaying n wundrful writrs....all with brilliyant xperiences uv sharing saying being n sew opn 2 changing stretching n showing what is” (*Real* vii). This already recalls for me the emphasis Foucault places on the ability of art to open a void and force the world to justify itself,<sup>7</sup> since the “what is” bissett mentions feels less like the status quo and more like the avoided and excluded perceptions present within unreason, summoned by his own unique spelling, spacing, and rhythm. bissett has long been aligned with the experimental avant-garde in Canadian poetry, and is known for his anti-conventional approach to orthography. In the above quotation the elisions of letters, the emphasis on phonetics, and the use of extra spaces to represent pauses or gaps all serve to disrupt the reading experience. But the intention isn't to make reading impossible, or to be incoherent. Instead, by making reading strange it allows us to focus in on the essence of the content. It asks us to be “opn 2 changing” ourselves. In the context of Mad Studies we can see the unique visual representation of language bissett adopts as another place where binaries (such as right way and wrong

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This is discussed in more detail in my introduction above.

way, or sane and insane) are replaced instead with an appreciation of diversity – of style as well as of thinking. As for the approaches to learning poetry, Bissett says:

we work with topics identity the relationship between the behaviour and the core self  
love comfort reticence solstice visual poetry sound many others dreams all the  
great approaches to writing poetry we have discovered and continue to explore voice  
gestures ideas image

This eclectic description lists an engagement with topics and key words but also with styles of poetic form that diverge from typical poetic voices, either by drawing attention to the purely visual or purely sonic dimensions of poetry. It's not a rejection of the lyric by any means, but signals his desire to welcome a vast range of poetic expression. He also highlights futurity, suggesting that the contributors to the volume haven't just learned techniques but that they continue to explore them through differing poetic voices. The juxtapositions of gestures, ideas, and images suggest an attention to physical, theoretical, and lyrical dimensions of existence, and the list in general has a boundless inclusivity to it in terms of both the style and the content of the poetry.

### Poetry

Madness is discussed in the anthology, as are asylums, as are reality and the appearance of reality. I will dive in to these poems later in the chapter, since they provide a multifaceted picture of lives lived and permeated by the looming presences of diagnosis

and treatment. But first I want to quote in its entirety a poem that struck me deeply. How can I not begin with these strong feelings, in this document of so many feelings?

**all the long nights**

*for my michael*

a little boy and his mom  
jump, rubber-booted onto  
thin waters of puddle ice  
with satisfying cracks  
like shattered glass  
with gleeful giggles

hands get cold now  
dog walks a little shorter  
wind a little sharper  
and darkness descends  
longer and longer

ancients had their megaliths  
impossible stones  
rituals of light  
old as humanity

I, old madwoman  
have my mixed mania  
to light me up  
all night long remembering

like the time we lay together quietly  
staring at that house across the street  
glitter flash twinkle like  
spilled sequins or  
cheap-ass urban northern lights

*“place is lit up like a Madame La Rue pinball machine”*  
I said

and from your bereft heart  
and your ails addled broken body  
and your crack-pipe chapped lips  
and your diminishing days

You whispered  
*Isn't it beautiful Jill?*

-- Jill McGinn

I am reading this poem with the eyes of sadness, but even still it is clearly a poem of grief. The part that resonates most for me is the last line. It calls out the same sense in me of the pain caused by recognizing beauty when that beauty is inflected by loss. Every encounter with something Zoë would appreciate has that same inflection for me. Here, in the poem, that lesson is in the mouth of a man about to die, but it asks us to re-hear it in the “all night long remembering” that happens earlier in the poem as well. Jill recalls the beauty of the lights, the beauty of being shown that beauty by her dying love, and the anguish of memory that burns her awake through the night.

She identifies herself as a madwoman in the poem, and the implied pun of mixed mania/mixed media positions her as an artist as well. Yet the poem does not “make disability stranger,” as Tobin Siebers would have it. It is a very legible poem, a poem that focuses on grief but is hospitable to its readers. It does not require us to look or think in a “mad” way, whatever that is. Perhaps that is the radical lesson of the poem – that grief is grief regardless of a label.

We are in fact invited by the poem to think in larger human terms. The impossible megaliths have some dimension of unreason to them, the urges that built Stonehenge feel incomprehensible to modern eyes and in that sense summon a kind of void, or the stigmata of the irrational as Foucault would have it (Foucault 58). But we do explain them, as the poem does, through reference to old “rituals of light” that require a willingness to expand our conception of acceptable human thought and action. We are invited to see Jill’s late-night grief memories as a kind of Stonehenge, and thus as a protection against the “longer and longer” darkness descending on the world and on her. As well as this ancient human history, we are placed in her own personal history through the poem’s re-enactment of a moment of visceral memory. The poem begins in a present-tense winter that acts, with its yearly ritual of “glitter flash twinkle” Christmas lights, as a trigger for an earlier winter when her love was still alive.

The poem opens with the gleeful fragility of ice on puddles, a hopping boy and his mother creating an image with positivity and a future to it. This image becomes destabilized by Michael’s body broken by AIDS, his drug-chapped lips another metaphorical instance of shattered glass. The parental nurturing that opens the poem shifts to include Jill’s role as caregiver, and makes us look at life trajectories more painful than the lighthearted play of childhood foretells. Yet again the whispered “beautiful” asks us as readers not to uncritically accept a purely sombre narrative. The skill of the poem is the way it pushes and pulls us, refusing to let us dismiss Jill as crazy, or see her dying

loved one as a mute (inevitable) victim of poor choices. Just as she draws a parallel between ancient rituals and the light of her mania as a way of including us in her own mental state, so too by putting the words of acceptance and insight in Michael's mouth we are included in his life and death. If we find the poem beautiful and are pushed along our own path of remembering, it becomes difficult to imagine ourselves as any different from the people inside the poem. The poem does not insist on a vision of normalcy, instead it invites us to feel the commonality grief produces.

#### Alluminium Baseball

I do want to think more deeply about Siebers' "stranger, not prettier" injunction, however. Applying this command to madness it might be "more elusive, not more coherent" or some other formulation that resists a temptation to unearth logic or rationality from inside expressions of madness. But along with that resistance to rationality there has to be something inviting. The strangeness Siebers advocates for in his aesthetics of physical disability he also extends to the mental, and perhaps it's as good a term as any for art that both refuses to be explained and refuses to be ignored.

The poem that leapt out at me in the anthology as an example of this difficult and disorienting territory (to borrow Sara Ahmed's language) is "Those who know of dark horror," by Chad Kelly. It opens with the completion of that sentence, "in human life/ will desire peace." The rest of the stanza abandons the creation of binaries, however, since the



contrasting group of people “who watch it from afar” are not warmongering or ignorant. Instead, their witnessing of horror “intrigues them” and lights their way. But even this distinction between groups is questioned at the end of the stanza, which asks “can anyone really know how/someone actually feels?” We flow from here into a discussion of death and the afterlife, a place referred to as “the honesty.” A woman has an out-of-body experience and in this afterlife she feels “completely connected without words” to everyone else up there, but then she is sent back to her body. This testimonial is contrasted with an imagined encounter between Hitler and his Jewish victims. Hitler cries. The ending of the poem after this point I want to quote in its entirety. Influenced by bissett, it adopts unusual spelling and elides letters, which increase in frequency towards the end of the poem:

when we go to wher they  
are  
it will not seem  
like a strange place  
it will be so real  
as if we nevr  
left home

does grover like me?  
I think I don't really know

If the date could actually be christmas

if grover takes the bait

tommy told me a story about  
hockey this helpd me finally

fall asleep if grover takes  
th bait I'll probably use the money  
for an alluminium baseball

In an attempt to follow Siebers's call for an aesthetics of strangeness I do not want to try and invent a meaning for this poem. But without explanations still I can say that the language has a strong grip on us as readers. The absolute confidence of an experience of heaven, which is a home because it is “so real” in contrast to the world we are in, is pushed up against the radical uncertainty of the hypotheticals that begin the final stanzas. The mystery of “grover” is never resolved, neither his identity nor his affections. The date, while unclear, is suffused with the prospect of an unattainable holiday. The calm of sports stories drifts us towards sleep, the whole poem settling into a kind of childhood fantasy realm. Even as we resist decoding it, and as the poem itself resists decoding, it's hard not to want to try. That explanatory impulse to me is a sign that the poem is working as a document of strangeness, one that gives neurodiversity an aesthetic value, as Siebers might say.

Siebers approaches aesthetics from a position of corporeality. He draws us back to the visceral reactions we have, arguing that “aesthetics tracks the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies” (1). He contrasts this with a kind of disembodied, distanced, and “rational” approach to art criticism that works to deny our physical engagement with the world and art. Importantly, however, Siebers' aesthetics is not opposed to politics or criticality. He argues that “aesthetic feelings of pleasure and

disgust are difficult to separate from political feelings of acceptance and rejection” (2). It is this difficulty that motivates him to think about a disability aesthetics, as a challenge to the tendency to reject difference from both art and politics. Rather than simply beautifying disability, however, he advocates for “detaching the aesthetic from its beautification program” and instead putting forward art that moves towards the strange, rather than the pretty (87). The goal is not just political acceptance by expanding the category of “beauty” to include disability, but to make reactions that sit outside the terms beautiful/ugly welcomed and discussed as significant. It is exactly this broader scope that an aesthetics of neurodiversity and a sense of strangeness point towards, and that I think we can locate through our desire to explain and discover meaning – although this desire is exactly what is being critiqued.

When we return to the opening of the poem, from its title invoking “dark horror” to the question of whether it's possible to share and know another human's feelings, it becomes palpable that this explanatory impulse is what we're being pushed up against. In the world of the poem knowledge is compelling and so is peace, but those desired values are not attainable. Certainly the wordless connection that would allow us a kind of knowledge and rest is only present in or after death. Or perhaps the childlike calm of the end is another suggestion for where connections occur, since “tommy” offer help and there seems to be some kind of potential satisfaction in the concluding and compelling image of an “alluminium baseball.” I find the poem satisfying and uplifting in its opacity.

## Touch

Sometimes I rest my hand on my shoulder as if it is Zoë's hand and she'll be behind me when I turn around. I need to feel her supporting me because it seems impossible that I have to be alone and apart from her from now on. The weight of my own hand makes me cry as much as it makes me feel close to something. Is it my own hand? Sometimes it feels like her hand, scars on the knuckles, lighter, a hand that can hold a paintbrush, a hand that knew how to release the tightness inside me. It is her hand, even though I held her fingers for the last time in a hospital room in Hamilton after they'd unplugged their machines. All the pieces of her are burned in a fire and the ashes sit in a box I can't open. How can her spirit fill the hand that is touching me? I want to be brave enough to show my grief to my friends. Still, most of the time I find myself screaming when I'm in a car by myself, or I'll walk out onto the lawn at midnight and crumple into a shaking ball for the stars to witness. At these times I know there are vast forces inside me with a tidal pull, a surge or ebb I can't predict although I feel the crests and troughs. Other times there is a blank stillness, I have been emptied of energy and momentum, I am sucked dry.

In her poem "Enigmatic," Eva Mosher begins by saying "I am an illusion. You can see; there's nothing inside." This is the starting point for the poem, however, and she goes on to list the internal contradictions and convictions of her illusory self. She sees the world as grey and lifeless, but when it is time for actions she has confidence in her

decisions. She believes in independence and fights against restrictions, saying “I am an ethical world and everyone should have freedom.” Yet she takes herself to task, acknowledging that “I can't hide from my hypocritical eyes.” Here too there is a sense of a kind of push and pull, a way of thinking about being that inhabits contradictions, that moves off the straight line and into queer territory, as Ahmed would say. Indeed, as Lynn Huffer points out, queerness was a form of subjectivity that was once “tossed into a dustbin called madness” and excluded as nonsense (1). So when Mosher writes, in a synaesthetic<sup>8</sup> moment, “I often hear with my eyes, feel with my ears, speak with my face, but am silent,” this resonates with the phenomenology of disorientation that Ahmed articulates, which emphasizes hands and faces as ways of summoning up and engaging both with the queerness of the world<sup>9</sup> and the normative gaze of society.

The relationship between queer phenomenology and touch in Ahmed has to do with proximity and distance. Hands both hold things and let them go, and in the same way they can be distanced from us, doing or holding things seemingly outside of our control, while also returning us to ourselves and our subjectivity. When things slip from our hands and become distant, as Ahmed points out, “distance is...the loss of grip over an object *that is already within reach*” (166). This possibility of loss produces a kind of slant or disorientation effect, another type of queer effect in which things appear to be lost or

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<sup>8</sup> Synaesthesia is the term for the coming-together of multiple senses, such as “hearing” colours or “seeing” sounds.

<sup>9</sup> In Ahmed's most expansive moments queerness is not just queer bodily desire but also anything that disorients the phenomenologically given, such as a table or a hand (Ahmed 63, 107).

slipping away even as we are still in a kind of contact with them -- the whole relationship is not direct and proximate, but oblique.

Faces too become bound up in this, as Ahmed elaborates, because in order to notice that an object is retreating or approaching, we need to be facing it. “We still have to face an object for the effect of the object to be 'queer'” she writes, but adds as well that we are also faced *by* objects (171). So a queer object might be one that faces in an unexpected direction. The importance of this is that “if a face is inverted and becomes queer or deprived of its significance, then such a deprivation would not be livable simply as loss but as the potential for new lines, or for new lines to gather as expressions that we do not yet know how to read” (171). Hearing Ahmed's alertness to the possibilities contained within the directions we face behind Mosher's poem, we can see her synaesthetic method of engaging with the world, in particular the silent speaking she does with her face, as an expression paralleling the queer “facing” Ahmed is describing. The challenge Ahmed and Mosher pose, in emphasizing the obliqueness of mad speech and embodiment, is whether or not we can hear it.

Ultimately, the basic assumptions that get made about the solidity and coherence of our world are jettisoned by Mosher, who concludes “Mysterious and fleeting is reality, I find,/Just like the thoughts that run through my mind.” We return to a Buddhist conception of impermanence, perhaps, but also or as well to the sense that the ephemeral thoughts we have are what shape the place we define as “real.” A medical system bound

up in diagnosis and based upon the belief that certain thoughts are valid and healthy while others don't count or are sick, is determining not just what is healthy but what is real. As the editors of *Mad Matters* put it, those in positions of power have the ability to “influence the very languages, thoughtways, and social practices by which we collectively determine what it means to be 'normal,' worthy, and even human” (*Mad Matters* 20). The enigma towards which Mosher gestures in her title isn't just the illusory nature of her self, but the illusory nature of the entire world. This fact leaves her with a keen awareness of an ethics of freedom, a freedom that permeates her being and allows her to speak while silent, to connect on a basic level with everyone around her.

### Models and Mannequins

I want to lift our gaze from the close focus of the anthology up to the broader context of its writing. Usually the type of creative output that's supported by Workman Arts and other organizations is talked about in the same terms as medicine. A January 2014 article in *The National Post* on the latest artist-in-residence at Workman Arts is titled “How two women found inspiration in the healing process” (Forani). The author mostly recounts the personal stories of pain and trauma in the lives of the artists he profiles, which he neatly resolves by gesturing to their creative output as a simultaneous justification for the organization's existence and proof that recovery has happened. As Cvetkovich points out, “within the popular imagination the medical model also holds powerful sway, especially

the rhetoric that depression...is manageable because it is a disease that can be detected, diagnosed, and treated” (90). Even if that treatment involves art, as opposed to only pharmaceuticals, still the dominant cultural metaphor for engaging with neurodiversity is to see it as an illness – with art becoming either proof of that illness (when it's too disturbing, or when it borders on vandalism) or a way out of it.

Much as Foucault advances the idea of madness, crime, poverty, and art as voices of unreason that challenge the basic assumptions of the dominant culture of logic and rationality, Eve Sedgwick emphasizes the queer or resistant dimensions of creativity. She argues that many people are willing to struggle to carve out personal time for “creativity and thought that will not be in the service of corporate profit, nor structured by its rhythms” (Sedgwick qtd in Cvetkovich 22), in and around their paid work.<sup>10</sup> That struggle should be seen, she suggests, “as one remaining form of insistence that it is not inevitable...for the facilities of creativity and thought to represent rare or exorbitant privilege” (Sedgwick qtd in Cvetkovich 22). Cvetkovich takes this to mean that creativity doesn't need to justify itself by serving a purpose – either a political or social justice purpose, or a therapeutic one. Instead, it is the seeming irrelevance, the purely resistant and unexplainable nature of creativity, that is the heart of the impulse to make things.

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<sup>10</sup> The importance of this resistant dimension within creativity is enhanced by Angela McRobbie's observation that increasingly “arts and culture per se, become the focal point for capitalization ... art is instrumentalized so that it begins to provide a model for working lives” (McRobbie 120). As the language of creativity is adopted by corporations to justify precarious contract work, the resistance that Sedgwick describes becomes harder to speak about, but vital to remember.



As Cvetkovich points out, the premise that mental illness is “a social and cultural phenomenon, not a biological or medical one” is unobjectionable and indeed banal in a cultural studies context. So too, the value and significance of the non-normative is routinely taken for granted. What she finds significant is that this is not the general commonsense view. Within a medical framework, “the premise that depression is social and cultural can seem not so much suspect as irrelevant” she writes (Cvetkovich 90). Thus, the neurodiversity signalled by madness is viewed primarily as a disease, with art as a potentially complementary treatment alongside pharmaceuticals and incarceration.

Scientific studies have recently begun to look at the impact of broader cultural forces on mental health. A recent study published in the *Clinical Psychology Review* investigated the “side effects” of biogenetic explanations of mental illness on stigma, concluding that “promoting biogenetic explanations to alleviate blame may induce pessimism and set the stage for self-fulfilling prophecies that could hamper recovery from psychological problems” (Kvalle et al. 782). In other words, suggesting that mental health issues are somehow genetic doesn't reduce stigma; instead, genetic explanations produce the feeling that there isn't a cure, imply that people with mental struggles are inherently dangerous, and have no effect on the social distancing that often accompanies a diagnosis. The importance of this conclusion is not just the conclusion itself, but that it is being reached from within a medical frame rather than outside of it. Similarly, an updated study published in the *Schizophrenia Bulletin* suggests that the common denominator among

the five most significant risk factors for schizophrenia is Social Defeat, which they believe “may lead to sensitization of the mesolimbic dopamine (DA) system” (Selten et al. 1) and thus increase the risk of a psychotic break. Importantly, however, neither of these studies are willing to jettison the medical model they're operating within. While the social causes of mental struggles are being acknowledged, the constructedness of the “disease” label still isn't questioned. Furthermore, the goal of discovering a cure or solution isn't itself challenged. Even if Social Defeat is countered by peer support and debt relief, the urge to locate its effects in dopamine or some other physical/chemical interaction works against the acknowledgement of the constructedness of “disease” as a concept being applied to those who think outside of cultural norms. Hopefully, scientific searches for the origins and explanations of madness will continue to take into account social factors, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the interaction between sociological circumstances and behaviours and actions that currently are labelled simply as “sick.” After all, even if there are some biological links between body chemistry and behaviour, an awareness of the effects of language and cultural attitudes on behaviour is equally important. The two are not incompatible with each other.

The emphasis on language is nowhere more clear than in the poem “we, the real mad poets” also by Jill McGinn. The poem reads like a manifesto, a demand to be seen in terms that fit with the lived experience of madness. It opens by rejecting the “wistful, romantic notion of madness” present in “idealistic university students” who imagine a

mild craziness in the gentle slant of moonlight<sup>11</sup>. From there it attacks the “lexicon of pathology” and “straightjacket jargon” of the medical system, which utilizes “words wrought to enslave” rather than liberate. On the one hand, the poem advocates for freedom of expression and the importance of mad voices; but on the other hand, it makes clear that those voices are edgy, uncomfortable, not the anaesthetized madness present in popular culture<sup>12</sup>.

So what do expressions of madness look like, according to McGinn? In the poem they “transmute/our sick synesthesia into a synergy of mixed metaphor,” converting the pathologizing label into a powerful poetic force. They “chant and speak and sing aloud/in unison and diversity,” using a whole vocal range not just to communicate a common vision but also to be wide-ranging and contradictory. She revels in being part of a group of “lunatic deviants” who defy “catatonic categories,” maintaining and embracing the queer disorientation of radical difference. In its most purified form, she suggests,

McLuhan has never been so right:  
“the medium is the message” stands chanting  
in the flesh,  
the psycho speaking  
is the poem

and it just doesn't get any clearer than that

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<sup>11</sup> This being a Master's thesis, I cannot help but feel myself accused by this poem. While there is undeniably a pathologization of grief currently happening in the DSM, I myself do not identify as Mad and worry that my decision to write this thesis is exactly what McGinn is condemning. I hope you share my uneasiness with this project, I don't want to try and make myself feel comfortable.

<sup>12</sup> For instance the relatable and attractive “madness” in the movie adaptation of Suzanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*, starring Winona Ryder and Angelina Jolie as the faces of psychiatric confinement.

In other words, madness is art, the physical manifestation of unreason in the bodies of those labelled as psychos is poetry, is a message for anyone willing to listen to it. The break identified by Foucault between the two terms, which occurs from the vantage point of Reason, is rejected here. Madness doesn't make art impossible, rather it is a pure form of art. Siebers wants to make a similar point in relation to physical disability. In both cases, the struggle is for that vision of non-normative bodies and minds as art to be accepted by those who happily apply the labels of illness and disease. But as the poem concludes, “we, the real mad poets/are not going away.”

#### Comfort

My friend Duane and I drive to a lake with a couple of sandwiches. I don't eat lunch very often, it's hard to want to take care of myself that way. Hunger is more of a curiosity than an impulse. Duane's cheekbones are high and exposed, his face gaunt from the side-effects of antiretroviral drugs. He's a hemophiliac who contracted HIV in the Canadian tainted blood scandal as a teenager. We talk about fear and grief. He's going to be a camp counsellor at a camp for hemophiliacs, and he wants them to feel brave enough to jump off swings and play with sharp sticks, and to be brave enough to self-inject the blood-clotting drugs when they're injured, and brave enough to talk about being angry and scared. Why is fearlessness so often equated with silence in the realm of emotion? The

lake is one of my favourites, a place Zoë and I used to go. I didn't want to drive there by myself, but I wanted to go with Duane because I knew he could handle my sadness. He tells me he knows his dad watches baseball with him, although it's been eight years since the heart attack killed him. I can't feel that way about Zoë yet because she's too close to me still. Is she there at the lake with us? When I feel the grief coming up inside I try and throw myself towards it. If I feel it strongly enough I know I am still human.

I met Anna Quon at a poetry reading years ago, and bought her self-published zine *Mental Illness Poems* immediately after. This is the poem she read that night. It still sweeps me away.

### Sadness

There's nothing wrong  
with sadness  
Sure, it's black and greasy,  
the stuff you need to oil the hinges  
of your heart  
Sometimes it burns in the  
middle of the night  
Sometimes it coats the feathers  
of your happiness, that winged creature  
hovering over you

Sometimes when the pictures are crooked  
and the pens run out and the cookies burn  
on the bottom, that's when sadness  
hugs you, awkwardly  
and sits  
on the edge of the bed  
with you,  
stroking your hair

with blue hands.

The poem vividly expresses the powerful importance of emotions, and in particular of seeing even those emotions we suppress or pathologize as playing a role inside of us. Here, sadness is not glorified or made glamorous. It burns us and coats our feathers with its grease, making us into some kind of strangled sea bird. The comfort it offers is awkward and strange. But we know from the very beginning that these are not problematic features or things we should try and change. Instead, we are invited to let it stroke our hair, let it oil our hearts. The more combative poems in the Workman Arts anthology still advocate for the same acceptance, asking us to see the comforting and significant dimensions in schizophrenia or psychosis as well.

In her poem “Human” Quon lists other labels she's been given, saying “I'm angry/I'm loud/I'm hyper/I'm manic/ I'm obnoxious, troublesome, dangerous,/Delusional.” Given this long list, we see that the sadness coming to comfort her isn't the only thing she struggles with. In fact, it may even be connected more to the way she's treated in hospital than to other dimensions of her madness. While she's sliding down the curved walls of the asylum, she's also resisting the long list of labels that begin the poem:

I'm human,  
I remind myself  
No matter how battered my brain  
Becomes, how ragged  
I cup it in my hands,  
Like a grasshopper

Long legs  
Flickering,  
    Ready to leap.

The structure of the poem keeps the labels and the pain of hospitalization on one side, self-enclosed like the cornerless asylum walls, and then shifts that image of being held into her cupped hands, delicately holding the grasshopper of her self-worth, intelligence, and humanity. Interestingly, the image that represents this humanity is an insect, a decision that for me invites us to recognize our interconnectedness, and to acknowledge that being human and finding humanity in others is an act of extending ourselves outward with kindness. When we take that approach, it is hard not to extend it further to encompass the natural world in its entirety.

### Asylum

There is more to say about the cornerless walls though, and the institutions that often house people labelled and diagnosed with mental illness. As mentioned above, Foucault links his archaeology of madness with systems of confinement, which he sees as an attempt “to eliminate from the social order a figure which did not find its place within it” (115). For him, this interaction between madness and confinement is used as a way of exploring the implied vision of madness present in the Age of Reason and continuing into contemporary culture. But what does it look like inside those asylums? Erick Fabris, in his book *Tranquil Prisons*, argues from within the context of Ontario's legal system that

medication for those declared mentally unwell is a form of “chemical incarceration” (6), and that psychiatrists use medication as a form of control and constraint instead of physical shackles.<sup>13</sup> When Anna Quon talks about her hospitalization in the poem “Medication Time” she describes the experience as having a tap turned off inside, walking in a cloak of fog, or having her happiness buried in a “great hole” with no option except to “get in line and wait for/the latest dispensation” of pills that taste “bitter as dandelions.” There's a sense of both hopelessness and coercion, a flatness or emptiness that matches the harsh surroundings. In “Hospital Poem,” she opens by writing “I'm tired/And my hair is falling out/I'm tired/And they keep feeding me,” and then we see her drained internal landscape pushed up against physiological side-effects of the medication like hair loss, and the coercion of forced feeding.

It is worth returning at this point to a poem in the *Workman Arts* anthology, called “The Looney Bin,” by Erika Hammel. It's written in a singsong style with a repeated chorus of “You cannot win/It's the Looney Bin.” Each verse tackles a different dimension of the experience of being not just diagnosed with a mental illness, but incarcerated as a result of it. The opening verse begins with the logic of the institution, saying they'll “let you in/To make you sane/Once again” which is contrasted with being inside where you “shout/Help, let me out” to no effect. The inescapability of confinement is further emphasized by the lockstep of the end rhymes. Hammel makes it clear that once you enter

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<sup>13</sup> Chemical incarceration is discussed in more detail in the following chapter.



the system and are given a label, a diagnosis, a stigma, and a record, it is very hard to have those structuring determinations lifted again.

The poem continues with some of the details of life inside, like “the doctors will/Prescribe some pill/To make you well/But you feel ill” or else they “test/My mind and me/Can I go free?” In both cases the answer is the chorus that you can't win. The pills keep you feeling sick, and the desire for freedom is denied through a battery of tests. The repeated chorus emphasizes the inescapability of the system, each new facet of the experience of “treatment” reduced in the end to losing. Hammel writes from the inside, saying “Now here I stand/In Looney Land/This isn't at all/The Life I planned/I want to go/Please let them know,” a verse that sums up the contrast between the patients/inmates and the doctors/wardens, and reaches out to the audience for help. Even when you feel capable of leaving, even when you have life plans and a sense of yourself and a desire for freedom, it is still evident that by entering the asylum you've had the right to self-determination removed. Hammel demands the interest of people outside the building and system, who seem to be the only ones capable of intervening on her behalf, since she is not allowed to intervene for herself.

This request for outside intervention allows us to see another purpose behind the short rhythmic lines and the end rhymes. The childlike singsong makes the brutality of the poem's content a little more palatable, or at least it drops the emotional register from trauma into a kind of ironizing humour. The rhymes provide a sense of momentum and

inevitability, which is exactly the feeling of being caught up in a system built around labels and conclusions. And as mentioned above, the cyclic verse-chorus structure highlights the lack of escape paths, the permanent loss that comes from being involved in the psychiatric system. The underlying self-aware humour creates a bridge between Hammel's lack of agency and the capacity her readers have for advocating on her behalf. As the editors of *Mad Matters* put it, the people in positions of power here take upon themselves

the right to constitute and judge mentalities; to distinguish authoritatively between 'sanity' and 'disorder'; to characterize the latter as an 'illness' like any other; to manufacture words and systems for labeling, cataloguing, and containing Mad conduct and people; to impart discipline in the name of science; to intervene, often without consent, into the lives of others; to unleash an arsenal of chemical, electrical, and other bodily interventions under the guise of compassion and cure (20)

While that lack of consent and agency is the structural cultural force behind asylums, these poems make clear that from the inside the felt experience of confinement is a mix of drugged listlessness and interminable repetition. They also highlight the value of not just awareness but intervention and advocacy from people on the outside of the asylum walls.

I began with Chogyam Trungpa's image of the “genuine heart of sadness” and I want to return to it, because that sadness arises out of an awareness of the real state of the world and a deep connection to the flow of things as they are. Recalling the multiple introductions to the anthology, and their requests for an audience that will pay attention to, listen, legitimize, and value the poems and poets, is an indication of the importance of

shifting the perspective of our culture in general around issues of madness. What prompts that kind of shift, however? How does the felt awareness of sadness become the action of compassion?

## Chapter 2: Stories, Pictures, Mad Memory

### Running man

In the first months after Zoë died I looked at pictures of her every night before bed. She felt so close to me I couldn't believe I wouldn't see her again. And she felt so far away from me I needed to see her picture to bring her to me. I would stare at the screen until my loss and anguish was overwhelming, I wanted to drown in the ocean inside my chest. As the months pass I look at photos less and less, and when I realize that shift I berate myself for trying to forget her. But when I do see images of her I am more struck by them, the cut of them is deeper. *Oh Zoë, I say, I miss you I need you, please come to me I'm so sorry, oh my love.* But the pictures stay frozen, and eventually I turn away from her smile and back into my new empty life.

I called this document a time machine, one that brings you to me and me to you. And so you are beside me when I wake up next to my small shrine with its incense, precious turquoise worn smooth, meditation gong, and picture of Zoë standing behind me, her hands on my shoulders, both of us twenty-one and convinced our world will be full of joy and each other. But no time machine is built in a day, and so this document is also a series of snapshots, a Muybridge photo cycle of me running through grief, a naked man looking for something he can't find. How many images compose that cycle? I do not know if it will ever end.

Grief feels less like a time than a city, I sometimes think. A city I had never been to before, although I knew it existed. Now that I find myself in it I realize I won't be able to leave. It lies like a transparency over top of the places I used to be, shifting their perspective. And yet the discovery of that shift happens through time, each day revealing new holes where futures I thought I had planted have withered at the root. Yes, in a strange way I see that the time I lost is the future, a set of futures I am grieving even as new ones keep happening. The happening of the future is something I am helpless to resist, which leaves me with a bitter taste. It is easier to be with what is in front of me, my books, my garden, my talismans, my whiskey, my single bed.

I want to bring you here so we can reflect together on memory, memoir, life, and story. Among many things this document includes a life narrative, me turning into a story some moments of grief, which is also the story of the effects of a death. It makes the rawness take a kind of shape, even if that shape is uneven, stitched together, imperfect. A part of me wants to reject the consequences of my storytelling because it feels like I'm using Zoë in a way she wouldn't want, that I'm muddying the purity of loss. Another part of me wants to tell our story as many ways as possible, hoping in some fractal pattern to capture the infinite significance of her life to me and our world. I worry that the shape I'm giving my memories in words will distort my vision of her, making her recede into some pinned-down facts on a page, and I desperately want her to appear so she can read what I've written and tell me she's proud.

## Messiness

The term “life narrative” comes from Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's book *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. In it they provide several key terms and tools for engaging critically with autobiographical creations in many mediums, and from multiple perspectives. Smith and Watson's careful articulation of the challenges surrounding the field of autobiography studies serves as the backbone of this chapter. The works this chapter investigates, Bobby Baker's *Diary Drawings: Mental Illness and Me* and Merri Lisa Johnson's *Girl in Need of a Tourniquet*, are both autobiographical stories about madness that use unconventional storytelling techniques and have complicated narrative voices. Smith and Watson define life narratives as “a moving target, a set of ever-shifting self-referential practices that engage the past in order to reflect on identity in the present” (3), a definition and term that avoids the specific Enlightenment understanding of autobiography, while being slightly more narrow in scope than life-writing, which they take to include novels and biographies as well as self-referential texts. Significantly, they also emphasize that autobiographical narration, because of its complex relationship to time, place, and self, is “an intersubjective mode, it lies outside a logical or juridical model of truth and falsehood” (13). For me, this formulation puts the processes of personal storytelling in dialogue with the language surrounding madness, which, as I

have discussed above, also resists models of truth and falsehood, even as those logical discourses are imposed upon it.

While such an emphasis on intersubjectivity within life narratives suggests a positive resonance between self-reflection and madness, Ann Cvetkovich also points out the ways in which memoirs about experiences of madness have served to bolster the dominance of medical models of mental illness in Western culture. She points out that while “memoir might seem to offer an alternative to medical expertise, it frequently confirms it” (93). Certainly, many contemporary memoirs are structured around the salvation of drugs or therapy, accepting diagnoses of illness and resisting larger cultural explanations of the construction of that diagnosis, or of the value of madness. She mentions *Girl, Interrupted* (Kayzen 1993) and *Prozac Diary* (Slater 1999) as memoirs that reinforce or accept a medical model and the value of medication. These types of memoirs are also typically written by and for people with a relatively high degree of privilege, who produce polished and coherent documents that “have none of the rough edges and messiness of the queer writing and performance art” (94) that shape Cvetkovich's commitment to memoir in her own book.<sup>14</sup> Those alternative memoirs Cvetkovich allies herself with often aim to challenge medical discourse and depathologize illness, as well as providing a stepping stone into the literary and public sphere for marginalized authors (74). Keeping in mind both the possibility that memoir

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<sup>14</sup> Cvetkovich mentions Dorothy Allison's *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, and Cherrie Moraga's *Loving in the War Years* as examples of queer memoirs that have influenced her own thinking and writing.

can uncritically reinforce cultural assumptions, and the ability of memoir to challenge cultural norms and empower people whose lives embody those challenges, I want to look more closely at Bobby Baker and Merri Lisa Johnson's self-reflections on the role of madness in their lives.

### Collaboration

I believe it will take some work to situate the book version of *Diary Drawings* that I am looking at, because its creation is somewhat complicated. The book is a smaller manifestation of an art exhibit of Baker's original watercolour drawings, displayed as photographic prints taken by her husband. The original drawings themselves span over a decade. Baker originally began by producing a drawing every day in her sketchbook, and after 421 consecutive days of drawings, switched to producing them once a week instead. The 158 images in the book are selected from the approximately 711 total drawings, and they have been selected in a collaboration between Baker and her daughter Dora Whittuck.

In case this slid by too easily, let me return to the important fact that these drawings were produced over the course of eleven long years. A decade, being a single unit, sounds somewhat comprehensible. But my grief has lasted a mere ten months so far, and already that length of time feels unbearable. As does my sense that it will be with me for however much longer I'm alive, the weight of that unknowable future also bearing



down on me when I reflect on it. Over the course of her decade-long treatment by Britain's National Health Service (NHS), Baker struggled not just with her madness but with surgery on the ligaments of both knees, a friend's suicide, the death of her mother, and her own breast cancer. While these events are listed as significant markers in a larger narrative, I have no doubt that as they were occurring they felt like sizeable cataclysmic ruptures.

This brings me to the first complexity we are presented with by Baker's book. The daily drawings provide a kind of insight or portrait of the experience of madness in a very immediate way. As Marina Warner points out in her introduction, they are a “unique picture of someone functioning consciously in the midst of a mental crisis” (8). Warner contrasts this with other accounts of madness written in retrospect such as Leonora Carrington's *Down Below*, and to some extent this contrast is true. Yet we are not receiving an unmediated vision here – the drawings are a small selection, chosen by Baker and her daughter (as she articulates it in her essay “For the Record,” included at the end of the book) to convert the drawings into a narrative “sufficiently succinct for visitors to be able to follow it during one viewing” (207). So while each individual drawing arrests us with its immediacy and intimacy, the collection as a whole is quite crafted and retrospective. This crafting, while acknowledged by Baker, is still somewhat disguised by the drawings themselves, which transport us back to the moment of their creation. I notice an interplay between the grip each drawing has on the present moment, and the goal of

the collection in general to present a narrative of recovery and getting “better” (Diary 215). A significant effect of this interplay is that it affords us as an audience a window into the rupturing moments of Baker's madness while allowing us to hold on to our sense that she does eventually find her way back to a world we can understand. As Smith and Watson point out, life narratives, despite being anchored in specific times and places, “are at the same time in dialogue with the personal processes and archives of memory” (14). The drawings are a very concrete archive, but nonetheless the act of choosing some and leaving out others requires us to see them as instances of memory alongside the gripping immediacy of the images. This also means that Warner's interpretive emphasis on the immediacy of the drawings needs to be tempered by a sense that memory has smoothed away some of the rougher edges of Baker's life for us.

I will return to the complexities of recovery as a model further on, but I also want to dwell a little on the collaborative dimension of the book. While the drawings are Baker's own, the selection process was done in partnership with her daughter, while her husband (a professional photographer in his own right) took the pictures of the drawings in her sketchbooks and developed the prints that made up the original gallery show. This is significant because Baker returns over and over to the importance of family throughout her years of madness. She would come home from the hospital or asylum to cook and clean, these household duties providing an anchor for her (74), and they regularly went on family vacations together, which were often respites from her challenging interactions

with the healthcare system (120, 151). Baker, by inviting the help of her daughter and husband in creating the show, asks us to see them as vital to the drawings themselves rather than as simply caregivers or collateral sufferers in her individual struggle. It also asks us to see the show, despite the private and individual connotations of the term “diary,” as a group creation. As Smith and Watson point out, the “I” of any life-narrative is “a composite of speaking voices” (60) and not a single unified self; the joint familial creation of the show and book merely makes those multiple selves more explicit and external.

### Seeing Double

In the first two months after Zoë died I couldn't drink any alcohol. I wanted to look as closely as I could at her death and my loss. Intuitively I knew I wouldn't be able to stay in the place my grief had brought me, which was full of brutal clarity along with numbing fog. I didn't want to look at clouds or colours, and anything transient or beautiful was torture. Everything underneath me was sadness, which felt like an empty void waiting to swallow the impermanent world around me. This is a place of deep truth I believe, although it is a truth that cannot be handled for long. I didn't want to drink my way into avoidance, though: I was holding on to a burning coal to test what I could endure and as a way of searching for a value in the pain. I wrote poems because I needed to document or testify to something I hoped I would never experience again, something I hoped no one

else in the world would ever experience. What a hopeless hope, to wish for an end to all suffering! One look at the history of the world shows how futile an aspiration it is, but I wanted it to be possible. Just as I wanted equally to set aside my own suffering, to be good enough or clear enough that I could bring Zoë back. It was a time of double vision, I burst apart into a thousand demons and ten thousand tears, I believed in nothing and I wanted to be held.

After a week-long silent meditation retreat, I had my first sip of beer. I had spent so long staring at the abyss of loss, wanting in every moment to run away from the pain of myself but knowing that there was nowhere I could go where I would feel any different. Inside of me there is perhaps another universe in which Zoë is alive and we are together, but I don't know how to get there yet. But all of the sitting still made me feel like it was safe to be drunk, that I wouldn't forget her or myself. Since then my drinking has steadily increased, and now I find myself sipping whiskey alone in a farmhouse watching the sun set behind windows so old the glass has dripped down the panes, wondering how drunk I need to get before I can fall asleep. It seems cruel somehow that I drink to deal with Zoë being killed by a drunk driver, and sometimes the irony of it grinds against me in a way that makes me laugh with a kind of bitter absurdity I don't want to value too highly.

In the *Diary Drawings*, there is a picture of Baker in pencil outline, bottle of whiskey raised over her head. The brown liquid has filled her up almost to her shoulders

and the bottle is mostly gone (71). I know this feeling, and I began here because the image speaks to my own way of dealing with the internal struggle against feelings I have no control over. There is another image labelled “grief,” a self-portrait where her brain is entirely liquid and tears are spraying out of her eyes in waterfalls (Diary 66 -- see Appendix 141). Water and liquor run throughout the selection, and in the case of Day 537 she floats on a bed labelled “oblivion,” the answer to an equation of diazepam plus vodka (137). Running behind the tears and liquor, then, is also the story of medication. Baker is eventually put on anti-psychotics, which among other things cause weight gain and lethargy, but which she feels had no effect on her paranoia and psychosis (101). For me this contrast between the potent prescription medication of anti-psychotics and the self-prescribed medication of liquor is worth noting, especially for the kinds of reactions it produces. Despite the widespread availability and legal status of liquor, drinking “too much” is taken as an indicator of a problem when we are suffering. Instead, the far more powerful medication controlled by medical professionals is supported, despite a vast range of side-effects (not to mention Erick Fabris's perspective that anti-psychotic medication is a form of “chemical incarceration”<sup>15</sup>). We see Baker full of whiskey as a symptom, but Baker overweight and numb as her being taken care of. Yet when she reflects on this time, in the intro to “stage 11” in the book, she writes that it was “refusing

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<sup>15</sup> The first chapter of Fabris's book *Tranquil Prisons* is called Chemical Incarceration, and he introduces the term on page 6 as a “physiological mode of detention.” Methodologically, Fabris emphasizes his own personal knowledge and the experiences of others who have been forcibly treated with anti-psychotic medication over and above medical research, although he does rely on scientific studies and court rulings as well.

to be put back on anti-psychotic medication” that made her realize she “had to take things into [her] own hands from now on” (139).

## Metaphors

This brings me back to the concept of “recovery” that runs behind *Diary Drawings*, which I want to explore more fully. In what she calls her “personal glossary” Baker says the term “recovery” was “first coined by mental health 'service users' to describe finding a life worth living, but is now the primary goal in NHS mental health policy” (222). Behind this definition lie years of advocacy by patients within the healthcare system, who wanted to be able to define their own goals from within that system. Some, like Baker, voluntarily placed themselves in medical care; others, as Fabris documents, are forcibly treated. Usually, in the medical system it is doctors, not patients, who decide whether someone is healthy or ill, and what the factors are that determine if they will continue to receive treatment or not. It is against this backdrop of disempowerment that patients sought to shift the goal of treatment from “stabilization” to “a life worth living.” Pat Deegan, a leader in the international recovery movement, puts it this way:

Through experience, I learned psychiatric medications are not magic bullets, no matter how much drug advertisements would have us believe that. Pills can't do the work of recovery for us. And the medication we use should not disable us. Maintenance and “stability” are not acceptable treatment outcomes. We must raise the standard of care to recovery. The treatment outcomes that matter are the ones that help us live lives of our choosing, indistinguishable from the rights and responsibilities of other non-diagnosed citizens. Anything less is a waste of public

funds. Recovery means changing our lives, not just our biochemistry! (Deegan par. 6)

Deegan herself was “stabilized” with anti-psychotic medication for schizophrenia at 17. She spent years in her room, cut off from the world, before she rebelled against her regime of medication and started to push for changes to the medical system.

The recovery movement that Deegan is a part of, although it advocates for more patient-focused care, is also critiqued by others who have experienced treatment at the hands of psychiatric institutions and wish to eradicate the system altogether. The anti-psychiatry movement sees even terms such as “recovery” as perpetuating the medical model of health and illness that in their eyes is both a fabrication and a system of control. Bonnie Burstow, in her essay “A Rose by Any Other Name?” sees “recovery” as a medical term that she contrasts with “getting better,” a phrase she sees as resisting or rejecting medical language (Burstow 83). In the comments section of the website Mad In America (which collects articles from both medical professionals and the psychiatrized themselves, offering a range of perspectives but all with the goal of providing alternatives and critiques of the current medical system), one commenter points out:

When you write a book of “recovery” narratives you are making a presumption, and that presumption is that everybody who was in the system, who would be interested in writing about their experience, has suffered from some kind of “mental disorder”, “breakdown”, etc. (We don’t have ‘the presumption of innocence’ at civil commitment hearings that we have in the criminal justice court process. What we do have is the presumption of “sickness”.) (Blankenship)

Marina Morrow's essay in *Mad Matters*, "Recovery: Progressive Paradigm or Neoliberal Smokescreen," concludes rather even-handedly that the concept of recovery "is poised either to disrupt biomedical dominance in favour of social and structural understandings of mental distress, or to continue to play into individualistic neoliberal political agendas and discourses" (Morrow 332). Certainly this gestures to the open-ended nature of processes, and resists the solidity of conclusions and certainty in a way I find appealing. Baker herself also doesn't come down on either side of this debate, rejecting the "tendency to polarise opinions on any subject – good/bad, right/wrong, order/disorder" (211). In the narrative of her madness she creates she does see a long arc towards being better, and, at the end of the collection, adopts the language of recovery to situate herself. She also contrasts the experience of treatment for madness with the treatment for cancer, emphasizing that the level of respect she received for a physical illness (where side effects of medication were explained to her, where she wasn't judged to be at fault for the illness, and where she was seen as a complete person with both strengths and weaknesses) felt like "being treated as an adult at last, rather than an irresponsible child" (212). Yet she also has a tendency to resist the label of illness altogether, writing at one point that she has come to the conclusions that "psychosis is a metaphor for extreme suffering" (101). This shift from a language of illness to one of suffering doesn't deny that experiences of madness can be painful and confusing, both internally and in relation to the larger community, but it doesn't invite medical intervention or create a vision of



health that excludes madness entirely. As Cvetkovich makes clear, when you don't begin from a medical perspective, mental anguish might be a spiritual crisis rather than a biological fact – inviting modes of engagement that replace pharmaceuticals with prayer, for instance (102). This shift is often unwelcome in medical communities, where the language of spirituality is contrasted with the rigour of science, and religion is constructed as illogical.<sup>16</sup> But as Baker points out, “to categorize someone in great distress as having a 'disordered personality' is fundamentally stigmatising and flawed in concept. I no longer fulfil the criteria for borderline personality disorder, yet my personality hasn't changed!” (Diary 212). Baker's felt experience of the illogical dimension of medical labels, which took her behaviour while suffering and solidified it into an essential quality of her personality, makes it abundantly clear that while Baker has in many ways embraced the concept of recovery, she is also deeply distrustful of the medical community's approach to diagnosis in the first place.

## Snakes

I fear that by focusing on Baker's words we are getting far away from the images that are at heart of *Diary Drawings*. While the act of remembering and the imposition of a narrative are essential qualities of the collection, each individual image is full of its present-moment intensity, and I want to look at some of them more closely to explore the

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<sup>16</sup> This is not to suggest that scientists and doctors are not religious, but that medical discourse often connects religious language to earlier and more superstitious approaches to medicine, which it wants to leave behind in favour of repeatable laboratory results.

dimensions of madness they make clear – as well as the ways in which that madness is engaged with by the medical community.

The selection includes many self-portraits, but the first one is comparatively plain – thin inky lines sketch out Baker's face, with her characteristically (and caricatured) long chin reminiscent of a Modigliani figure,<sup>17</sup> and a shock of short blonde hair on the top. The most distinguishing feature of it is that she has given herself two mouths (Diary 30 -- see Appendix 140). Baker herself writes that this is one of her favourite self-portraits, and it is the image on the front cover of the book collection. What do the two mouths signify, however? Each time I begin as if to explain I am reminded again of Siebers' vision of a disability aesthetics, and my own sense that an aesthetics of madness would resist the urge to rationalize and explicate, without also suggesting that it is empty of meaning. I am also drawn to Lynne Huffer's decision to begin her book on Foucault with an exploration of splitting, what she describes as “negotiating the uncomfortable space of the in-between” (4). The origins of the split in Huffer's thinking lie in the separation Foucault explores between reason and unreason, which reason necessitates in order to make its claims, and which results in “an act of division that already denounces and masters” the voices of unreason (qtd in Huffer 20). For Foucault, the voices of unreason are in some sense nothing, because even to name them as something is to apply the approach of

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<sup>17</sup> In her introduction, Marina Warner mentions that Baker has cited Modigliani as an artistic influence. Warner also mentions Kandinsky, Louise Bourgeois, Egon Schiele, and Cubism as influences on Baker. Her drive to situate Baker within visual art history to me has a legitimating feel, and recalls my discussion of the importance of being legitimized by the art community in Chapter 1's close look at the poets of Workman Arts.

reason to them, which in itself negates them. I take Baker's self-portrait as a type of resistance to Foucault's articulation of this oppositional relationship. For me, the doubling of her mouth represents those voices of reason and unreason, both of which speak to us from the page. The image has a lot of clarity to it – the human shape is recognizable, the eyes are lucid, it doesn't have the wildly metaphorical and fantastical dimensions of other images. And yet there are those two mouths, both closed, and to me at least this is aesthetically satisfying rather than discomfiting. When I see those mouths I think of my own experience of wondering whether I'll speak with a mouth of reason or howl out of a mouth of grief. These sounds are not incompatible. A Foucauldian reading of the split between those mouths (that they would be unable to speak to or comprehend each other) is resisted and refined by Baker's physically embodied portrait. There isn't a negated nothingness inside of her, there is instead a doubling. And importantly for me, that doubling, while perhaps strange on the surface, is resonant on a deep level. It speaks to our human capacity to manifest both reason and unreason without requiring us to choose between them. They are both present.

Other self-portraits by Baker express her feelings of psychosis and mental anguish in more elaborate metaphors. In one, there are snakes coming out of her eyes and mouth and wrapped around her neck (74); in another there are worm-like cracks running through the inside of her head and emerging as dotted lines outside of it, which she says is a depiction of her feeling of psychosis (107); in a third, titled “attacked with sharp

thoughts,” her head is bowed with tears on her cheeks while the rest of the page is filled with tiny arrows or daggers in concentric rings surrounding her, although only one has drawn blood (119 -- see Appendix 142). These drawings are important to look at because they manage to convey the intense fact of her suffering but without recourse to either illness or blame. The constructed nature of illness as a concept doesn't imply that pain and suffering are also constructed, and Baker's drawings make that evident. They complement Cvetkovich's cultural studies approach to madness, grounding the confluence of social and political forces that create the label of “mental illness” in Baker's lived experience of pain and treatment. Baker's suffering is present throughout the selection of images included in the book, and her desire to find a way of ending or coping with that suffering is what led her to seek out treatment in the first place. Is it possible to affirm the fact of suffering without it leading to a language of illness? And to get better without the language of healing? I see these questions running deeply through Baker's drawings, generating a tension between her suffering self in the moment of painting and the narrating self of her and her daughter selecting certain images to build a narrative of recovery.

### Body Parts

The opening stages in Baker's collection are full of the gruesome images that haunted her and made her decide to seek treatment in the first place. She would have fleeting

hallucinations of hung and bleeding bodies as she passed a bus stop (36), of her body covered in thousands of cuts (27), of her neck being chopped with an axe (24). As her time in treatment continues, the images shift to encompass the various psychiatrists, psychologists, hospital doctors, and other professionals who sought to help her, using a number of different techniques ranging from Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy to heavy doses of anti-psychotic medication. They also touch on the progress of her career as a performance artist, since over the course of the decade she produces and tours two new performances (*Box Story* in 2001 and *How to Live* in 2005), holds a three-year Creative Fellowship at Queen Mary, University of London in 2006, and works for the arts charity Creative-Routes. There are also consistent moments of love and care between her and her family, which provide a constant anchor through the multiple bouts of suffering and institutionalization she documents.

I want to pay some attention to these strands in the narrative that Baker constructs, because they speak to the range of identities she inhabits over the course of the decade. As Smith and Watson make clear, narratives are created out of “multiple, disparate, and discontinuous experiences and the multiple identities constructed from and constituting those experiences” (35). As Baker becomes more exposed to and familiar with the medical discourses that surround her, labels such as “psychotic” or “borderline personality disorder” emerge. She also experiences and feels the clash between that institutional identity and her sense of herself as a wife and mother, or as an artist. As she

herself admits, “before I became ill, the words associated with mental illness were as scary to me as they are to others, but I've been privileged to meet the most remarkable people” (43). In this brief phrase we can see both her adoption of an identity of illness, and the first growth of her awareness that the totalizing stigma of that label doesn't do justice to the capacities and other identities also available to those who find themselves inside the medical system.

Throughout both the drawings and her occasional retrospective explanations of specific images, Baker seeks to emphasize the authority she has as someone who has experienced madness, and in particular as someone who is aware that the label of mental illness often has a silencing effect. Baker thus stands in a dual position. Her experience of treatment is of being ignored, treated like a child, and of generally having her opinions and reactions not legitimated. Yet as her cultural status as an artist of note increases (and as the publication of the book itself attests), she is again granted a voice of authority that derives not just from her experiences but from her emerging celebrity. Celebrity and social acknowledgement legitimize her voice perhaps more than her own experiences do, especially since the experience she speaks from is the experience of being ignored. As Smith and Watson put it, “the instability of something called the authority of experience suggests how it is that the category of experience itself is socially, culturally, historically, and politically negotiated” (28). Thus, Baker uses her identity as a successful artist to emphasize her right to speak, while also addressing the many ways in which she was (and

potentially still is) ignored or silenced because of her identity as a madwoman. By returning to this split or doubled identity, together with the changes to her physical body brought about by drugs and surgeries, Baker seeks to “engage, contest, and revise cultural norms” (Smith & Watson 41) surrounding madness.

### Looking Long

In her essay “For the Record,” included in the book after the drawings, Baker tackles the question of whether her art is in fact therapy. Reading her brief response to this question made me sit up with excitement, because it is a question that I have my own strong responses to when I think about the art programs Zoë and I ran for years. For us, as I've said earlier, the goal of our programs was to get people to take on the challenge of making art for the rest of their lives. Any positive effects of making art, either alone or with a group of people, we treated as side-effects. Positive feelings are not guaranteed, they're not predictable, and the heart of the decision to make art lies in its challenge more than anything else. I have often resisted the language of therapy because to me it inevitably emphasized the results, and had built into it a concept of self-improvement that I didn't want anyone to get stuck on. For me at least, part of the risk of trying to make art is that it can propel you to look closely at yourself and the world in ways that may make you feel worse and not better. And furthermore this risk is important, because it is the risk of seeing deep truths and attempting to bring them to the surface for others to also see. Art

can have great personal costs, especially if it exposes shameful or taboo dimensions of ourselves to the public, which is something that the concept of therapy doesn't seem to acknowledge. When Baker tackles the question of art and therapy, she also emphasizes that she sees herself “simply as an artist” and that she has been making art for a half-century, endlessly practicing it (213). She feels that it is a human tendency to want to categorize things, which she feels resigned to more than anything. But for her, the decision to begin and stick with her paintings over the decade was not a decision coming out of a desire to get better, it was a decision rooted in her already existing self-identity as an artist. She says she sees art therapy, drama therapy, and occupational therapy as having “their own criteria and processes” which she respects, especially their goal of helping people to get better (214). So for her, the drawings were both a “vital method of survival” and an “act of self-reflection which has led to a great awareness, acceptance and understanding of the world and its ways” (214), an act that contributed to her sense of getting better but that had origins predating her diagnosis and results more far-reaching than her recovery. When I read this and think of it in contrast to the values of therapy, I believe Baker is getting at something similar to my own experience of teaching art. The lifelong regularity of art, the discipline that can become something of a lifeline, and the potential for self-reflection, might all contribute to someone feeling better, as they did for Baker. But self-reflection sometimes means looking very long at suffering, and the built-in trajectory of “recovery” that therapy has at its root clearly doesn't resonate with Baker's



sense of the ways that art operates in her life. For her, art began before there was anything to “recover” from, and it continues to be present long after she is declared “recovered.” It seems to be less a method of therapy than a constant companion. Art, for her at least, has a larger scope and a longer narrative than the narrative of recovery she includes in the book.

### Photo Album

I am sitting in Zoë's father's house waiting for him to return. The view out his windows is of the harbour, the large orange cranes by the container pier dipping their long necks down like dinosaurs to haul the freight onto waiting trains. The wind is visible on the ocean's surface as dark patches that cut and stretch and disappear. Skate blades on ice, fingers through flour, deer tracks in tall grass. Except more powerful and temporary. On his dresser are a collection of photos. He and Zoë's mother on the corner of their bed, dressed fancy. Zoë meeting Chogyam Trungpa, his big smile taking her in. Another of her less than a year old, wide-eyed on a high chair, looking at a camera for the first time. A large photo of her at twelve, staring down at hands that are on their way to becoming the competent, sensitive ones I'm used to holding. He tells me he can't look at the photos yet, every time he goes to his dresser his eyes slide down to the knobs and never look up. Because I'm alone I go and stand in front of them a long time. I can't stop the tears pouring down my cheeks, my chest shakes like an imbalanced engine. Everyone in the

pictures is dead except him. I do not see anything in her pictures that tells me she will be dead at thirty-three. Or her mother's cancer, or Trungpa's heart attack. But mostly I look at the young Zoë and wish for pictures of her that can never happen, pictures that fulfil the promise of the life inside her from her birth.

My second case study in this chapter, Merri Lisa Johnson's memoir *Girl In Need of a Tourniquet* is a book that also searches for explanations, looking for hidden causes lying behind the surface of events. In many ways it stands in contrast to Bobby Baker's visual memoir, and I believe the two works complement each other in their discussions of personal struggle and social status, even more so because both Johnson and Baker were both given the diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder (BDP).

Johnson makes the presence of multiple voices within her visually legible in the book by alternating between screaming ALL-CAPS declarations, quickly whispered *runawayobsessive* italics, and measured reflective present-tense narration, which also occasionally becomes the voice of a past self when the paragraphs are indented slightly. The result is a visually compelling polyphonic text, representing the internal struggle between her various selves. Apart from recounting, in loose chronology, a series of breakdowns and failed relationships, Johnson also weaves in episodes from the lives of celebrities as diverse as Princess Diana and Lisa “Left Eye” Lopes (both of whom die in car crashes), Camille Claudel, and Lisa Nowak. These expand the narration to encompass moments of public breakdown by women whose lives and actions are frequently

interrogated and explained while they themselves are silenced. In addition, she opens each section of her book with quotes from various psychology books explaining different dimensions of BPD, childhood trauma, therapeutic frameworks for dealing with different diagnoses, and general histories of madness and mental illness. She quotes pop songs and scenes in movies, and dives briefly into the troubled lives of her younger sisters as well. If Baker's images seem on the surface to present a unified narrative by a single person rooted in her individual experience (despite the double mouths and her daughter's background presence), then Johnson's memoir on the surface is a scattershot of multiple people and multiple experiences organized less around a single unifying story than around a social and cultural moment. However, underneath these stylistic differences there is a resonance of approach.

Johnson's frequent use of the language of therapy and diagnosis does seem to suggest that she accepts the medical framework surrounding madness, or at least that she found it useful at times. It is sometimes the case that for people who are enduring a sudden and intense amount of mental anguish, the explanation offered by a diagnosis can be comforting. It provides the sense that there is a reason behind their pain, and that it is understandable and treatable (HeretoHelp par. 3). That is the promise that the medical framework of the psy-sciences holds out. Yet Johnson also resists the label initially. The way her story flows, her therapist decides not to provide a diagnosis so she turns to Google to look it up herself, entering her various symptoms into the search engine. When

the Internet suggests BPD she says “*Shit. THOSE PEOPLE ARE CRAZY*” (Johnson 133). She digs deeper. The DSM-IV offers nine criteria, of which a patient must meet five. Johnson fits all nine. She exhaustively researches therapeutic approaches and conceptions of the label, attempting to be the best patient she can be, a process that is reflected in the many quotations scattered through the book. Yet she also refers to BPD as “a slippery mishap of a label...a smear of water in the sky” (Johnson 133). After an extreme bout of cutting along her forearm, her therapist holds out the threat of hospitalization and “the scars, institutions, the stigma of madness on my permanent record” (Johnson 188). The threat alone makes her step towards “sane” behaviour. Johnson is willing to embrace the parts about being labelled that motivate her towards getting better, and also manages to resist (and is helped by friends to resist) the types of outbursts that would lead to incarceration and forced treatment. This is perhaps the biggest difference between Johnson and Baker: Johnson's experience is an articulation of the through-line of her mental suffering and its resonance with other women in positions of cultural celebrity, but without the direct impact of incarceration that Baker engages with.

While Baker provides snapshots of various interactions with doctors and other healthcare professionals and their emotional impact on her, Johnson talks a lot about her family history and the complicated and damaging sexual relationships she seems to cycle through. This includes her mother's unstable personality, her father's multiple

relationships and his decision to separate her from her sisters, her own heavy use of drugs and alcohol, her early marriage and divorce and subsequent affairs with older couples and one of her co-workers, as well as her gradual acceptance of her lesbian sexuality. These serve as both a quest for the origins of her suffering and proof of the truth of her diagnosis. Looking back over her life she writes that her struggles in intimate relationships reveal that “the pain caused by years of secretly suspecting something was wrong with me [subsides] when I realize something *is* in fact wrong” (Johnson 221). Yet she complicates this equation by refusing the biological explanation of mental illnesses offered by mainstream psychiatry. She writes that

A personality disorder is not the foreign presence of demonic possession or a cancerous cluster of cells spreading among the internal organs. It is a pattern of cognition and reaction that impairs the capacity to be productive, happy, and generally at ease. It is a fractured sense of self giving way to the weight of stressful interpersonal dynamics.

ATTACHMENT DISORDERS ARE AS COMMON AS DIRT.

*They should not be relegated to the speechless realm of the ineffable.*  
(Johnson 199)

In a complicated fashion this act of re-description manages both to accept the diagnosis of “disorder” while resisting the physiological reductionism that often accompanies such diagnoses. In talking about patterns of cognition Johnson seems to align herself with the Cognitive Behavioural Therapy that Baker also credits with helping her return to a life she wants, and she links those patterns to ways that people behave in a push to de-

stigmatize or at least normalize some of that behaviour. I come up against this idea of the “speechless realm of the ineffable” however. I don't believe her protest against relegation to a speechless realm is a critique of the Foucauldian claim that madness is incomprehensible to reason, that it becomes speechless when it is bound up in the regime and discourse of reason. I believe instead that Johnson wants the language of therapy to enter popular culture enough that the labels don't take on mystical and stigmatized significance (while simultaneously being taboo enough to not get mentioned).

#### Disoriented

This past month the Israeli Defence Force has been bombarding the Gaza strip, destroying several UN medical shelters along with apartment buildings and schools and the other civic structures of the area. Hamas is firing rockets back into Israel, but the news is mostly full of images of the dead bodies of Palestinian children. The number of casualties is horrifying, and it is increasing every day. I think about my own grief because it fills my world, so when I extend my feelings out to the thousands of people in Gaza trying to grieve and yet still under attack, I quickly become overwhelmed. My heart wants to shut off, it feels impossible for so many people simultaneously to be experiencing the intensity of loss. How fortunate I am, that I have a place I can go where my sadness can crest over me and grind me into the rocks and I do not have to fear a missile, or go without water or food! Even within grief there is privilege, especially within my grief. I do not think this

means I should feel guilty about sadness or try and avoid it – the privilege to grieve is not negative. What is negative is that the same privileges should exist for everyone who will grieve, and it isn't. There are large systemic forces that continue to remove even the right to mourning and tragedy from large portions of the global population, what Judith Butler refers to as a “differential distribution of grievability” (Butler 24).

The existence of these systemic forces I believe means that they cannot be ignored by me when reflecting on my own grieving, and cannot be ignored in this exploration of madness and art. Indeed, there are some pointed critiques of Mad identity offered in *Mad Matters* by Rachel Gorman and Louise Tam, and I want to look more closely at their emphasis on the connection between race, class, and madness. Both Johnson and Baker are relatively privileged and successful white women, and these dimensions of their identity are significant to their experiences of the social reactions to their years of mental anguish. What Gorman is responding to is her sense that Mad identity “will be absorbed into white, middle-class narratives of disability” (269). She sees two emergent possibilities – that Mad identity becomes linked to personal or communal histories and experiences (instead of psychiatric diagnoses), or that it becomes linked to claims of “an essential ontology” (270). It is this ontological claim that she aims to disrupt, because it often reproduces Western white subjects. The result is that madness is compared to other forms of oppression in a way that builds in a simplistic binary. White experiences of madness are made equivalent to racialized forms of oppression like colonialism and

slavery, all of which are contrasted to an imagined normative identity. A dimension of the binary logic is that madness becomes seen more as an essential attribute than a social relation. Furthermore, it might be the case that the socially constructed label of an illness is available for critique by someone with race or class privileges but not for others. Quoting an earlier essay of her own, Gorman says “What might be diagnosed as a treatable disorder in someone with relative access and privilege may be thought of as an inherent characteristic of someone in a different social location” (276). As a professor, one year Gorman decided to pay attention to the number of students asking for academic accommodation or using the campus disability services, keeping track of their racialized identities. She found that “students of colour would describe their problems to me as socially contextualized difficulties (or 'just life') while white-identified students would describe themselves as having a disorder” (277). This exposes one way in which privilege enables people to take on identities of illness in order to access support. It also exposes a split in which the narrative of mental illness is contrasted with narratives of racism, poverty, or violence, where one is deserving of help and the other is simply overburdened.

While Gorman explores the privileges surrounding Mad identity for North American university students, Louise Tam maps Jasbir Puar's discussion of ability/debility within a global context onto the language of sanity/insanity to point out that this is “an unreliable division...that shifts based on the organization of other facets of



social difference” (286) and that these labels have different meanings within different countries. She argues that it is possible to experience madness without being identified as mad, that madness is not just about cultural perceptions but also global systems of power. Thus, state governments utilize neoliberal capitalist logic in a global context to reinforce power structures that rely on perceptions of who is sane or able in relation to work. Tam paraphrases an example Puar provides of the government in Botswana normalizing disability in order to get recently impaired miners back to work, and also points out how “racial oppression is sustained through...encounters with psy knowledge” (286). Her goal is to suggest ways in which narratives of madness might become subversive, building solidarity less around personal identity than around awareness of the impact of histories of colonialism and racism on Mad communities (287).

My desire to reflect on the absence of these dimensions in the memoirs of Baker and Johnson is not to take them to task for not acknowledging their privileges, but instead to emphasize that the kinds of identities and communities built by memoirs have the capacity to extend and reaffirm the logics of whiteness, neoliberal capitalism, and other forms of oppression. The connection between memoir and personal experience means that if only certain bodies are comfortable sharing their experiences of madness and taking on a Mad identity, then it is possible that only those bodies will become seen as Mad or start to define the parameters of Madness.

In her discussion of the phenomenological linkages between queerness and race, Sara Ahmed talks about the inherited social history of race alongside its embodied dimensions through an investigation of orientation and the Orient. In her view, whiteness is oriented *towards* or aimed at the Orient (as the space of the Other), but in another way it is also oriented *around* the Occident as the space of givenness. In this way, while it faces an otherness and in facing it makes it both distinct and reachable, it also makes itself cohere around its whiteness through that act of facing (116). One consequence of this is that bodies that are visibly not-white serve to disorient white space, even as they themselves might also experience being held up or restricted by those spaces (Ahmed 135). This dynamic of exclusion allows us to see that even as stories of madness are stories of disorientation, they can also still be oriented towards or privilege certain dimensions of the world. If the memoirs of Baker and Johnson both seek to challenge the stigma surrounding madness, it is also important to consider the kinds of communities and publics they want to manifest through that challenge. As Leigh Gilmore points out, “autobiography profoundly concerns representations of citizenship and the nation” (12), so that attempts to testify to other ways of being are already working to contest who counts as a citizen. Baker and Johnson are simultaneously struggling against the historical exclusion of mad bodies and voices from the realm of representation, and themselves constructing a vision of what kinds of mad voices are heard.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Gilmore describes this as the coexistence of a culture of confession and a culture of testimony, both of which “insist on the centrality of speaking of pain, but emerge from different contexts which are

Miranda Joseph, in *Against the Romance of Community*, points out that while community is a concept that is often valorized in groups that resist dominant cultural discourse, often times “communal subjectivity is constituted not by identity but rather through practices of production and consumption” (Joseph viii). Joseph's interest in this critique of community is to reveal the ways in which community formation can support capitalism even as it also resists it. Her awareness of the complexities of this dynamic help expose some of the difficulties in the community-building efforts of Johnson and those in the field of Mad Studies in general. While communities can be places of resistance, once those communities are seen to exist in the eyes of corporations they also become “niched or individuated producers and consumers” that turn diversity into “an assimilation to corporate culture” (Joseph 22-3).

The writing of *Girl In Need of a Tourniquet* prompted Johnson to create and maintain a blog called Borderline PhD, in which she grapples with some of the issues and concerns that the book led her to, like revisions to the DSM-V, borderline personality in the media, and tools for recovery. She interviews other authors writing about their experiences of suffering and BPD diagnosis, and reflects on the nuances of being labelled. In one blog post in particular, “The Unthinkable Thought of Borderline Pride,” she points out that trying to create a sense of pride or community seems valuable on the one hand because “shifting the paradigm from an illness model to a disability model, and themselves impure” (2).

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then using the path established by disability studies to make our assets and surpluses as visible as our impairments and deficits” (Johnson par. 2) would provide a valuable tool to resist the stigma that comes with diagnosis. Elsewhere, though, she emphasizes that trying to build pride and a community might downplay “the fact of psychological suffering in the lives of borderlines, and sometimes I find it useful to describe BPD as a kind of chronic illness” (Johnson par. 3), an insight which makes pride seem like an awkward or impossible thought. As she herself points out, “cancer pride and BPD pride tend toward a focus on pride-in-recovery or pride-in-survival, unlike autism pride and mad pride which foreground pride-in-alterity” (Johnson par. 7). Her own sense that the way she talks and thinks about her diagnosis shifts depending on context makes Johnson aware that sometimes the language of illness is useful to her, while other times the language of difference is preferable. In both of these choices, however, there is a general sense that community as a goal is preferable to an absence of community, which would leave those people struggling with diagnoses and stigma in isolation.

The search for sources of pride that Johnson calls for in her blog are answered by some in the comments section, and they suggest qualities like empathy, compassion, intensity, honesty, creativity, and intuition as borderline traits. There are also calls for T-shirts, ribbons, campaigns, and other community building efforts. Here again Joseph's critical analysis of the link between diverse minority identities and niche markets becomes relevant, so that the community Johnson is seeking to create is already working

to “facilitate the flow of capital by organizing themselves on the basis of, and thus producing, the community with which the business is identified” (Joseph 54). Layering onto this Gorman's sense that it is primarily white and privileged students who are willing to take on the label of disability, and it seems entirely possible that both the pride-in-survival and pride-in-alterity that Johnson contemplates have the potential to produce a BPD community that is white, privileged, and tends towards uncritical integration with the broader capitalist society that currently stigmatizes it.<sup>19</sup> To simultaneously build community while resisting that integrative trend requires a disorientation that allows the histories of race and class to be discussed and supported within this emergent borderline community.

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<sup>19</sup> This shares much with Jasbir Puar's critique of some queer community formations as a form of “homonationalism,” which is the term she uses to describe the inclusion of privileged queer subjects (often white) into national discourse “contingent upon the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary” (Puar 2). In this way, Puar points out, queer communities that see themselves as exceptional or liberatory from heteronormative society might end up facilitating “the reproduction of class, gender, and racial norms” through “the fractioning away of queer alliances” (Puar 32), despite their rhetoric of deviance and freedom.

### Chapter 3: Bodies, Madness, Infinity

#### A Cloak

Last night I lay in bed listening to a rat chewing its way through the farmhouse wall. The nights have started to cool, and animals are looking for homes for the winter. The insulation below the plywood floor is safe and warm, and from there the rats come up looking for food. In the spring I set traps and killed a mother and four babies, and I performed small rituals over their bodies before I consigned them to the fire. Now they are back in what feels like an inevitable cycle. The night time is when my mind is most unruly, and I am drawn to visions I wish I did not have. I see Zoë's hand, her big tough knuckles lined with scars from years of working on boats, thin fingers that held paintbrushes and pliers equally. Now I see it twitching uncontrollably on the hospital bed, an involuntary motion caused by the brain haemorrhage, they tell me, although I want it to mean she will come back to me. It doesn't. Or I see her swollen face, a trickle of blood from her right ear and nostril, and it is still and always the face I love, and which is most beautiful to me. But I wish I didn't have to look at it through the night while I lie in bed, sliver of moon walking across my window.

My grief is in my body and it is about her body. My lungs ache, my chest comes in to protect me from the world. And in bed alone I want to be able to put my hand on her shoulder, I want to feel her hips against mine when I roll to the side. Her body is ashes in

a box that I can't look at or hold for fear I will crumble away completely. I want to step behind her while we hike to the ridge of the far hill, I want to kiss her before we eat dinner, I want us to stay under the warm covers in the morning and have leisurely sex before she leaves for work. Instead, I am listening to a rat, ashamed about my desires, idly brushing a hand across my chest to remind myself that I am still alive in a physical world although the cold moonlight takes me to a mysterious dreamscape, hushed and empty.

If feelings are like clouds drifting temporarily across a vast sky, so too are bodies. Death shows me this, but it is like a magician's cloak. I see the infinite void shooting through every piece of the world we hold in our hands, but when I turn away that vision is gone and I go about my day believing in permanence again. The salt shaker is still by the stove, the books stay on the shelf, the rocks are next to the well. And then there is a terrible magic and they are gone, I am gone, Zoë is already gone. I bow my head, I perform my small rituals to acknowledge this terrible loss, my feet take me somewhere and the world is once again here before me. Until it isn't.

Naked

When Yayoi Kusama was a small girl she was consumed by visions. She writes about one such experience, when she was looking at a tablecloth with red flower patterns on it:

When I looked up, I saw the ceiling, the window panes and the pillars completely covered with the same red flower patterns. With the whole room, my whole body and the whole universe covered entirely with the flower patterns, I

would self-obliterate; be buried in the infinitude of endless time and the absoluteness of space, and be reduced to nothingness. (qtd in Hoptman 119)

She talks about these visions, which occurred throughout her life, as illusions and hallucinations, but also as frightening monsters and as an unknown world. Her art began as an attempt at survival, she says, “something primitive and instinctive, far removed from art” (qtd in Hoptman 118) that helped her shuttle between these worlds. Rather than an engagement with trends in contemporary art, her artistic creations were “based on the inevitability that emerged from within me,” and emerged as a way of “calling forth and back the place for my soul” (qtd In Hoptman 119-20). Her mother, she says, was opposed to her becoming a painter, while around her people were spreading the rumour that she was insane. For her part, she says, “I was totally lacking in social and general common sense, there was always friction between me and my surroundings,” which intensified her “spiritual burden and uneasiness” (qtd in Hoptman 121). Already, the diversity of the language she uses to describe her mental state is telling. The medical language of illusion and hallucination is present and acceptable to her<sup>20</sup> (unlike Bonnie Burstow, who refigures “hallucination” as “seeing or hearing what others do not see or hear”<sup>21</sup>), but she also slides easily into the spiritual and the metaphorical as Ann Cvetkovich is inclined to do when she explores depression's link to medieval conceptions of the “noonday demon”

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<sup>20</sup> Alexandra Munroe, in “Obsession, Fantasy and Outrage” claims that “psychiatry gave Kusama what her parents had denied her: justification to express herself and freedom to be mad” (qt. in Yoshimoto 51). This seems to me to be an overstatement, and one that removes agency from Kusama.

<sup>21</sup> See the end of my Introduction for a more detailed discussion of the resistant language of anti-psychiatry, and Burstow 83



of acedia (86). Her idea of shuttling between realms allows her to hold on to a kind of truth value in the self-obliterating visions, while also expressing the panicky feelings they generated and her desire to regain some kind of control over or connection to the broader social world.

Despite her mother's fears and in the face of the rumours spread about her insanity by the Japanese press,<sup>22</sup> Kusama went on to achieve international acclaim as an artist. Her fifty-year career has included paintings, installations, photography, writing, and performance and installation art, and she has been on the forefront of several artistic movements during that time. However, as Kris Kuramitsu writes, art discourse on her work and persona usually results in the “terse assessment of Kusama as 'problematic'” (Jones 571). Conversely, many of the longer critical articles about her focus primarily on supplying biographical details, since they are so profuse and multi-faceted.

I feel like I should provide some of those details, but when they are talked about by critics they are interspersed with psychological interpretations and judgements, which I want to look at critically. She was born in Japan in 1929, became a celebrated young painter there, moved to New York in 1958 and shifted from painting into installation and performance art, achieved recognition in New York and in Europe, moved back to Japan in 1973 and checked herself in to a mental institution, where she lives and works currently, rising to fame again there and internationally in 1993 when she was selected as

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<sup>22</sup> Yoshimoto notes she was often referred to as a *tokui jidou*, a term that means both physical idiosyncrasy and distinctive talent. This was a coded way of referring both to her mental health and to her position as a young female artist challenging male hierarchies in the Japanese art world (Yoshimoto 51-2).

the first individual and woman to represent Japan in the Venice Biennale. One reason that her biography is seen by many critics as indivisible from her work is that Kusama consistently inserts herself into her works, physically and photographically, and in her speaking and writing expresses little separation between herself and her art. As Laura Hoptman writes at the opening of her long essay “Yayoi Kusama: A Reckoning”:

Kusama is the *Infinity Net* and the polka dot, two interchangeable motifs that she adopted as her alter ego, her logo, her franchise and her weapon of incursion into the world at large. The countless artworks that she has produced and that carry Kusama's nets and dots into the world, when seen as a whole, are the mere results of a rigorously disciplined and single-minded performance that has lasted for almost fifty years (34)

While this indivisibility is broadly acknowledged, it has also led to a wide range of interpretations. Midori Yoshimoto sees Kusama's conflating of art and artist as rooted in her childhood hallucinatory visions, and so the photographs of a naked Kusama covered in polka dots and reclining on her couch of phallic accumulations represents her desire to “return to a primordial state in which her art and life could become one,” while simultaneously allowing her to “emerge from her private world of fantasy to the public life with the constructed self” (65). Yoshimoto's psychoanalytic take on Kusama also exposes Yoshimoto's own unquestioning acceptance of the discourse of illness, leading her to conclude that Kusama's willingness to discuss her mental state and her powerful work ethic “turned her disadvantage to advantage” (77). This seems to me to be a strangely disingenuous reading. On the one hand, Kusama's mental state is judged as a

problem and a challenge, and, on the other hand, it is privileged and central to the powerful and important art she creates. Borrowing from Kusama's own language, we might instead say that her art and life are a series of moments of her meeting her spiritual burden with dedication. This removes the stigmatizing notion of disadvantages, while emphasizing Kusama's own sense that her visions and her art are deeply interconnected.

A different critical perspective is provided by Amelia Jones, who considers the same image as Yoshimoto, but sees it as a refutation of the “reigning ideology of disinterested criticism” and a challenge to the “assumption of normativity built in to modernist models of artistic evaluation” (Jones 572). Kusama's naked body is read by her primarily as marginalized, and thus Kusama's decision to insert herself into her work photographically is a challenge to the “prudery, imperialism, racism, and sexism” of the time, and also a method of extending herself outward into her environment vertiginously. Jones sees the image primarily as a way for Kusama to enact herself publicly, and takes that enactment to be a form of “radical narcissism, where the distances between artist and artwork, artist and spectator are definitively collapsed” in an art practice Jones calls body art (572). Rather than seeing Kusama's self-obliteration through a psychological lens, she interprets it politically as a way of challenging the masculine rationalist critical tradition. The performative and physical dimensions of the work are emphasized to create art that codes Kusama as both a celebrity object and an artistic genius, hinged around her radical otherness. Jones deliberately decides not to inflect this otherness with madness because

she feels that it deploys a “modernist conception of the mad genius” (Jones 574) that she believes Kusama is critiquing. However, Kusama herself continually emphasizes her madness as bound up in her art and her self, and by excluding that portion of her persona Jones disregards an important dimension of Kusama's own sense of herself. Even if the tendency to psychoanalyze or explain away her art through the language of insanity, as Yoshimoto does, uncritically adopts contemporary assumptions about madness, Jones's exclusion of the term similarly reproduces a disinclination to find value or significance in Kusama's own articulation of the importance of her psychic and spiritual life.

### The Highway

Rather than allowing the focus to remain on her biography, I want us to return to Kusama's art, so we can picture it for ourselves in its immediacy. The first piece to look at is her large-scale monochromatic series of paintings, the *Infinity Nets*, which she first exhibited in 1959. They are large, some up to 2 metres high and 10 metres long, and from a distance appear entirely white. Up close, however, lace-like whorls and patterns of brushstrokes emerge, producing a feeling of both randomness and natural patterns. Their vast scale consumes you as you become aware of the countless hours needed to paint them, as well as their physical size. It is this sense that tends to summon up words like “obsessive” when the paintings are described, and as Hoptman observes, even without

Kusama's own description of the self-obliterating repetition of her childhood visions, it is clear that they are “highly personalized expressions of the artist's persona” (43).

The restricted palette of the *Infinity Nets* series led her to be linked to the Minimalist movement in New York at the time (late 1950s and early 60s), as well as the European “Nouvelle Tendance” groups like Zero and Nul, which sought to refute the emotionality of Abstract Expressionism. Yet the intensity of Kusama's personality in the paintings, as Lucy R. Lippard points out, makes them seem like “a refutation of the coolness of Minimalism” and more in line with the eccentric abstractions of artists like Eva Hesse (Lippard qtd in Hoptman 44). Furthermore, Kusama hired professional photographers to capture her in the process of painting them, as well as standing before them on display, insisting on the connection between her physical self and the paintings. This decision, apart from gesturing towards her later investigation of performance and installation art, also deepens our sense of the interconnection between Kusama and her work, the way in which they are imbued with her presence.

Kusama continued to maintain a strong connection between her body and the art she was producing even as she began to explore sculpture, and specifically the soft sculpture of her *Accumulations* series, beginning in 1962. Her second piece, *Accumulation #2* (see Appendix 143), is a couch entirely covered in phallic shaped protuberances which sprout in all directions with a blend of the random and the patterned carried over from her *Infinity Net* series. Claes Oldenberg's similar exploration of soft

sculpture meant Kusama was often linked to him and to Pop art, and her 1963 piece *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show* (which involved 999 printed images of a boat covered in the same phallic growths surrounding the actual boat) invited comparisons to Andy Warhol's use of repeated prints of images. However, as the critic Jill Johnson observed, Kusama seemed more concerned with “an accumulative art of repetitive insistence” (qtd in Yoshimoto 56) than in the objects that were being repeated. Oldenberg made a similar observation, noting that her sculpture is “a small thing that covers” (qtd in Yoshimoto 57) rather than his own large-scale soft hammers and telephones, which emphasized the object over the experience of texture or repetition.

This returns us again to our own experience of these sculptural pieces. Viscerally, they have much the same effect as her paintings – there is a sense of the natural and the personal about them, painstakingly made fields of spores that overwhelm with their scale and seem imbued with Kusama's persona. But unlike the paintings, which were initially linked to the coolness of Minimalism, the couch (and stepladder and ironing board and other household objects she covered with her soft penises) has a humorous effect as well. As Helen Molesworth observes, however, “underneath the laughter [is] an almost electric flow of fear” (167). Molesworth reads this fear as Kusama registering the threat of masculine sexuality and patriarchal control more broadly. It contains for me as well the awe of repetitive patterns in nature, and amazement at Kusama's creative perseverance. Certainly, the fear Molesworth identifies is not the most lasting of the many emotions the

sculptures evoke. Molesworth later (and I believe more accurately) describes this kind of art as a swarm, an “emergent order that arises out of immanent flows of matter” (164) with an effect similar to a beehive or an ocean bed of mussels, yet also erotic. Molesworth explains this combination of the erotic, the electric, and the hilarious as Kusama's attempt to create work that dissolves “the boundaries between bodies and objects and bodies and space” (167), an effect maximized by the concentration of the repeated patterns that disperses or obliterates not just the object but the viewer.

In their comparison of ancient and contemporary Japanese art, Ivan Vartanian and Kyoko Wada link Kusama to the tradition of *kacho-fugetsu* painting, a style that takes as its subject an appreciation of nature. They look specifically at the work of Jakuchu Ito, who painted repetitive natural patterns in a naturalist way, but with the effect of surrealism because of the density of his repetitions. For them, Kusama updates this tradition by imbuing inorganic materials like couches and ladders with nature's proliferation (101). For them, this connects more broadly to Japanese animism and other spiritual traditions like Pure Land Buddhism, which locate the spiritual within the natural world.

When taken together, and reflecting as well on Amelia Jones's feminist and political take on Kusama's sculptural pieces, it is clear that critics diverge wildly on what her works mean, even if they all agree about the dissolving and obliterating effect on the audience. Certainly, they can be simultaneously a critique of the masculine art criticism

world, a feverish explosion of natural forms, and a connection to a spiritual animism. But, in an interview with Gordon Brown in 1965, Kusama talks about her turn to sculpture as a “development of everything I have done since I was a child... a deep, driving compulsion to realize in visible form the repetitive image inside of me” (Hoptman 104). She calls them both aggregations and a driving image, and says that they represent the feeling of “driving on the highways or carried on a conveyor belt without ending until my death” (104). These various different critical interpretations all shy away from madness, choosing instead to look at the effect Kusama's art has on its viewers, or to link it to broader artistic or cultural trends. For Kusama, however, they are an expression or articulation of an internal sense, a force found within her but also involving the entire universe, linked to both momentum and death. For me, it is this combination of vast emptiness and proliferation that resonates most. When Lynne Huffer discusses her vision of Foucault's ethics of eros, she observes that “the body reactivates the tragic dimension of subjectivity, the fact of our life and our annihilation in the body's eventual death” (Huffer xvi), and, just as important, that historically it was madness and unreason that represented this corporeal dimension of human existence. The discursive shift from madness to mental illness covers up that tragic expression, masking this central dimension of subjectivity while simultaneously locating sexuality in the realm of rational and normative ethics. For Foucault, attempts to reclaim tragic eros and madness are inevitably still bound up in the scientific and rational frame of contemporary life, making



the goal of liberating them already another form of captivity. At the heart of this, I believe, is his sense that any language that seeks to make a space for madness or unreason is ultimately seeking to make it legible, and that legibility is inherently a prison that disciplines or controls madness. But I believe Kusama manages to convey the convergence of madness, eros, and death in her art in a way that doesn't bind them to coherence. If we immerse ourselves in her pieces in the way she does, they allow us, in a non-judgmental way, to access on a physical level the overflowing and inarticulable connection between love, the infinitude of nature, madness and death.

### Being Seen

I sometimes reflect on what it means that no one else in the world will know Zoë. The thought brings me great pain, because I learned so much from her and because she was a skilled teacher to so many others as well. It also means no one else will be able to see how deeply we loved each other or how she made every place she entered glow with a fierce energy. This summer, the Sea School, the organization that taught her how to sail and which we both later worked for (and who encouraged us to teach art together), put a plaque out on East Point Gut, an island in the ocean where most Sea School voyages spend their first night. The plaque reads:

Zoë passed by here many times with crews of young people, helping them to find their way on the sea, on the land and through life. She taught them to be sure-footed, passionate and generous, as she was herself.

She lives in their memories and actions.

I went to the unveiling ceremony and bowed to her memory. The plaque feels right, and it's important that this dimension of her life is marked. It also makes me angry that she's gone, and it makes me think about recognition. Why do I want her to be known? Do I think she ever could be? The sense of connection I have to her, and my belief that others who knew her had that connection as well, rubs against my sense that it is impossible to fully comprehend anyone else let alone myself. The knowing, the recognition, the public acknowledgement of her feels sometimes significant and sometimes ludicrous, and either way I see her slipping and hardening into a memory that is always too still and motionless.

What she wanted and was working towards in the months and years before she was killed was to be recognized as an artist, to have her paintings seen in shows and galleries. Somehow it's important to be talked about in those terms by strangers, not to be a sailing instructor but to be a painter when you're introduced to someone new. I think about this as well in connection to Kusama, who is also talked about as an artist instead of as a madwoman, and above all who is famous internationally. In order to look at this dimension of Kusama and her art more fully, it is helpful to turn to some discussions of the nature and function of celebrity in our contemporary culture.

Celebrity is not quite the right descriptor for Kusama, at least not in comparison to the recognition given to Hollywood actors or platinum-selling musicians or certain

politicians. Nevertheless, she did deliberately and ambitiously seek out international recognition, and, during her stay in New York in the 70s, she rivalled Andy Warhol for press coverage. She was considered a star artist in Japan in the 50s, having been championed by the prominent art critic Shuzo Takiguchi and the artist Nobuya Abe (Yoshimoto 51), but often expressed that she felt stifled by the conservatism of Japanese society and in particular the way female artists were treated. Her move to New York was equally full of ambition and nerve -- she wrote to Georgia O'Keeffe to ask for advice on how to get her work into galleries in New York, and once she arrived there she embarked on a “no-holds-barred promotion of her art/self” (Hoptman 38) that managed to get her a solo show within eighteen months of her arrival in America.

As Laura Hoptman explores in detail, Kusama's shift from painting to sculpture to performance art was accompanied by an increasing use of photo documentation, press releases, manifestos, and artists' statements, all used “to advertise that [Kusama's] life, as art, to an audience outside the confines of the contemporary art community” (59). She claimed, in 1967, to have more press clippings than Warhol, a declaration that led to widespread recognition in New York but also to attacks from the art establishment, which viewed her self-promotion as a lust for publicity and a detriment to her work. It is only in retrospect, Hoptman observes, that her interactions with mass media can be seen as a part of her larger artistic project, one that directly confronts the paradoxical

“commercialization of contemporary art with the anti-commodity call to merge art with everyday life” (63).

At this point it is helpful to draw on the analysis of celebrity done by P. David Marshall in his book *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*. Marshall traces the historical emergence of celebrity in conjunction with several theories about society in general, in particular the intersection of theories about leadership with theories about collectives put forward by cultural critics and social psychologists. A shift from an image of collectives as irrational mobs to collections of individuals with universal drives occurred in the early 1900s, and meant that research into the emergent forms of mass communication like radio similarly shifted from an exploration of the effects of propaganda to the effects of entertainment. As a result, writes Marshall, this research “helped to reposition the identity of the mass in terms of audiences, individuals, and satisfaction” (41). When he places the modern celebrity figure alongside the emergence of this conceptual shift, he sees celebrities as people who help to reinforce a sense of individuality within mass society. They become an ideological tool for consumer capitalism by emphasizing the possibility of individual success, while also encouraging consumption as an expression of free will (43). However, as he goes on to say, there is a dual process at work around celebrities. They are not only tools that reinforce the dominant capitalist culture, they are also refashioned by audiences to represent meanings that sit outside or challenge that dominant culture. As a result, the figure of the celebrity

exists in a kind of tension. For members of the dominant culture, the celebrity embodies and justifies cultural power; for members of the various subordinate audiences within that culture, the celebrity provides “a bridge of meaning between the powerless and the powerful” (49). These two meanings never completely cohere in the identity of the celebrity, even if they converge on the body of specific celebrities. Kusama's simultaneous expression of and challenge to the consumerism within the contemporary art world manifests these two competing visions of celebrity in a very visceral form.

Kusama's celebrity also poses questions for us as the audience of her work, since her critique of consumerism also leads us to ask why we are choosing to “consume” her art in particular. Marshall identifies three ways in which celebrities hold power in contemporary society. The first is a sense of charisma, which emerges out of the social will of the audience even as it is taken up by cultural institutions and used to rationalize their existence – the consequence of which is an inherent instability within individual celebrity figures (56). The second is a kind of hyperindividuality, where the celebrity is coded with signs and significations, held together by the interpretive writing of different media forms – the various magazines, television interviews, rumours, and internet forums all serve to deepen and multiply the meanings of individual celebrities, making them signs of both dominant and subordinate cultural meaning (60). And last, the celebrity is supported by the emergence of what Marshall calls the “audience-subject” (61). If “class” refers to the work that collectives do, and “mass” refers to the leisure time of collectives,

“audience” defines collectives in terms of what they consume, says Marshall. He links this with an Althusserian sense of subjectivity as a process by which large cultural ideologies “hail” individuals and thus constitute them, allowing us to accept cultural norms and conceive of ourselves as culturally distinct, all without questioning the ideologies underlying that acceptance. Against the backdrop of these definitions, then, Marshall concludes that celebrity power is sustained by audiences-as-consumers, turning them into “an embodiment of a discursive battleground on the norms of individuality and personality within a culture” (65). Moreover, the discourses that cycle around the figure of the celebrity are in effect power struggles between the forces of consumer capitalism and audience-subjects, making the celebrity system in general a place where “the sphere of the irrational, emotional, personal, and affective is contained and negotiated in contemporary culture” (73). Recalling Miranda Joseph's critique of community as a force that creates new markets for consumer products, we can see as well how forming bonds with others around the celebrities we celebrate is also reabsorbed into the system of consumer capital (22). Kusama's decision to enter into and take on celebrity power, then, allows her to activate these dimensions of the celebrity role. We can see part of her artistic project as an attempt to expand the types of bodies and personalities who are recognized as capable of becoming a celebrity. This also allows us to question why it is that we, as audience-subjects, are willing to see Kusama as a celebrity while shutting out others who put forward identities similar to hers. What makes Kusama's madness

acceptable within the celebrity sphere of contemporary art, but is a barrier for the writers of the Workman Arts group, for instance?

### Pumpkins

To explore this question further, I want to look more closely at the piece Kusama presented at the Japan pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 1993. Alongside a retrospective of her earlier *Infinity Nets* and *Accumulations*, she staged a performance inside a room created for the exhibition called *Mirror Room (Pumpkin)* (see Appendix 144). The room is yellow from floor to ceiling and covered in black polka dots, and in the centre of the room is a smaller mirrored box with a single window. Looking through the window, the inner space is filled with more mirrors and papier-mâché pumpkins also covered with black polka dots, seemingly extending in an infinite field. This inner room is a gesture to her 1965 piece *Endless Love Show*, where mirrors and marquee lights created another infinite field that also included the reflection of the person looking into the room. For her performance, Kusama dressed in a yellow and black polka dotted robe and matching sorcerer's cap, and handed out little papier mache pumpkins to anyone who came in to the room. This too is linked to an earlier performance of hers, her infamous *Narcissus Garden* outside the Venice Biennale in 1966. When Kusama wasn't invited to the Biennale she set up outside the entrance, wearing a gold kimono and standing in a field of 1500 plastic mirror balls. She sold them for 2 dollars each, a blatant critique of the

commercialism of the art world. Although the organizers of the Biennale called the police and she was forced to stop, the scandal of her installation became the most talked-about event of the Biennale, and the subsequent press photos and discussion were carefully organized by Kusama for maximum effect. Hoptman reads this later pumpkin giveaway as both “a gracious acknowledgement of her arrival at the pinnacle of success and...a familiar bid to popularize and promote her work to a wider audience” (78). In comparing this later performance with her earlier one, the resonance with her initial economic critique is layered on top of a more free-spirited generosity. Similarly, the kimono that activated her cultural otherness has been transformed into the magical otherness of a sorcerer, the pumpkins a kind of Cinderella fairytale icon that speaks to Kusama's mythical or otherworldly interests.

When Marshall's analysis of celebrity power is brought to bear on Kusama's re-emergence on the international art stage, what becomes apparent is the importance of a language of intentionality and a comparison to the works of other artists in smoothing away the “problematic” elements in Kusama's art practice. Her insistence on using the language of madness, death, and infinity is de-emphasized, while the surrealist, feminist, and performative dimensions of her work are focused on instead. This speaks to the kinds of discourses the audience-subjects of the art world are willing to consume, and as Marshall clarifies, it is the collaboration between various culture media and audiences that shape the meanings that accrue to individual celebrities, despite the personal image-



shaping in which celebrities engage. In Kusama's case, her visionary madness is seen as proof of originality and genius,<sup>23</sup> and the links between her and Duchamp, Oldenburg, Warhol, Carolee Schneemann and others allow her work to enter the critical lineages surrounding those other artists. This indicates that the culturally active stigma about mental illness still circulates around Kusama, except that instead of dismissing her work as merely a symptom of that illness it is reintegrated into the world of art by the emphasis on these resonances with other artists, in conjunction with a belief that Kusama is in control of her artistic production. Meanwhile, the art being made by those who are primarily defined by their diagnosis is seen primarily as either a symptom or a therapeutic outlet, and the discourses of art criticism and history are not brought to bear on their work. Additionally, even as Kusama's performance of celebrity invites madness into the realm of the popular, the multiple forces that shape celebrity convert her rupturing presence into another consumable moment, defanging some of the power of her critique and the intensity of her otherness.

Dots

Often these days my friends will ask me what my plans for the future are, where I might live, if there are any projects I'm pursuing. I find these questions challenging. I don't have

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<sup>23</sup> As Siebers and others have pointed out, genius is a malleable term, which has been used both to exclude artists with disabilities (as in the case of Judith Scott) and to make them acceptable within the artistic canon (as is the case with Kusama). “Genius” allows madness to be glossed as something consciously controlled, or conversely that a lack of control precludes being described as a genius (see Siebers 19, 42).

any plans because I don't trust in the future any more. The things I wanted, the goals I had, the desires that drove me, were bound up in a life with Zoë. Her death makes me give up, makes apparent the foolishness of believing in any continuity between today and tomorrow. This is not a comforting vision, and I feel bad when I answer questions about my plans with some version of this observation. The radical uncertainty of time is not a place where people like to be for long. One consequence of this uncertainty is that I not only don't believe that the things I want will happen, I don't believe that I will be alive. When I say this I feel the need to assure people that I'm not planning on killing myself. But every time I walk down a busy street in the city I think about what it would be like for a car to jump the curb and kill me. How long would I be in the air? Would I have time to say anything to anyone? I recall Zoë's last words, which a lawyer relayed to me months after her death. I had always believed she was killed instantly, and there was a comfort in imagining she died painlessly even though I spent days holding her body hooked up to the tubes and machines that kept her organs alive. When those words come to me, that she turned to someone and said *I'm sorry you have to see this*, I always cry. Every day in the city I hear ambulance sirens, I watch the bend in a road, and think that I may not make it into tomorrow.

When Kusama talks about being on a highway heading towards death, this feeling I have now is what I think of. In her 1967 *Self-Obliteration* performances she would cover people and objects in polka dots, and in her book *Manhattan Suicide Addict* she

explains this further, writing “when we obliterate nature and our bodies with polka dots, we become part of the unity of our environment, I become part of the eternal, and we obliterate ourselves in love” (Hoptman 124). In this vision I see an underlying connection between repetition and the overflow of boundaries, a way of unifying the natural and the infinite with our bodily specificity through immersing ourselves in larger patterns. I think the tendency to label this an obsession within Kusama avoids the underlying inevitabilities of death and infinitude that she is trying to point to. It isn't comforting, but it isn't depressing or untrue either. Kusama wrote in 1975 that “what death signifies, its colours and spatial beauty, the quietude of its footprints, and the 'nothingness' after death: I am now at the stage of creating art for the repose of my soul, embracing all of these” (Hoptman 122). It seems important to think of this when we consider her infinite pumpkin room and her polka-dotted sorcerer's hat, and her continued engagement with the social dimensions of celebrity. In addition to the interpretive connections made to her earlier art and to other artistic and social movements, the room and her presence within it constitute a continued summoning of personal dissolution and death. Kusama hands out pumpkins that are Kusama, and that also constitute an image of infinite nothingness, undoing the constraints of space and time.

It is difficult to think of infinity and obliteration simultaneously, because the two terms seem to exist in contradiction. Nevertheless, Kusama clearly wants us to. She describes this obliteration as a self-destruction and a forgetting, but also as a unity and a

form of love (Hoptman 124). These are held together visually by the repetitive form of the polka dot, which visually covers over everything (and thus obliterates distinctions) but also visually represents for her the sun, the moon, the energy of the cosmos, and a lack of aloneness. For her, the destruction of the self doesn't lead to absence, but instead to an expansiveness that points towards infinity. We die as individuals, only to enter a larger “we” of the cosmic environment.

#### Residue

To deepen our understanding of this temporal dimension to Kusama's work, I want to consider Elizabeth Freeman's term “chronobiopolitics.” In her book *Time Binds*, Freeman describes the way that society organizes and controls individuals by synchronizing narratives of movement and change. She points out that “teleological schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death” are all ways that the state and other institutions synchronize and then regulate society (4). The chronobiopolitical also attempts to regulate cyclical times, using a repetition of events or the logic of an inevitable return to manage and contain breaks in linear working time. Thus, domesticity and mourning, although they break with the teleological flow of history, still work to buttress and fortify society's trajectory. Freeman constructs queer time as a tendency to backwardness, a way of lingering or extending time that runs counter to the chronobiopolitical. I would add

Kusama's mix of physical embodiment alongside the self-obliterating infinity of dots as another way of manipulating time, and thus of resisting dominant social and temporal structures. She asks us to be aware and in our bodies as vehicles heading towards death, yet also holds out a way for us to expand/leave behind our selves and enter the infinite realm of our larger environment. Importantly, this is not a position that she is attempting to argue for rationally. Instead, she presents it through the figure of herself, her life, her art, her body, her madness, on an experiential rather than a linguistic level. As Kusama says of herself in a recent interview with Akira Tatehata, “I have had so many hardships, with people saying various things about me. Time is finally turning a kind eye on me. But it barely matters, for I am dashing into the future” (Hoptman 28). The chronobiopolitical social time that turns to look at her, seemingly granting fame or acknowledgement, has become less relevant to her. The future she is dashing into is a future full of the colours and nothingness of death, the interconnected love of the infinite, the embrace of a net or the warmth of a polka dot sun.

Here again, however, we come up against the cautionary words of Foucault and his sense that attempts to make madness legible or comprehensible inevitably discipline and constrain that madness; more broadly, perhaps, that our culture of reason absorbs and silences any expression of unreason. Kusama holds out a very physical and experiential path to unreason through an art practice that is seamlessly interwoven through her entire life. Yet her celebrity status and the continual revisions and interpretations of her work, as

they continue to accumulate, have much the same qualities of discipline and silencing. Even if that “barely matters” to Kusama as she runs toward the future and the eternity of death, it should matter to those of us left behind holding her orange and black pumpkins, some residue of the infinite.

Conclusion: Racism, Grief, Madness

On the Ocean and Off

Within the year of Zoë's death I set sail on a boat heading to The Bahamas. The boat was captained by our friend Crane, who taught Zoë how to sail almost twenty years ago. I knew that being out on the water and in a boat would be full of memories for me, especially since it was Zoë who introduced me to sailing and the ocean. While I knew those memories were unavoidable, I also thought that going on an adventure would be an appropriate tribute to her, since I would be doing something challenging and new alongside feeling the physical intensity of her absence. My goal was to reach the Caribbean around the date of her death, so that I could take my grief with me to the edge of some gleaming beach and mourn without any witnesses. Sometimes for me the days and places where I believe I'm expected to be overcome are the hardest, not because of the feelings but because I imagine myself being scrutinized. Is he really sad enough? Is his grieving real? Or else that my friends will want to distract me and I'll let them, they'll tell jokes or pass me a beer and there won't be room for me to stare silently at the horizon and remember the impossible smell of her brain-dead body, the last time she looked at me before leaving our apartment.

The adventure didn't happen the way I wanted it to. The boat needed work done to it before we could set sail, and my first few weeks were spent drilling holes in stainless

steel and messing around with epoxy, attaching new rigging to the boat. And then there were a series of disasters and accidents, torn sails and a leaking engine, the boat telling us it wasn't ready by producing as many obstacles as possible. Instead of sailing around waters I didn't know, I spent a month lingering along the coast of Nova Scotia, visiting every possible location where I had memories of Zoë. If I was imagining in part being able to leave our home and her history behind, I was being told that I wasn't ready to leave anything. Six weeks after our initial departure date I found myself on a dock in New Hampshire staring at the full moon, trying to listen to the ocean. It said that Zoë didn't want me to go anywhere new, and so I apologized to her for trying to forget some of my pain, wept as I always do when I address her directly, and bought a plane ticket back to Canada.

Earlier I referred to this writing project as a time machine, something that brings this past version of me alongside the present version of you that's reading me. Each chapter is also a moment in time so that what I've said before also brings my own past back towards me. The howling grief that I started with while crossing the train tracks in Hamilton, or that carried me down to the flooded spring river, has become hushed and private a year later. I don't feel like I've healed, the grief is a ball in my stomach slowly spreading and dissolving through my veins. I see that I used to have pure emotions, a joy was only joy, a confusion was only confusion. But now everything is mixed with sadness, an undertone that sometimes dilutes, sometimes intensifies, and sometimes muddies every



thought and action. I can't scramble an egg without remembering the way Zoë liked hers cooked, I can't listen to a new song without wishing I could play it for her so we could dance together.

Although it seems impossible, every day is full of new moments and events. The world continues. Police in Ferguson, Missouri shot Michael Brown to death. Robin Williams committed suicide. There are countless other tragedies and losses as well, but I want to talk about these two deaths and their coverage in the news because their juxtaposition highlights so many of the challenges we face culturally when talking about madness, grief, and injustice.

### Two Dead Men

Michael Brown was shot and killed on August 9th by police officer Darren Wilson, under circumstances that are still unclear. The death of yet another unarmed black teenager led to protests in the town of Ferguson and across the United States, protests that are continuing now, nearly three months later. This news story was interrupted by the death of Robin Williams two days later on August 11th, whose suicide led to calls for greater vigilance and empathy for those dealing with depression and other forms of mental suffering. The contrast between these two reactions in the mainstream media and online was made even more stark by the temporal proximity of the deaths, and is an invitation to think about the social and cultural circumstances that allow for that divergence to exist.

Earlier, I spoke of the privilege I have in being able to grieve Zoë's death, and compared it to the challenges and barriers to grief in Gaza (and other war zones). The ungrievability of precarious lives also seems present in Ferguson, where protesters have expanded the significance of Brown's death with signs bearing hashtags like #blacklivesmatter to emphasize and resist the long history of unacknowledged violence aimed at black bodies. As Ann Cvetkovich points out, following Cornel West, there is an “emotional color line” that separates white and black sadness. For her, West provides a “beautiful diagnosis of white depression as a cultural rather than medical predicament... he suggests that sadness comes when the belief that one should be happy or protected turns out to be wrong and when a privileged form of hopefulness that has so often been entirely foreclosed for black people is punctured” (116). If white sadness has to do with an awareness of a lack of expected or assumed privileges, black sadness in America may have more to do with “histories of colonialism, genocide, slavery, legal exclusion, and everyday segregation and isolation” (115). Both of these explanations resist the biological and medical model of mental illness, but in a way that also complicates and challenges the idea that mental suffering may be treated by spiritual or emotional methods on an individual level. Locating sadness in a collective and systemic history means that personal relief from sadness needs to engage with broader social issues, a path that feels both daunting and unclear.

Another example of the difference between individualised mental suffering and an awareness of systemic contributing forces is Rachel Gilmore's sense that her non-white students were less inclined to take on the label of mental illness.<sup>24</sup> Their tendency to refer to their challenges simply as “life” or “struggles,” suggests to me as well that awareness of systemic racism and the complex emotions required to exist within that system raises questions about the adequacy and appropriateness of the medicalization of emotional states. The few scientific studies that attempt to explore the connection between race and mental health have unclear results, because they tend to point in cultural rather than biological directions -- that a lower incidence of depression in people of colour, for example, may have more to do with lack of access to health care or a mistrust of institutions, rather than any biological marker (Cvetkovich 118). Following Cvetkovich, my sense is that Michael Brown's death (and Trayvon Martin's and many others both before and after him) is connected to a feeling of hopelessness, that these tragedies are inevitable and unavoidable, a fatigue that Cvetkovich at least would describe as political depression. But alongside that depression there was also anger. Mainstream media coverage of the protests in Ferguson tended to portray the tensions in the city as a problem, and the police exacerbated this by imposing curfews that criminalized and delegitimized the demonstrations. Brittney Cooper, writing in *Salon* magazine, took a different approach:

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<sup>24</sup> Gilmore's observations are discussed in more details at the end of Chapter 2 above.

We are talking about justifiable outrage. Outrage over the unjust taking of the lives of people who look like us. How dare people preach and condescend to these people and tell them not to loot, not to riot? Yes, those are destructive forms of anger, but frankly I would rather these people take their anger out on property and products rather than on other people (Cooper par. 9)

Alongside the intensity of the emotional reactions by the people of Ferguson, there were critiques of the repressive reactions by the police, who moved in aggressively in response to the justifiable outrage of the citizens. Writing in *Deadspin*, Greg Howard points out as well that:

If officers are soldiers, it follows that the neighborhoods they patrol are battlefields. And if they're working battlefields, it follows that the population is the enemy. And because of correlations, rooted in historical injustice, between crime and income and income and race, the enemy population will consist largely of people of color, and especially of black men. Throughout the country, police officers are capturing, imprisoning, and killing black males at a ridiculous clip, waging a very literal war on people like Michael Brown (Howard par. 12)

One of the most challenging dimensions of the unfolding protests in Ferguson in the days and weeks after Brown's death was the inability of the police and media to admit that race was a factor in any of the confrontations. Instead, there was a search for justifications for the use of lethal force that led to Brown's death, and descriptions of the protests as looting rather than civil disobedience. Part of the importance of naming and exploring the ongoing presence of racism surrounding Brown's death is that doing so allows grief to be experienced fully. Grieving the specific death of this one young human opens up into grief over the entire history of black lives cut short, and when that connection is denied

both verbally and by state forces armed for war it is no wonder that grief is also accompanied by rage.

The outrageous denial of grieving rituals for the community in Ferguson was made even more apparent by the outpouring of eulogies for Robin Williams two days later. Here, the media seemed to focus on a few key narratives: that Williams had freed himself from suffering; that we hadn't properly acknowledged his genius; that mental illnesses are real and we need to end the stigma against them; that proper or different medication could have solved his problems and prevented his death. If the coverage in Ferguson was characterized by the denial of race and by contestations of that denial, the coverage of Williams's suicide pivoted on attempts to emphasize the reality of mental illness.

Dean Burnett, in the psychology section of *The Guardian*, wrote an article the day after Williams died emphasizing that depression is real, and that “depression (like all mental illnesses) typically doesn’t take personal factors into account. Mental illness can affect anyone” (Burnett par. 7). Similarly, in the wake of Williams's death, Kelly Posner, the Founder and Director of the Center for Suicide Risk Assessment at Columbia University, wrote in the *Huffington Post* that:

One of the biggest problems is that most people who need treatment do not get it -- 50 percent to 75 percent of those in need receive inadequate treatment or no treatment at all. This is partly due to stigma and access-to-care barriers, but in the end few are spared from the problem of under-treatment: more than 80

percent of college students who die by suicide receive no consistent treatment prior to their deaths (Posner par. 4)

As I've maintained throughout this thesis, this type of news coverage is a large part of what promotes and reinforces the culturally constructed medical model of mental health and illness. Challenging this model is not about denying the fact of mental anguish, and Williams must have been in a lot of pain in order to kill himself. Holding the Michael Brown and Robin Williams news cycles side by side, though, it seems that both are working to resist or undermine attempts to make larger social connections surrounding the events. Denying systemic racism and supporting metaphors of individual illness work to keep the deaths of Brown and Williams discrete, separate, and ungrievable.<sup>25</sup> If Zoë's death has shown me anything it is that nothing is separate. My grief has broken me open and broken open the world around me, making it apparent that there was nothing whole to begin with.

## Lifelines

Another thread running through my thesis is art, and I want to step away from the cultural analysis of current events to emphasize again the importance of creative impulses alongside madness. In her chapter on racism and depression, Cvetkovich frequently turns

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<sup>25</sup> This is not to suggest that his parents and friends aren't grieving, but that media coverage has shifted the conversation away from the causes and effects of grief, denying a public venue for that grieving.

to works of art as she explores the emotional links between two forms of suffering that are not often talked about in tandem. She writes that “musicians and novelists may be especially well equipped to articulate the public feelings that are necessary to reckoning with the history of racism,” as they resist the impatience of politicians and the rationality demanded of academics (122). If grief, race, depression, and anger are denied existence in the media and broad public discussions, it is possible for them to be given full and rich expression through art. As my earlier chapter on the Workman Arts anthology makes clear, sometimes this artistic expression is stifled by institutions using a logic of legitimization. And as the case of Kusama makes clear, critical reliance on terms like genius and intention can also have the effect of covering over and thus defanging critical artistic voices. However, as Baker and Johnson attest, the choice to make art has the capacity to form communities and resist or contest those cultural logics (even if capitalism wants to view those communities as markets rather than rebellions). Cvetkovich's decision to turn to works of art in her discussion on racism and depression for me signals her awareness that there is an uncontainable power in creativity, especially linked to the emergence of thoughts that challenge the status quo and call the world to justify itself.

For the past year I've been struggling with Zoë's death, and my thesis has been a large part of that struggle. In a long list of possible futures there is one where I don't decide to move to Hamilton for school, and thus save her life. It's just another

impossibility, however, and writing about her death here has been one way of coming to terms with my loss, and trying to salvage something meaningful out of it. In many ways this writing has been a lifeline, giving me the illusion of a purpose when I haven't felt any. But using her death also makes me feel cheap and dirty, especially the way her vibrancy has been reduced to the signifier of her name, which I type out and hope somehow makes you connect to whoever is most precious to you in your life.

In her elegant essay *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry argues that beauty is lifesaving, that beautiful pieces of art or objects or people make life worth living. The structure of the perception of beauty, to her mind, has folded within it the sense that beauty is sacred, unprecedented, and life-giving: “it is as though one has suddenly been washed up onto a merciful beach: all unease, aggression, indifference suddenly drop back behind one, like a surf that has for a moment lost its capacity to harm” (25). Furthermore, beauty also invites deliberation and reflection. It brings us into a wordless present in front of the object, but it simultaneously causes us to think about other instances of beauty. For her, “what is beautiful prompts the mind to move chronologically back in the search for precedents and parallels, to move forward into new acts of creation, to move conceptually over, to bring things into relation, and does all this with a kind of urgency as though one's life depended on it” (30). In this way beautiful things offer a gift of life and invite us to our own acts of creation, to extend and multiply beauty for ourselves and others.



Earlier I spoke about Tobin Siebers' efforts to shift discussion away from beauty and towards strangeness. Turning to Scarry's desire to rehabilitate and find positive value in beauty puts these two theoretical impulses in a conflict with one another. Yet for me, both of them are asking us as audiences of art to expand the way we think about our reactions to the world around us. For Scarry, the apprehension of beauty is not linked to a cultural inheritance – she isn't arguing that only certain things are beautiful objectively, but rather that everyone has at some point in their lives paid close attention to something in front of them. This makes beauty a personal reaction available as a possibility with regards to any object in the world. Being attuned to beauty in her mind is being alert to the entirety of existence. Siebers resists the language of beauty and the values it implies because of the history of abuse and disdain heaped on disabled bodies, but his emphasis on an aesthetics of strangeness to me has at its core a similar desire to expand the terms of what is considered artistic. If Siebers makes us wary of the language of beauty, it is not with the desire to make us turn away from our impulses to view or make art. In this way, both he and Scarry are holding out an invitation for us to welcome the world in its totality as the subject of and inspiration for artistic production. In this way, Scarry's delight and Siebers's strangeness seem to hold within them an emphasis on disorientation as a starting point and place to dwell.

I believe there is a link between Scarry's encounter with beauty as a salvation, and Cvetkovich's sense that art is equipped to engage with troubling histories of suffering.<sup>26</sup> I feel the link most strongly when I contemplate the impact of my grief on the way I perceive the world. For a long time, it was impossible for me to feel beauty. I could identify beautiful things, but always they would remind me of Zoë's loss, that I couldn't share that beauty with her any more. But despite not sensing beauty, I knew that it was there. The grief that it summoned inside me was itself a kind of proof. In some ways, the clarity that grief provided me replaced the clarity that beauty has for Scarry. Wordlessness in the face of beauty, a wordlessness caused by the direct perception of something, was for me grief in the face of the world, what I referred to earlier as the genuine heart of sadness. In both cases there is also a desire to create, to do something with that wordlessness -- to offer it to others, to confirm it for myself, to further enrich existence. Both grief and beauty seem to summon action.

In previous chapters I've traced an aesthetics of madness that invites us to think in terms of strangeness, about memoirs and their multiplication of selves alongside calls to community, and about the links between multiplicity, death, and the infinite. The poems, memoirs, and performance pieces I was drawn to all put forward claims to beauty that I believe are as important as the issues of grief, madness, and race that surround them. I hope it is clear, then, that the perception of beauty and sadness I am talking about here is

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<sup>26</sup> And if there is no art currently engaging with present suffering, that it will be created quickly.

not exclusionary or rigid. Rather, it seems to be the case that anything at all has the capacity to startle us into awareness, as long as we are open to it.

Let me conclude with a brief story. After Zoë's death my Zen teacher asked if I wanted to work with a koan that is sometimes read after a person dies. It is called Chosa Goes Picnicking, from the *Hekiganroku*. It goes like this:

One day, Chosa went for a walk in the mountains.  
When he returned to the gate, the head monk said, "Where have you been, Master?"  
Chosa said, "I was out walking about in the mountains."  
The head monk said, "Where did you go?"  
Chosa said, "First, I went following the scented grass; then I came back through the falling flowers."  
The head monk said, "It sounds very much like a spring mood."  
Chosa said, "It is better than the autumn dew dropping on the lotus flower."

I struggled with this koan for a long time, because it asked me to think about beauty at a time when beauty felt very far away. More than that, it asked me to be Chosa, to see not the beauty of a future autumn but to see the beauty of the scented grass that is in front of me today. I asked myself if it was possible for beauty and grief to exist together, and if I wanted them to. Seen another way, though, Chosa also wants me to be simply where I am. There is no difference between the grasses and my grief, I am only grief, I am only a falling flower, the falling flower is the entire universe, the entire universe grieves.

Now it is beginning to feel as if words are running out, and so alongside this story of Chosa let me also extend an invitation. Put down this time machine, step outside, look

for an object beneath your notice. Pick it up, hold it in your hand, close your eyes. Begin to ask yourself questions: is it warmer than you imagined? Is it rough or smooth? Does it have a smell? Explore it, let it become everything to you. And when you are ready, open your eyes.

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APPENDIX OF IMAGES

Figure 1: Bobby Baker Diary Drawings 30 (Day 12)

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Figure 2: Bobby Baker Diary Drawings 66 (Day 350)  
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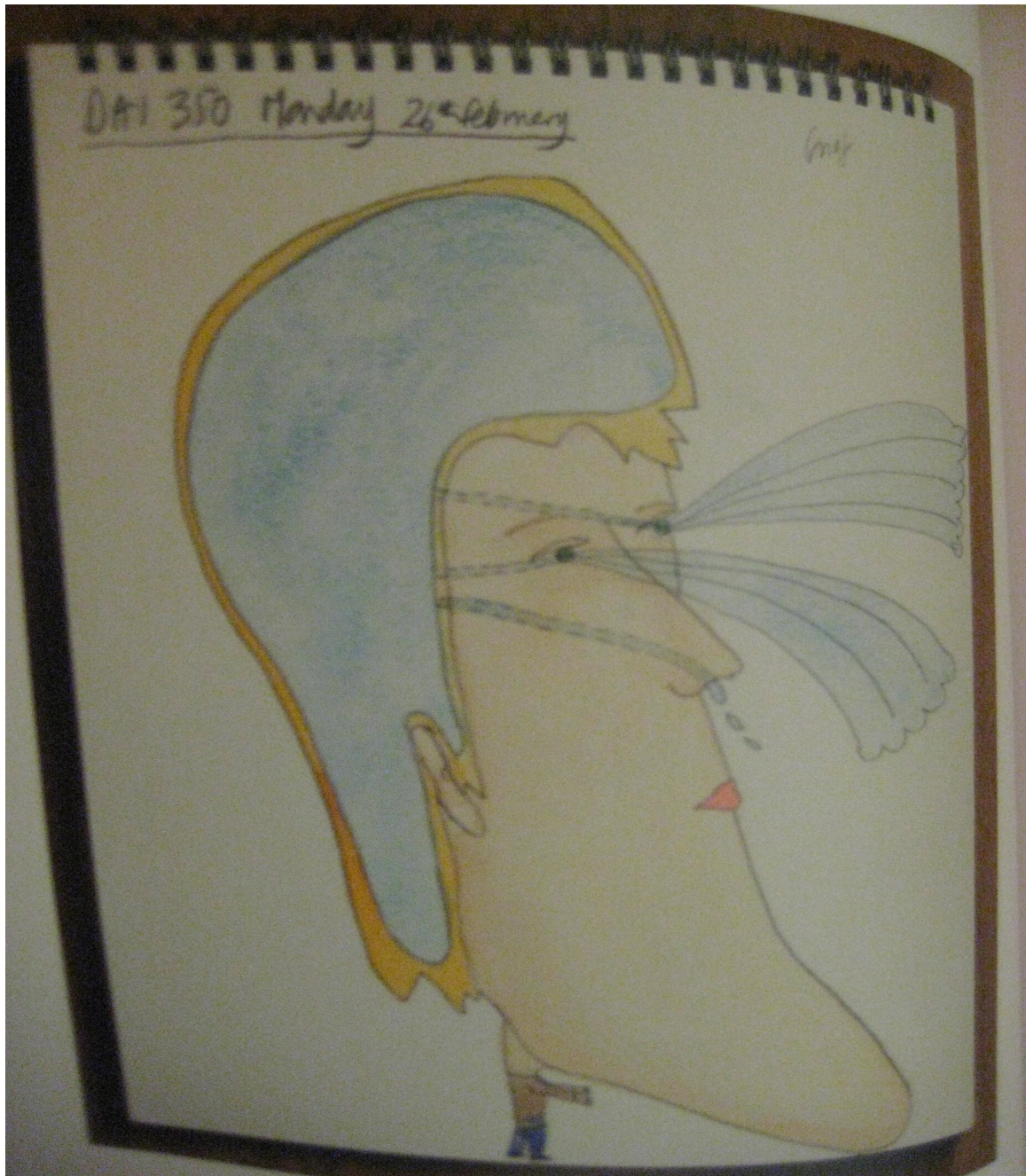


Figure 3: Bobby Baker Diary Drawings 119 (Day 480)  
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Figure 4: Yayoi Kusama *Accumulation #2*  
*Untitled* 1966 © Yayoi Kusama, Yayoi Kusama Studio Inc



**Figure 5: Yayoi Kusama *Mirror Room (Pumpkin)***  
*Mirror Room (Pumpkin)* 1991 © Yayoi Kusama, Yayoi Kusama Studio Inc

