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Abject Bodyminds and the Humanist Subject:
Contemporary Neuroqueer Aesthetics Across PanPacific Literature,
Film, and Popular Culture

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Comparative Literature

by

Shanna M Killeen

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June 2026

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June 2026

Abject Bodyminds and the Humanist Subject: Contemporary Neuroqueer Aesthetics Across
PanPacific Literature, Film, and Popular Culture

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by

Shanna M Killeen

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Finally, thank you to my friends and family. To Mychelle and Matches for the care you bring to my life. To KeeAnna and Margaret who have loved me for so many years even when life took us far from each other. To my online community who may be far away but are always ready to offer support, smiles, and the occasional horse picture. And to Amelia and Lauren who have become dear friends and collaborators on the journey through academia. My network may be small but with all of you it is mighty.

To my autistic bodymind and to the past and future of our growing neurodivergent communities

VITA OF SHANNA M KILLEEN
June 2026

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2017	Student Sustainability Leader. South Corvallis Food Bank and Oregon State University, January-June 2017.
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In progress “Masked Horrors and the Horror of Masking: On Slashers and Neurodivergence from Hollywood to *Dead Friend Forever* (Thailand, 2023).” Accepted for special edition with the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*. In progress.

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- In progress “A Meaningless Unexpressive Smile: Narrative Constructions of Affect and Emotion in Mendocino State Asylum (1890-1940).” *Moving the Body: Affective Imaginations of Illness and Disability*. Edited by Femi Eromosele and Andries Hiskes. In progress.
- 2017 “[The South Corvallis Food Bank](#): Investing in Assemblage Sustainability.” *Assembling Oregon: Material Rhetoric in the Pacific Northwest*, edited by Ehren Helmut Pflugfelder, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017, pp. 17-28.

Public Facing Work

- 2016 “[Cooking Up Excellence](#): Tradition Meets Innovation in Basque Gastronomy.” *Smithsonian Folklife Festival*, 20 October 2016. Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. (Blog Post).
- 2016 “[Basque Recipe](#): The Ubiquitous Pintxo.” *Smithsonian Folklife Festival*, 4 October 2016, Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. (Blog Post).
- 2016 “[Basque Recipe](#): Txuleta with Red Pepper.” *Smithsonian Folklife Festival*, 2 September 2016, Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. (Blog Post).
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- 2016 “[Here’s an Ingeniously Simple Method](#) for Making Bakailaoa Pil-Pilean, the Traditional Basque Meal.” *Smithsonian.com*, 25 August 2016. Smithsonian Magazine. (Magazine Article).
- 2016 “[The Most Expensive Cheese in the World](#).” *Smithsonian Folklife Festival*, 4 August 2016, Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. (Blog Post).

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- 2027 “A Meaningless Unexpressive Smile: Narrative Constructions of Affect and Emotion in Mendocino State Asylum (1890-1940).” Paper presentation. Modern Language Association Annual Convention, Los Angeles, January 2027. Accepted.
- 2026 “Aromantic Archives and Alternate Intimacies: Aromantic Methodologies and Aesthetics in the film *I Am What I Am (Sobakasu)*.” Paper presentation. Modern Language Association Annual Convention, Toronto, 8-11 January 2026.
- 2024 “Painful Play: Neuroqueer Narratives and Self-Awareness in Qiu Miaojin’s *Notes of a Crocodile* and Hannah Gadsby’s *Nanette*.” Paper presented. American Comparative Literature Association Annual Meeting, Montreal, 15 March 2024.
- 2020 “Neurodivergent Aesthetics: Neuroplay in Online Fandom.” Paper presented. Modern Language Association Annual Conference, Virtual, 10 January 2020.
- 2019 “Funky Love and Sonic Dreamscapes: Articulating Aromanticism in Black Feminist Scholarship.” Paper presented. *To Freedom! Imagining Black Feminist Futures: A Graduate Student Colloquium*, University of California, Santa Barbara, 5 April 2019.
- 2018 “It’s All in Your Headcanon: Neuroqueering Online Fandom.” Paper presented. *Alter Net Bodies: UCLA Queer Graduate Conference*, University of California, Los Angeles, 26 October 2018.
- 2015 “Nation and Individual: The Effects of Capitalism on Identity in *Jimmy Corrigan*.” Paper Presented. Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association Annual Conference, Portland, Oregon, 6 November 2015.

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-
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2018	Graduate Center for Literary Research Recruitment Award, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2018. \$3,000 award.

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Writing Program, University of California, Santa Barbara

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Fall 2023 Academic Writing, lower-division workshop and seminar.

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- 2021 Co-Organizer. “Crippling UCSB Distinguished Faculty Lecture with Tanya Titchkosky.” *Crippling UCSB: Conversations on Disability Justice Event Series*. Graduate Center for Literary Research, University of California, Santa Barbara, 10 November 2021.
- 2021 Co-Organizer. “UC-Wide Roundtable: Disability Justice and Knowledge Production.” *Crippling UCSB: Conversations on Disability Justice Event Series*. Graduate Center for Literary Research, University of California, Santa Barbara, 17 May 2021.
- 2021 Co-Organizer. “Disability Justice Conversation Town Hall.” *Crippling UCSB: Conversations on Disability Justice Event Series*. Graduate Center for Literary Research, Multicultural Center, Disabled Student’s Program, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2 March 2021.
- 2020 Co-Organizer. “Care Beyond the Human with Rachel Adams.” *Reimagining (Dis)ability at and Beyond UCSB: A Community Speaker Series*, Disability Studies Initiative, Culture and Community Grant, University of California, Santa Barbara, 10 September 2020.
- 2020 Co-Organizer. “Curating the Invisible: Disability and Climate Change with Aidan Moesby.” *Reimagining (Dis)ability at and Beyond UCSB: A Community Speaker Series*, Disability Studies Initiative, Culture and Community Grant, University of California, Santa Barbara, 27 August 2020.
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- 2020 Co-Organizer. “I Can’t Even Get to the Back of the Bus: Race and Disability with David Serlin.” *Reimagining (Dis)ability at and Beyond UCSB: A Community Speaker Series*, Disability Studies Initiative, Culture and Community Grant, University of California, Santa Barbara, 6 August 2020.
- 2020 Co-Organizer. “Disability and Intersectionality in Journalism with Sarah Kim.” *Reimagining (Dis)ability at and Beyond UCSB: A Community Speaker Series*, Disability Studies Initiative, Culture and Community Grant, University of California, Santa Barbara, 30 July 2020.
- 2020 Co-Organizer. “Self-Reflection and the Art of Capturing the Moment in Our Time: A Creative Writing Workshop with Kelly Gluckman.” *Reimagining (Dis)ability at and Beyond UCSB: A Community Speaker Series*, Disability Studies Initiative, Culture and Community Grant, University of California, Santa Barbara, 16 July 2020.

- 2020 Co-Organizer. "A Coalition of Marginalized Bodies with Cyree Jarelle Johnson." *Reimagining (Dis)ability at and Beyond UCSB: A Community Speaker Series*, Disability Studies Initiative, Culture and Community Grant, University of California, Santa Barbara, 16 July 2020.
- 2015-2017 Co-Founder, Vice President, President. Creative Writing Society. Oregon State University, 2015-2017.
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ABSTRACT

Abject Bodyminds and the Humanist Subject: Contemporary Neuroqueer Aesthetics Across PanPacific Literature, Film, and Popular Culture

by

Shanna M Killeen

This dissertation seeks to unsettle the entrenched boundaries of the human, offering a crip (disabled and queer) intervention into the parameters of the humanist subject. My research engages with recent affective and cognitive turns in literary and cultural studies, turning to neurodivergence as a mode of critique. Through a neuroqueer (queer and neurodivergent) lens, my work critiques contemporary understandings of the human and the humane that are rooted in intertwined histories that pathologize those who fall outside of relational norms. Such pathologization often plays out through psychiatric and social narratives of neurological difference. In opposition to accounts of neurodivergence that foreclose agency, I propose that neurodivergent creators deploy aesthetic, rhetorical, and affective strategies that disrupt, reshape, and queer dominant discourses. In doing so, they exercise more expansive notions of agency that move beyond the parameters of humanism to embrace neuroabjection and other neuroqueer possibilities.

This comparative literature and popular culture project draws on a transnational and multimodal archive of texts that span three cultural and spatial contexts—the virtual, Asian

Pacific, and Ethnic American—and includes Latinx literature and poetry, Australian stand-up performance, a Taiwanese novel, a Thai television series, and social media posts. These works, I contend, demonstrate the complex ways in which neuronormativity structures our subjectivity, while also offering necessary reimaginings of affect, care, and the human(e). Many of the texts I draw on reveal the intertwined workings of humanism and neuroableism. For example, in chapter one, I close read the 1978 horror film *Halloween*, demonstrating how it takes up psychiatric discourse that equates cognitive difference with monstrosity and the in/unhuman. Throughout the project, I situate this figuration of the humanist subject in conversation with a transnational and multimodal archive of texts by neurodivergent creators. This archive, I argue, showcases various forms of crip agency, including aesthetic, rhetorical, and affective possibilities.

This dissertation is comprised of four main chapters. Chapter one, “Masked Horrors and the Horror of Masking: On Slashers and Neurodivergence from *Halloween* (1978) to Thailand’s *Dead Friend Forever* (2023),” focuses first on the paradigmatic American horror film *Halloween* (1978), exploring how the piece employs the figure of the psychokiller to convey anxieties around hidden mental illness. I then turn to the recent queer Thai horror series *Dead Friend Forever*, which I argue intervenes in this genre tradition while offering an exploration of mental illness that resonates more closely with neurodivergent experiences of forced normativity. In my second chapter, “Tenemos Que Enloquecer: Silence, Debility, and Mad Latinx Aesthetics,” I take up the Latinx feminist concept of “loca epistemologies” (named by public intellectuals and podcasters Diosa Femme and Mala Muñoz), turning to a short story by Chicano writer Ramón García and the poetry of Puerto Rican political prisoner turned mental patient Francisco Matos Paoli. I explore how loca epistemologies engage in politics of visibility, not just as a practice of individual liberation but one tied to wider politics that speaks back to systems of silence invested

in upholding empire, biopolitics, debility, and death. My third chapter, “It’s All in Your Headcanon: Neuroqueering Online Fandom,” analyzes a corpus of social media posts wherein autistic people use the transformative practices of fandom to queer dominant discourses around autistic embodiment. My final chapter, “Painful Play: Neuroqueer Narratives and Self-Awareness in Qiu Miaojin’s *Notes of a Crocodile* and Hannah Gadsby’s *Nanette*,” examines transnational queer and neurodivergent aesthetics by placing autistic comedian Hannah Gadsby’s 2018 Australian stand-up special *Nanette* in dialogue with Qiu Miaojin’s 1994 Taiwanese novel *Notes of a Crocodile*. Through a comparative reading, I sketch out an aesthetic approach that prioritizes rhetorical, textual, and self-awareness in contrast to assumptions that cognitive disability is equated to mindlessness.

My dissertation deliberately seeks to address bias against neurodivergent people (15-20% of the population) and to redress the ethical, epistemological, and material consequences of their exclusion.

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Introduction

Humanist Subjects and Neuroqueer Epistemologies

An Occasional Stupid Meaningless Unexpressive Smile: Neurodivergent Agency and the Human(e)

In 1928, a twenty-four-year-old man named Tom was transferred to the Mendocino State Asylum in California. His intake forms—which thoroughly summarized data about his mental state, personal history, and medical condition—listed his emotional status or “affectivity” as follows: “Shows no emotions, except an occasional stupid meaningless unexpressive smile...” (Mendocino, File 211).¹ From the outside, Tom’s expressions were deemed “meaningless” regardless of what he might have been trying to express or what he truly felt. From the late 1800s onward, it was common practice to document and comment on the perceived emotional state of patients, whether in formal documentation by doctors or routine ward notes by nurses. Such notes routinely described patients as either “euphoric,” “noisy,” and “emotional” or “indifferent” and “affectively dull.” While in some cases these reports reflected the patient’s own expressed understanding of their emotional state, by-and-large affective assessments were determined by the judgment and outward perceptions of doctors and nurses. These judgements tied emotional state closely to cooperative behavior, cleanliness, and appropriate sociality, while pathologizing patients for improper emotional expression (Mendocino). This is just one example of how psychiatry has historically narrativized emotion in neurodivergent people, moving beyond simple data collection to

¹ This analysis comes from my work with archival materials from Mendocino State Asylum and the California Department of Mental Hygiene housed at the California State Archives.

construct social narratives around affective difference. Such stories, as Tom’s treatment shows, relied on the assumption that patients did not have their own stories to tell; their affective realities were already perceived as “meaningless” or, at best, narratively fractured—meant to be reconstructed by psychiatry. Moreover, such framing figured neurodivergent people as lacking in agency to the extent that it became justification for their institutionalization.

This pattern of narrating emotion, or a lack thereof, in neurodivergent people, would progress through the latter half of the twentieth century—from American neuroendocrinologist Roy G. Hoskins’ 1945 claim that “the primary defect in schizophrenia...is inadequate empathy” to Bruno Bettelheim’s 1967 usage of “The Empty Fortress” as a metaphor for autism (Hoskins 102). Today such narratives continue both within and outside of psychiatry. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, currently in its fifth edition, commonly uses affect to create a narrative understanding of various disorders. The manual for example, notes that those with schizophrenia “may display inappropriate affect” and gives the example of “laughing in the absence of an appropriate stimulus” (117). What criteria are used to distinguish “appropriate” from “inappropriate” is left unclear with only brief mention of cultural variation’s impact on emotional expression. This of course leaves unaccounted endemic social, cultural, and institutional values that contribute to normative notions of (in)appropriate behavior. For its part, Autism Spectrum Disorder is also described in terms of affect. The DSM lists “deficits in social-emotional reciprocity” as a core diagnostic feature, with one example being “reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect” (56). This narrative also holds weight in broader social understandings of autism, with the

persistent myth that autistic people lack empathy and emotions. In their work on emotion, Bergenmar et al. refers to this discourse as the “affective deficit perspective” of autism, wherein autistic people are viewed as having “an absolute and global absence of emotional responsiveness” (203-204). This often includes both a lack of emotion on the part of the autistic individual and a lack of understanding of the emotions of others. As Bergenmar et al. note, the affective deficit model relies on normative ideas of the human subject and “human emotionality” (201).² By framing autistic people as emotionless we are in turn framed as not humane. We are figured as abject, not proper humanist subjects, and at times not human at all.

Yet in recent years, autistic people have begun to create a counter-narrative around their emotional and affective experiences. In a post on X from 2022, user Autistic Paleocontinent writes about autistic joy noting the following: “Autistic joy is real. / We may not always see it or remember it. / We may process that joy into shame. For feeling weird, different, awkward. So many of us have walked so far.” Here, Autistic Paleocontinent discusses the complex relationship between autistic joy and shame, including the way in which autistic joy is often buried by stigma directed at autistic expression. Importantly, Autistic Paleocontinent foregrounds this discussion with an authoritative claim: “Autistic joy is real.” This resonates with recent discussions by autistic people on social media platform X and the autistic blogsphere where autistic joy has become an important topic that begins to explore the dimensions of autistic emotionality that have long been overlooked and

² For more on the ways in which scientific and medical discussions of autism have framed autistic people as affectively deficient we can turn to work focused on the intersection of autism and alexithymia (Costa et al. 2017, Liss et al. 2008, Poquérousse et al. 2018) and on the study of theory of mind and empathy (Baron-Cohen 1989, Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright 2004, Mazza et al. 2014, Sucksmith et al. 2015).

dismissed by mainstream medical and scientific discourse.³ This epistemological and affective framework is also expressed in the work of Jennifer White-Johnson and Kevin Johnson III. Their 2020 zine *Autistic Joy*, which is housed with the National Museum of African American History and Culture was written by Kevin (then nine years old) and visually designed by his mother Jennifer. The foldable zine is made up of a single page with photographs and visual art accompanied by the title “Autistic Joy” and a panel that says, “Believe in the freedom of being you.” To me, one black-and-white image stands out specifically. A young black boy faces the camera, water runs off his hair, his eyes look slightly to the right of the camera, and he shows his front teeth in a soft smile. His neurodivergence is captured through embodiment, with the water suggesting a sensory engagement and play. His smile here is given meaning through context alongside the zine’s subject “autistic joy.” Through this placement, the visuals help to map autistic affect, to create narratives of emotion that counter a long history of discourse that has situated autistic people outside the human(e). Here his smile is expressive, and it is full of meaning.

This provides just one example of how neurodivergent creators are carving out agency through aesthetic, rhetorical, and affective practices. Such practices offer intervention into long held narratives of cognitive difference that figure neurodivergent

³ For more writing on autistic joy see Lloyd-Williams 2020, Belle 2022, White-Johnson 2019, Bascom 2015, Seymour 2022, and Dale 2023. In his autoethnographic chapter in *Unsettling Literacies*, Chris Bailey (2022) notes autistic joy in passing, mentioning how “there is a concept of ‘autistic joy’, which has yet to permeate academic accounts of autistic experience but is often exemplified on social media” (92). As Bailey notes, there are yet to be any sustained discussions of “autistic joy” within the academy. This has only been remedied in a handful of cases such as Wassell’s 2026 participatory study on the topic and Hannon and Hannon’s 2024 education research on black autistic joy. Many of these accounts stress the embodied nature of autistic joy and its connection to physical expressions like stimming.

people outside the human. The human must communicate, feel, and think in ways that are legible to social norms. Neurodivergence, however, is typically figured in opposition to such standards. As Remi Yergeau notes in their work on rhetoric and autism, “Autism’s rhetorical function—in genetics, neurology, psychology, philosophy, and more—is to contrast those who are otherwise presumed to be cognitively and thereby humanly whole” (23). This reliance on contrast cuts across non-normative identities. As Robert McRuer articulates in his work on crip theory, the normative subject comes into being through intertwined systems of compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness. I would add to this figuration, compulsory able-mindedness.⁴ Indeed, the modern humanist subject, I argue, relies foundationally on the negation of neurodivergent personhood, relying on strict affective, social, and rhetorical norms to figure the human(e).⁵

By the humanist subject, I refer, at least in part, to our definition of the human as an independent, individualist subject. In the enlightenment era, this referred to the notion that each human being was an individual actor deserving of equal rights. However, even during this time, the humanist subject relied on exclusions. Humanism in this period developed alongside and often in conjunction with scientific racism. It also significantly shaped our understanding of the human as a reasoning liberal subject. In her work on intellectual disability, political scientist Stacy Clifford Simplican notes how enlightenment figures such

⁴ Here I identify mindedness for its exclusion. However, I do not wish to reify a mind-body split. It is for this reason that I largely use the term *bodymind* throughout this dissertation. In this, I follow in the footsteps of thinkers such as Alison Kafer (2013), Sami Schalk (2018), Margaret Price (2011), and Eli Clare (2017). In this view the body is considered alongside the mind. The two are interconnected. Neurodivergence is as much cognitive as it is embodied.

⁵ For work on neurodivergence and the abject see Rossi 2025, Morrison 2019, Moga 2024, Krazinski 2023, Sinha and Prabir 2025, and Ní Éigeartaigh 2026.

as John Locke mobilized the figure of the idiot in order to reify the idea that men were defined by their “rational capacities” (22). She notes the tension in enlightenment thinking, where the focus on reason “expands political membership by staking it on equal cognitive faculties, at the same time that it uses cognitive capacity as a way to enforce exclusion” (22). Put succinctly, the human in this model is defined through the exclusion of cognitive disability.

This model of the subject, built on and structured by its exclusions, continues to operate at the heart of democratic, rights-based notions of the human and the citizen subject. Simpican notes, for example, how in the US, many intellectually disabled individuals are not seen as capable enough to vote or participate in political life. Other disability scholars and disability justice activists have similarly pointed to the way our value as human beings and citizens is dependent on our ability to uphold values of independence. Such thinkers as Eva Feder Kittay and the group Sins Invalid note how this is an impossible goal, as we are all interdependent. In this view, the humanist subject excludes disabled people from visions of liberal humanist subjecthood and the full rights this entails.

In this vein, I would argue that the human has long been defined through the exclusion of neurodivergence. We see this in enlightenment formulations of reason. We also see a similar impulse at play in psychiatry through the treatment of affect and emotion that I outlined at the start of this chapter. This phenomenon continues even today, with many fields of science, from psychology to linguistics to philosophy, still relying on neurodivergence’s exclusion to define universal or “normative” human qualities. Take for example a 2006 work by social scientist Stephen C. Levinson, in which he formulates universal principles of human interaction. In the piece, Levinson notes that we can identify a

distinct human social intelligence based on studies that show its lack in autistic people and its excess in Down's syndrome.⁶ This structuring of the subject on exclusion has been usefully theorized by Judith Butler in their work *Bodies that Matter*. Butler notes that the liberal subject cannot exist on its own. Rather, it is brought into being and upheld through negative definition, through the dehumanization or abjection of certain bodies and categories of people. It is in this sense that I conceptualize the intertwined relationship between the humanist subject and abjection. While Butler primarily writes about gender and queerness, here I also consider neurodivergence as an abject positionality. I argue that the exclusion of neurodivergence from the human is foundational to liberal subjectivity. While I explore these exclusions in a broad sense, I am also specifically interested in the ways the human gets defined through affective, interrelational, and rhetorical norms—norms that neurodivergence is frequently narrated as lacking.

In this light, this dissertation seeks to unsettle the entrenched boundaries of the human, offering a crip (disabled and queer) intervention into the parameters of the humanist subject.⁷ My research engages with recent affective and cognitive turns in literary and cultural studies, turning to neurodivergence as a mode of critique. Through a neuroqueer (queer and neurodivergent) lens, my work critiques contemporary understandings of the human and the humane that are rooted in intertwined histories that pathologize those who fall outside of relational norms. Such pathologization often plays out through psychiatric and social narratives of neurological difference, much like those described in the opening of this

⁶ I have seen this same argument repeated as late as 2018 in a cognitive science classroom.

⁷ I will more deeply explain how I am deploying the term “crip” later in this introduction. For now, it refers to the intersection of queerness and disability. Much like queer can be a verb, so to can we “crip” norms.

introduction. In opposition to accounts of neurodivergence that foreclose agency, I propose that neurodivergent creators deploy aesthetic, rhetorical, and affective strategies that disrupt, reshape, and queer dominant discourses. In doing so they exercise more expansive notions of agency that move beyond the parameters of humanism to embrace neuroabjection and neuroqueer possibilities.

This comparative literature and popular culture project draws on a transnational and multimodal archive of texts that span three cultural and spatial contexts—the virtual, Asian Pacific, and Ethnic American—and includes Latinx literature and poetry, Australian stand-up performance, a Taiwanese novel, a Thai television series, and social media posts. These works, I contend, demonstrate the complex ways in which neuronormativity structures our subjectivity, while also offering necessary reimaginings of affect, care, and the human(e). Many of the texts I draw on reveal the intertwined workings of humanism and neuroableism. For example, in chapter one, I close read the 1978 horror film *Halloween*, demonstrating how it takes up psychiatric discourse that equates cognitive difference with monstrosity and the in/unhuman. Throughout the project, I situate this figuration of the humanist subject in conversation with a transnational and multimodal archive of texts by neurodivergent creators. This archive, I argue, showcases various forms of crip agency, including aesthetic, rhetorical, and affective possibilities.

Methodologies and Key Fields of Engagement

This project will play and tinker at the intersections of many disciplines drawing foremost on disability studies, crip studies, and queer studies. In addition, I will pull from a range of relevant fields and subfields, including American studies, global studies, mad studies, critical autism studies, Latinx and ethnic studies, philosophy, sociocultural

linguistics, horror studies, and fan studies. As a project about epistemology, I hope to draw on the expertise and methods of these fields while also queering and disrupting their boundaries to establish new spaces for thinking about abject bodyminds. Following a neurodivergent and queer praxis, I hope to embrace many forms of thinking and communicating, at times turning to alternative flows of knowledge creation. In this vein I often draw little distinction between high and low culture or theory. Given the nature of this project, I embrace knowledge-making from the margins. In this spirit, I follow the tenets of “standpoint theory,” which emphasizes the way in which those in marginal social positions have a unique epistemic perspective (Harding). Similarly, I turn to notions of cripistemology, developed by scholars such as Robert McRuer and Merri Lisa Johnson, which frames disability and the lived experiences of disabled people as spaces of epistemological value. I take up this thinking in order to ethically situate an archive that demonstrates neurodivergent agency.

My mode of reading is at once formalist, paying close attention to literary and rhetorical form, while also situating such analysis in larger political and cultural contexts. As I will explain in more depth shortly, I draw heavily on queer and crip theory to offer critical depth to this analysis. In this vein, this dissertation examines the relationship between neurodivergence and narrative—attending to narrative at the level of social and hegemonic discourses and at the level of story and literary form. I examine the various ways that neurodivergence gets figured by sociopolitical discourse as well as neurodivergent rhetorical and aesthetic practices that disrupt these narratives. I therefore propose that to study neurodivergent aesthetics requires a move beyond isolated formalist analysis to acknowledge the ways such aesthetics and our perceptions of them are influenced by and in

dialogue with larger social and cultural discourses. Each chapter in this dissertation will take as a starting point the question of how neurodivergence is narrated and pathologized in a particular space and context, while examining the consequences of such abjection. I then place these hegemonic frameworks in dialogue with texts that queer and crip these structures. In doing so I hope to reveal how these narratives and counternarratives play out materially, rhetorically, and affectively.

The archive I draw on is intentionally multimodal and global in scope. While I cover traditional literary forms such as novels, short stories, and poetry, I also turn to new media—such as films, web series, and social media posts—as well as performance genres such as stand-up comedy. This diversity allows me to demonstrate how the humanist subject emerges across both institutional and popular culture. Moreover, it engenders an exploration of neurodivergent aesthetics as they emerge in diverse forms of media. Some of these, such as social media posts, give insight into the processes by which neurodivergent people are employing bottom-up knowledge production to articulate their own epistemological values and insights.

As suggested, this archive is also global and transnational, drawing on sources from the US, Thailand, Puerto Rico, Taiwan, and Australia. This scope is intentional, pulling primarily on texts from across the Pacific Rim in order to examine the transnational politics of cognitive disability. All of these works are united by a single factor—they are caught up in, or place themselves in dialogue with, constructions of the humanist subject that emerge in dialogue with American liberalism. Chapter one, for example, examines how a Thai horror series directly dialogues with the stereotype of the psychopathic killer which emerged out of late 1970s Hollywood horror traditions. Chapter two turns to consider how madness

and abjection have been employed against Latinx people in the US and US-controlled Puerto Rico. Chapter three moves the conversation to digital online spaces. And chapter four considers neurodivergent aesthetics as they emerge in two queer works from Australia and Taiwan. The latter, in particular, grapples with processes of liberalization in 1990s Taiwan that implicated queer identity formation.

This dissertation therefore takes a transnational and comparative approach, situated at the borders of American studies, global studies, and ethnic studies. I seek to bring a transnational perspective to disability studies and neurodiversity studies which both remain largely invested in American and Western conceptual models.⁸ Both, for example, continue to turn to limited rights-based models of the human.⁹ In response, my work turns to a range of queer and neurodivergent cultural traditions, inviting them into the conversation, drawing on their creativity, visions, and artistic strategies to rethink disability studies alongside and beyond the American liberal subject. I situate my work, therefore, within the realm of PanPacific American studies, drawing primarily on works from across the Pacific Rim that are in dialogue with American models of the liberal, humanist subject. In doing so, I place

⁸ See for example Nair et al.'s "Is Neurodiversity a Global Northern White Paradigm?"

⁹ Calls to move beyond a right-based focus have come in recent years with groups such as Sins Invalid forwarding a Disability Justice model originating in 2005. This model seeks to redress the many oversights of the Disability Rights Movement, taking an intersectional approach that builds on earlier intersectional movements such as the environmental justice and reproductive justice movements. As noted on Sins Invalid's website, "Rights-based strategies often address the symptoms of inequity but not the root. The root of disability oppression is ableism and we must work to understand it, combat it, and create alternative practices rooted in justice" (Billman). Key figures in the movement include Patty Berne, Mia Mingus, Leroy Moore, Stacey Milbern, Eli Clare, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. For readings on disability justice see the work of Sins Invalid, Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, Kafai 2021, and Tastrom 2024. For work that critiques rights-based models and their intertwined relationship with neoliberalism see Puar 2017.

my work in dialogue with the recent transpacific turn in American studies. In his introduction to the collection *Oceanic Archives, Indigenous Epistemology, and Transpacific American Studies*, Yuan Shu argues for an “oceanic archive” that balances interrogation of US imperialism with decolonial epistemologies. He conceptualizes the formulation of the Pacific as informed by “contradictions, competitions, and uncertainties among local and global powers, which have haunted and shaped the region to the present” (2).¹⁰ My own work takes such contradictions seriously. In doing so, I examine shared aesthetic practices that arise in the contact zones between local experiences of neurodivergent personhood and the dehumanizing logics of liberalism.

Disability Studies, Crip Studies, Affect and Neurodiversity

This dissertation is foremost rooted in the intersection of disability studies and queer studies. Disability studies as a field is broadly interested in the political and cultural construction of normative and nonnormative bodyminds.¹¹ An important contribution of the field is the distinction made between viewing disability from a medical perspective (medical model of disability) and viewing disability from a social perspective (social model of disability). The former locates disability solely in the individual and as something to cure. The latter views disability as socially mediated and constructed. How we experience and interpret disability will vary based on the environment, culture, and historical period. The

¹⁰ For more work on transpacific studies and transpacific American studies see Shu et al. 2019, Huang 2008, Giles 2018, Corbould and Emmett 2018, Dürr and Schorch 2016, Gonzales Sae-Saue 2017, Li 2023, Hornung 2025, Shu and Pease 2015, Wang 2019, and Wong et al. 2024.

¹¹ Some of this work includes work on stigma and deviance (Goffman 1963, Davis 1961, Brown 2016) as well as work on the construction of normative bodyminds (Garland-Thomson 1997, Davis 1997, Davis 2014) and the functioning of ableism (Goodley 2014).

social model moves away from an individualist framework, acknowledging that disablement is contextual and that in many cases it is society that is disabling. This model has been influential in shifting the conversation around disability from one of individual cure or struggle to a conversation about disability rights.¹²

While this shift has been invaluable, it also remains rooted in a liberal framework within the context of the US and UK. It is fruitful to discuss how disabled people construct themselves as liberal subjects. However, I am more deeply interested in how neurodivergent people question, destabilize, restructure, and even disidentify with liberal notions of the human, moving beyond hegemonic forms of interrelationality. Given this, I turn instead to critical disability studies and crip studies, two traditions of thought and practice that have been taking up queer, crip, and decolonial approaches to think and rethink how structures of power and biopolitics shape the bodymind. Both traditions are invested in radical approaches that disrupt how we think about normal and abnormal. By taking up these frameworks, I hope to further question the violence liberal models overlook and exert on marginalized bodyminds.¹³

¹² The distinction between the medical and social model has roots in the disability rights movement of the 1970s, though the first use of the term “social model” comes from Michael Oliver’s 1990 book *The Politics of Disablement*. However social concepts of disability appeared throughout the 80s and 90s (Abberley 1987, Barnes 1998). These two models remain central to the field, though a number of scholars have made moves to complicate the social model. Disability studies scholarship has offered up other models, such as those that view disability as cultural (Waldschmidt 2017), a social movement (Barnes 2016), as relational (Kafer 2013), and as complex embodiment (Siebers 2013).

¹³ For some work in critical disability studies see Connor et al. 2016, Devlin and Pothier 2006, Dowse et al. 2009, Ellis et al. 2019, Goodley 2013, Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009, Nguyen 2018, Padilla 2021, Ryan and Milton 2022, and Shildrick 2009. For relevant work in crip studies: Chandler 2013, Clare 2015 and 2017, Schalk 2013, Pickens 2023, Heisinger-Nixon 2017, Kafer 2013, McRuer 2006, Smilges 2023, and Chen et al. 2023.

In this respect, I turn instead to the model of disability offered by crip theorist Alison Kafer: the Political/Relational Model. This model locates disability not in the individual but in social environments. However, unlike the social model, Kafer's figuration is interested more broadly in how disability and ableism are relational. As Kafer points out, notions of compulsory able-bodiedness/abled-mindedness affect not just those with impairments. Rather, disability is "experienced in and through relationships..." not "isolation" (8). Similarly, my figuration of disability and neurodivergence is rooted in cultural, affective, and political economies and cannot be divorced from localized contexts.

In considering the relationality of disability, I also turn to affect studies, which ties together discussions of affect, power, interrelationality, and subjectivity that infuse my project. Affect studies focuses on what we might loosely call emotion and feeling as well as the various ways such feeling is both embodied and directed socially. Scholarship in the field has explored how affective attachments are formed, directed, and given shape.¹⁴ Importantly, theorists such as Sarah Ahmed note that affect is felt by individuals but always embedded in the social, economic, and political. Affect is thus always relational. Such affect

One example of work that looks at the violence of liberal models is Jasbir Puar's *The Right to Maim*. In her work, Puar argues that we need to attend to the ways in which neoliberal structures systemically figure certain bodies as maimable, or more likely to come to bodily harm, often in exchange for neoliberal progress. She argues that current power structures ensure that certain bodies are "slated for death or slated for debilitation" wherein "power is made visible on the body" (x). Moreover, Puar notes that the current liberal disability rights framework does not account for the ways that certain bodies are made more vulnerable to harm, thus excluding who gets included in the category of disabled. In a neoliberal, rights and identity-based society, disability fails to include certain people, and moreover, its very existence is often predicated on the exclusion of and violence towards non-white, queer, and otherwise marginalized bodyminds.

¹⁴ For work in affect studies see Ahmed 2004, Berlant 2011, Chen 2012, Massumi 2015, and Ngai 2005 among others.

is central to our lives but also can exert power and discipline the body. The affective turn in queer studies in particular has examined how queer and racialized subjects are situated in and face the discomfort of normative affect.¹⁵

In the last few years there has also been a call for an affective turn in critical disability studies. This work has explored the effects of shame and ableism on disabled people, thinking through how ableism is exerted socially and emotionally as affective disablism. As Goodley et al. note, it is important “to think about the ways in which affect economies draw disabled people and those close to them into particular ways of feeling and emoting” (206). In their work, they also argue for the importance of exploring affective logics that refuse to be subsumed within ableist notions of affect. They usefully refer to those occupying these alternative positions as affect aliens (after Ahmed), arguing that they are “alienated by the ableist logics of living a standard life and, importantly, alienating others by their presence” (211). This framework will be something I draw on in thinking about the alienation of neurodivergent ways of knowing and feeling. As much as my work is formalist, analyzing literary and rhetorical form, it also seeks to place aesthetic concerns within wider political and interrelational contexts. In so doing, my work is able to consider more capaciously the means through which neurodivergent agency is negotiated.

More broadly, in taking up an interrelational model, I will be drawing heavily on crip studies, a field that synthesizes disability studies and queer studies. This has led to work that

¹⁵ Such scholarship has also been interested in how queer people disrupt these norms, forging new forms of attachment while disrupting the binary of normative/antinormative. For scholars thinking about affect’s alienation and relationality alongside race and queerness see Sedgwick 2003, Muñoz 2006, Edelman 2004, and Puar 2007.

thinks about the historical overlap and interdependence of queerness and disability.¹⁶ Crip as a term also signals an unruly politics that questions normalcy and embraces deviance. In this sense, crip studies shares much with queer studies, even embracing the use of crip as a verb. As crip writer and theorist Eli Clare puts it “*Queer* and *cripple* are cousins: words to shock, words to infuse with pride and self-love, words to resist internalized hatred, words to help forge a politics” (*Exile* 84). Crippling, similar to queering, suggests questioning and destabilizing, it is a doing and being otherwise, a framework as well as a praxis. Crip studies will be central to my project, guiding questions about how neuronormativity is intertwined with heteronormativity and compulsory-abledness. It will also be a key lens through which I will examine the archive of texts I have assembled. For example, in considering neurodivergent aesthetics, I will analyze how hegemonic narratives are being crippled, queered, and rewritten by neurodivergence. Crip studies’ turn towards political entanglement and structures of subjectivity is central to my analysis which intertwines formalist questions of aesthetics with social political, rhetorical, and affective concerns.

Historically, the field of disability studies has been dominated by discussions of physical disability, while cognitive disability remained undertheorized. However, in recent years there has been a cognitive turn.¹⁷ Scholars have begun to consider questions such as

¹⁶ For example, Robert McRuer (2006) has articulated the way in which the heteronormative subject is always already a white and able-bodied subject. Both McRuer and other scholars such as Susana Peña (2013) have also noted the ways in which historically queerness and mental illness were conflated and used as a means to exclude immigrants.

¹⁷ While many scholars are turning to think about cognitive disability and mental illness as opposed to physical disability, other scholars have turned instead to think about the body alongside the mind, viewing them as interconnected. Many of these scholars use the term “bodymind,” which I also adopt in thinking about neurodivergence as embodied. Thinkers

how we might theorize disability with attention paid to those with cognitive disabilities who cannot represent themselves (democratically or narratively) in traditional manners.¹⁸ The aim is to find ways to represent those who cannot represent themselves and to acknowledge that there is value in such positionalities. This work raises valuable ethical and theoretical questions. My work and its focus on neurodivergence could be considered part of this body of scholarship; however, I also take issue with the way the cognitive turn (particularly the work on literature and aesthetics) has been slow to fully include the perspectives, voices, and theories of cognitively disabled individuals in favor of a neutral formalist approach.

For example, in his work on cognitive aesthetics, Michael Bérubé chooses to de-emphasize the importance of self-representation as a means of exploring the aesthetic dimensions of literary texts rather than solely focusing on concerns of character representation. He argues that disability studies scholars should move away from the assumption that disability aesthetics must always be attached to disabled individuals, authors, or characters. Interestingly, Bérubé brings up the notion of authors passing as disabled, noting that in *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner “is himself passing as disabled...” (575). However, Bérubé dismisses concerns about such passing, stating that he is not “that skeptical of Faulkner’s creation,” further noting how it impresses in him a sense of “shock and awe” (575). On the whole Bérubé opts for a strictly formalist approach that locates cognitive disability in formal aesthetics and traditional literary texts. He focuses on texts

using this framework include Alison Kafer (2013), Sami Schalk (2018), Margaret Price (2011), and Eli Clare (2017).

¹⁸ For works that explore this see Simplican 2015 or Bérubé 2016.

such as *Sound and the Fury* to examine how the presence of cognitively disabled characters and narrators disrupt and construct textual norms such as temporality and narration.

My work acknowledges the importance of such thinking, and the value of moving beyond character diagnosis. At the same time, I hope to also gesture towards the limitations of this framework for understanding neurodivergent agency. Ultimately, aesthetic representations of cognitive disability are informed (intentionally or unintentionally) by wider cultural frameworks around neurological difference. To study cognitive aesthetics in literary texts in an isolated manner risks eliding the ways any work is informed by wider political, social, and affective contexts. This is particularly so with aesthetic deployments of cognitive difference. By suggesting that we invest in neurodivergent epistemologies, I am not arguing for an entrenched identity-based understanding of neurodivergence or neurodivergent aesthetics. I also do not wish to reify liberal determinants of the human, this time formulated around biological/neurological identity.¹⁹ Rather, I hope to use this as a starting point to understand where such aesthetics move beyond purely formalist concerns to push back on and offer alternative visions to existing frameworks and epistemologies.

In this light, I align my work more closely with the writing and thinking of the neurodiversity movement and mad studies. In a neurodiversity framework, cognitive disability is viewed as a form of neurological diversity rather than inherently a deficit. The movement has roots in the autistic self-advocacy movement and like other groups often stresses the slogan “nothing about us without us.” Similarly, mad studies is rooted in the activism and thinking of those who identify as mad and mentally ill with roots in the

¹⁹ For a discussion of how neurodiversity has been more recently co-opted by neoliberal institutions reifying the bounds of normalcy through neurology see Acevedo and Stolz 2024.

psychiatric survivors movement. I will not be arguing that we can only study and understand cognitive disability and disability aesthetics by looking at creators who are out and self-identifying as such. However, I want to challenge scholars to consider what is lost when we do not also consistently and consciously invest in narratives and theories by neurodivergent individuals as a starting place. In this vein I will be in conversation with and build upon work by thinkers such as Julia Miele Rodas and Remi Yergeau whose work takes up questions of what autistic rhetoric and aesthetics look like when we value communication and thinking styles that have been traditionally seen as lacking.²⁰

Given my own positionality I will at times focus on autism as a central lens as I will do in a case study later in this introduction. However, I am also interested in other forms of neurodivergence and the way madness operates as a broad category of difference that engenders the humanist subject. In this work I cover a range of neurodivergent positionalities and psychiatric figurations, including schizophrenia, autism, depression, and psychopathy. I also turn to more broad categories such as madness, neurodivergence, and *locura*. In doing so, I will also be engaging in an intersectional approach in keeping with critical disability and crip studies frameworks. For example, cognitive disability studies has long elided the intersections of race and queerness with cognitive disability. Mad studies and critical disability studies have much more readily begun to explore these avenues, taking up calls to expand the field in transnational, decolonial, and other intersectional directions. My

²⁰ Yergeau's work focuses on the ways in which autistic people are framed as arhetorical as well as the queer possibilities of autistic rhetoric. Rodas' work notes how many of the traits that are pathologized in autistic people are prized in literary circles (i.e. repetition). Rodas explores commonly agreed upon aspects of autistic language, attempting to articulate what an understanding of autistic expression would look like when framed as rhetorical and poetic.

work similarly aims to attend to the complex political, social, and affective economies in which neurodivergence is intertwined, turning to questions of race, empire, biopolitics, and queerness throughout my chapters.²¹

Neuroqueer Aesthetics: Neurodiversity and Queer Studies

One key question that became a seed for this work was “what does a neurodivergent aesthetic look like?” The answer to this question frequently involves an exploration and theorization of neurodivergent creative and discursive practices that pose a resistant potential. Such practices are frequently employed to disrupt and queer dominant discourse and political economies. In this light, I argue that neurodivergent aesthetics are often neuroqueer aesthetics, and it is this intersection of neurodivergence and queerness that is a central focus of much of my critical analysis throughout this dissertation. In this I build on the work of scholars and thinkers such as Remi Yergeau, Nick Walker, Athena Lynn Michaels-Dillon, and Ibbly Grace who collectively coined the term “neuroqueer.” On her blog “Neuroqueer,” Nick Walker gives an expansive definition of the term. I adopt much of her framework here, while acknowledging the slippery, queer boundaries of any such definition.

Neuroqueer is both an adjective and a verb. It can be used to describe an individual whose identity intersects with both neurodivergence and queerness; however, to be

²¹ For a global approach to mad studies see Beresford and Russo 2022. For work on madness and Blackness see Pickens 2019 and Stefan 2018. For Latinx intersections see Kafai 2012 and Minich 2023. For Latin American context see Carlos Cea Madrid 2022. For mad studies and indigeneity see Tam 2013. For work on transnational crip studies see the collection *Crip Genealogies* co-edited by Mel Y. Chen, Alison Kafer, Eunjung Kim, and Julie Avril Minich. For a decolonial perspective on madness see Mills 2014, Imada 2017, and Nair et al. For work on queerness and madness see the work of Regina Kunzel.

neuroqueer also encompasses the various ways in which an individual might “[approach] one’s neurodivergence as a form of queerness,” including, for example, expressing neurodivergence in ways that disrupt and queer aspects of identity, such as gender and sexuality. Neuroqueering is also a practice, particularly a practice wherein cultural norms and conformity are challenged and transformed. As Walker notes, such practices might involve the production of “critical responses to literature and/or other cultural artifacts,” as well as the production of these artifacts by neurodivergent people. Ultimately, Walker points out that neuroqueerness is about reclaiming neurodivergent expression; at its heart is “the aim of reclaiming one’s capacity to give more full expression to one’s uniquely weird potentials and inclinations.” In their own work on neuroqueerness and autism, Remi Yergeau argues that “Autistic bodies... are bodies that not only defy social order but fail to acknowledge social order’s very existence. Autism, then, poses a kind of neuroqueer threat to normalcy, to society’s very essence (27).²² Neuroqueering entails disrupting boundaries and norms, challenging, reshaping, and undoing structures of normalcy and power. I thus take up neuroqueer as a way of understanding and theorizing the aesthetic, narrative, and discursive practices of neurodivergent people and spaces.

²² It is also notable that more autistic people identify as LGBTQIA+ than in the general population. While the reasons are currently unknown, a common theory in the autistic community is that this has to do with the fact that we do not internalize social narratives and social roles as easily as neurotypicals, so we are more likely to actively question sexuality and gender. Terms such as autigender and gendervague have arisen to convey the way in which our sense of gender identity may be complicated by our neurology. They tap into the experience of some autistic individuals who may not be able to pin down their gender because it is difficult to understand social constructs like gender in the first place (Brown; autism-asks).

Neurodivergence and Epistemology: Voice, Agency, and Contested Meanings

While this dissertation performs theoretical work tracing neuroqueer aesthetics, at its heart the project is motivated by a concern with epistemic injustice and the material effects of this marginalization. Neurodivergent people have historically faced epistemic injustice in various forms, being excluded from the knowledge-making process. Neurodivergent people's perspectives and meaning making are often viewed in pathological terms with medical experts and neurotypical people often invested in a narrative about cognitive disability that diverges sharply from the perspectives of neurodivergent people themselves.²³ This phenomenon, whereby neurodivergent people are excluded from the knowledge-making process, I argue, can be understood through Miranda Fricker's concept of "epistemic injustice"—that is, the ways in which we come to be systematically harmed in our capacity as knowers, and thus in our ability to imagine and become fully-realized selves. Such epistemic injustice impacts more than just individual understanding, but limits possibilities for thinking about the world and power systems otherwise. This has material effects on abject bodyminds including trauma and mental health difficulties, economic and social exclusion, and experiences of physical violence. Thus, this project contends with epistemic injustice and the effects of dehumanization, acknowledging that the stakes are social and material and that attempts to imagine otherwise are always political, a means of survival.

In order to contextualize my concerns, I hope to spend some pages laying out a tangible example of how neurodivergence gets caught up in processes of epistemic injustice.

²³ Neurotypical refers to those whose cognitive function and expression falls within societal norms or neuronormativity. Like any norm, neuronormativity is often a receding, unreachable horizon, an unattainable goal. Later in this dissertation I will discuss the fragility of neurotypicality as it relates to the humanist subject. For now, we can consider it as indexing those who are not classified as neurodivergent.

Autism provides an emblematic case study for thinking through this tension between neurodivergent agency and epistemic injustice. With this in mind, I hope to offer a sketch of how autism has historically been, and continues to be, a contested site of meaning in Western contexts. That is, how narratives of neurodivergence are currently being shaped and disputed, often while excluding neurodivergent epistemologies.

The story of autism in the public consciousness is largely stereotypical. There is a significant discrepancy between how autistic people are portrayed and how they perceive themselves. In her work on media depiction of autism, Jennifer C. Sarrett notes that early research on autism, beginning in the 1960s, generated specific tropes about autism (such as associations of autism with imprisonment and fragmentation) that persist today. She notes that despite shifts in scientific practice (from psychogenic to biological models) these tropes still persist through their popularization in media. Much of the public's understanding of autism comes from this pathologized lens, wherein autism is viewed from an outside perspective rather than incorporating autistic self-understanding. Research on autism and news coverage, for example, has shown that readers “get a skewed image of autism and what it entails” (Billawala and Wolbring; Jones and Harwood; Huws and Jones). There is a clear discrepancy between autism as an embodied reality and autism as it is understood in the public consciousness.

Even among the relatives of autistic people, understanding of the autistic perspective can be limited. One study by Johnson et al. found that autistic youths described their autistic traits differently than their parents did, with the youths noting fewer autistic traits and citing more empathy. This is not so surprising given that, despite the common myth that autistic people lack empathy altogether, many in the autistic community discuss having hyper

empathy. Unfortunately, this is a myth that many parents of autistics still prescribe to themselves, whether explicitly or implicitly, leading to conflicting reports of empathy.²⁴ Such discrepancies in understanding autism are also reflected in the differing views parents and autistic people have on cure. One survey of 11,521 respondents, conducted by autistic self-advocate Chris Bonello found that while the majority of autistic people strongly oppose a cure for autism, in relatives of autistic people, only 16.27% of respondents strongly opposed a cure, with 22.16% strongly agreeing that they would give a cure to their autistic relative if it were available. This shows a discrepancy between the autistic community, which largely frames autism as a part of our identities, and non-autistics (allistics) who frequently view autism as a pathology.²⁵

Within the realm of literature, film, television, and popular media, depictions of autism also trend towards stereotypes, such as a lack of empathy, isolation, lack of self-awareness and/or a lack of awareness of others, and general suffering. When media

²⁴ To be clear, this is not to say that there are not hypo-empathetic autistic people. Constructions of empathy are tied closely to the humanist subject, so it becomes important not to reify the idea that empathy is needed. The point here, however, is to demonstrate the way pathologizing discourses around autism have led to a significant gap between external perceptions and self-understanding.

²⁵ The survey question allowed respondents to reply as “strongly agreeing”, “agreeing”, “neither/not applicable”, “disagree”, and “strongly agree.” As Bonello notes, relatives’ responses were fairly evenly distributed with a slight leaning towards favoring cure. He comments, “This would imply that the debate about autism cure has no general consensus at all...except of course, from actual autistic people.” Anticipating pro-cure arguments that might argue this only applies to “high-functioning” autistics, Bonello broke up the data to demonstrate that among nonverbal/selective mute autistics and autistics with learning difficulties there was strong disagreement with cure (at 59.32% and 50.78% respectively). Bonello’s survey also found similar results to the Johnson et al. study on perceptions of empathy. Bonello looked at how autistic respondents described their empathy in comparison to how non-autistic respondents described the empathy of their autistic relatives. While 65.84% of autistics said they felt intense empathy, almost half of allistics responded that their autistic relatives lacked empathy or had both hypo- and hyper- empathy.

depictions do expand beyond these narrow stereotypes, they are often focused not on the autistic character but on how the character's autism affects those around them. In other words, these depictions present stories about neurotypicals not stories about autistic people or their experiences. Such narratives have little interest in exploring the character beyond their autism. This fits a trend often remarked on in disability studies wherein representations of disability proliferate in our media landscape but often only show up in stereotypical ways—the supercrip, inspiration porn, the angel, the robot. Scholars such as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder note how narrative is often reliant on disability to create meaning, turning disability into a metaphor rather than a meaningful exploration of disability as an embodied experience. They call this trend “narrative prosthesis.” Scholars and autistic advocates have further noted that media representations of autism are limited and often rely on troubling metaphors that frame autism as separable from the individual. In her work, autistic self-advocate Zoe Gross notes how autism is often framed with metaphors that turn autism into an outside agent such that we commonly hear phrases like: “‘we are fighting against autism.’ ‘He is behind the wall of autism.’ ‘Autism stole my child’” (258). She notes how autism becomes separated from the individual and how it is given agency (as opposed to the autistic person who is seen as a victim) through metaphors of war, kidnapping, barriers, and death.²⁶

²⁶ Groups such as Autism Speaks have been hugely influential in spreading these metaphors. Take for example their infamous “I Am Autism” video from 2009 in which one hears lines such as “I work faster than pediatric aids, cancer, and diabetes combined. And if you’re happily married, I will make sure that your marriage fails. Your money will fall into my hands, and I will bankrupt you for my own self-gain” (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, “Horrific”). While the video is unlisted, it still remains on the organization’s YouTube page, and no apology has ever been issued. While the organization has shifted some of their rhetoric to avoid the worst backlash, they still disregard autistic voices and promote negative views of autism. For example, their “100 Day Tool Kit” for recently diagnosed children

All of this demonstrates that there is a large discrepancy between how autism is portrayed and narrativized in media or public discourse and the frameworks through which autistic people understand themselves. As Sarrett notes, there are “two divergent ‘realities’ of autism being disseminated into the general public” (141). This discrepancy is a result of two competing frameworks or models of cognitive disability: the medical model and the neurodiversity model. The dominant narrative surrounding autism follows the medical model, which views disability, including autism and other neurological differences, as individual pathologies in need of cure. Historically, autism has been framed through psychiatry and the desire to label behavioral and functional differences in order to cure them or normalize them. Take, for example, how many researchers are still working on finding the genetic underpinnings of autism in order to cure it. Given that no such cure has been found, the medical establishment turns instead to Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA), the current “Gold Star” treatment for autism. ABA aims to teach neurotypical social behavior to autistics, particularly autistic children. However, despite its reputation, ABA is highly opposed by much of the autistic community, who view ABA as abusive given that its central aim is to make autistic people appear and behave like neurotypicals through behavioral modifications.²⁷

promotes metaphors of death by telling parents that they should go through the Kübler-Ross stages of grief as if their child has died (Luterman).

²⁷ ABA therapy attempts to change visible autistic behaviors while not addressing or understanding the reasons why we may behave this way in the first place (for example, stimming). It is common in the autistic community to refer to ABA as autistic conversion therapy. This is not hyperbole given that ABA has the same roots as gay conversion therapy. ABA was designed by Ivar Lovaas who was heavily involved in the Feminine Boy Project. A recent study has also linked ABA therapy to increased likelihood of PTSD, confirming the claims of many autistics who received ABA therapy themselves (Kupferstein).

In contrast to the medical framework for autism, many in the autistic community prescribe to the Neurodiversity Model. This model frames autism as an integral part of our identities, not something to remove, cure, or hide. The neurodiversity model takes as its starting point the idea that neurological diversity is valuable and that no form of cognitive function is better or worse than another. The model has been taken up by the Neurodiversity Movement, a social justice movement seeking civil rights, respect, inclusion, and equality for neurodivergent people. The Neurodiversity Movement has its roots in and grew out of the Autistic Self-Advocacy Movement (also known as the Autistic Rights Movement) which began in the 1990s.

Some mark the start of these movements in 1993 with the publication of Jim Sinclair's essay "Don't Mourn for Us," which addressed parent and professional communities that framed autism as a tragedy. At the time, many parent-led organizations were heavily invested in framing autism as a medical issue. This was due to how previous theories of autism, such as the "refrigerator mother" theory, directly blamed parents, particularly mothers, for causing their children's autism through cold dispositions (Rosenblatt). In response to this now debunked theory, early organizations that were parent-run focused heavily on medical models to avoid the previous stigma. This has led to a large portion of the parent and caretaker community subscribing to a medical model of autism, working with professionals in attempts to "cure" their "lost" children. While divisions between the perspectives of autistic people and the perspectives of parents and professionals are beginning to lessen, these divisions still exist today. The Autistic Self-Advocacy movement arose partially in opposition to parent and professional-led groups that historically excluded autistic voices and perspectives (Sinclair, "Autism Network

International”). The movement highlights the importance of autistic voices, and advocates for viewing autism as a neurological difference not a deficit. In the late 1990s the term “neurological diversity” began to appear in early online autistic communities (Botha et al.). Around this time, “neurodiversity” was also coined by autistic sociologist Judy Singer.²⁸ Since then, the Neurodiversity Movement has expanded to include all forms of neurodivergence (such as ADHD, mental illnesses, learning disabilities, and intellectual disabilities). Despite the growth of the movement since the 1990s, the neurodiversity model is only just emerging as a framework to be taken more seriously by researchers and scholars.²⁹

Although not all understandings of autism fit neatly into a medical or neurodiversity model, we can see the way in which the meaning of autism is constructed by these two competing frameworks. Philosopher Ian Hacking has described this dynamic as a type of looping, wherein types or classifications of the human (ex. Schizophrenia, autism, etc.) are formally articulated via science and psychiatry before being reinforced or altered by the behavior of those classified. This creates opportunities to create new loops, to alter these

²⁸ The origin of the term “neurodiversity” is attributed to autistic sociologist Judy Singer who published work on the topic in 1998 and 1999. Recent scholarship by Botha et al. (2024) notes that the precursor term “neurological diversity” appeared in print as early as 1997 by journalist Harvey Blume who was writing about the term’s appearance in online communities such as “Institute for the Study of the Neurologically Typical.”

²⁹ For a historical overview and perspectives from members of the neurodiversity movement see Kapp 2020. For essays on neurodiversity studies broadly see Rosqvist et al. 2020. For work on neurodiversity and literary studies see Rodas 2018, Irish 2025 (*Literary Neurodiversity Studies*), Battis 2021, and Bergenmar et al. 2025. For works on neurodiversity in sciences and medicine see Thorp 2024, Curran 2025, and Jackson-Perry and Rosqvist 2024. For work on neurodiversity and historical scholarship see Marks and Irish 2026 and Irish 2025 (“Historical Neurodiversity Studies”). For work on neurodiversity politics see Baker 2011 and Ne’eman and Pellicano 2022. For work on neurodiversity and capitalism see Chapman 2023.

categories, though it is typically not without friction. It should also be noted that the power dynamics at play in this looping are far from neutral. The medical model is institutionalized and holds power over neurodivergent lives, both in terms of how autism is defined but also in regard to the lived consequences of how autism is understood and regulated. Autistics still face shame, conversion therapies, involuntary commitment, filicide, police brutality, seclusion and restraint in schools, high unemployment and poverty rates, high rates of suicide and mental health struggles, and torture.³⁰ In the US, most of the funding for autism goes towards research on genetics and cures rather than towards providing supports or research aimed at improving quality of life.³¹ It is clear in this light that the power is often

³⁰ In terms of torture I refer specifically to the Judge Rotenberg Center in Massachusetts, which at the time of writing this has not been stopped from using electric skin shock on children and adults with developmental disabilities. The FDA has determined that such devices should be banned but has not yet taken action to stop the torture at the time of writing this dissertation. Regarding filicide, the Autistic Self Advocacy Network notes that in the last five years, over 548 people with disabilities have been murdered by their parents, relatives or caregivers” (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, “2026 Anti-Filicide Toolkit” 5). Each year on March 1st activists hold Disability Day of Mourning to honor victims of filicide. In regard to seclusion and restraint, these are practices still used in many schools with disabled students of color being the primary victims. While these practices are banned in some US states, there is no federal law to prevent them. From 2011-2012 over 267,000 cases of restraint and seclusion were reported nationwide, 75% of which involved disabled students. A 2009 report found “hundreds of cases of abuse, including at least 20 deaths,” and a study that looked at restraint from 1993 to 2018 found seventy-nine deaths (Shapiro, Nunno et al.).

³¹ The Autism CARES Act (The Autism Collaboration, Accountability, Research, Education and Support Act), previously known as The Combating Autism Act, is a bill that provides the majority of funding for autism research, education, and support in the US. Most of this funding goes to research and organizations invested in the medical model of disability. Despite autistic advocates trying to push forward more support for other types of funding, in 2014, Autism Speaks lobbied against “the inclusion of provisions expanding self-advocate representation in research, re-balancing autism research funding to support additional investments in services and adult issues, and requiring the LEND programs to attempt to recruit trainees on the autism spectrum and with other developmental disabilities” (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, “ASAN Statement on Autism CARES Act”).

balanced against the autistic community and their values. The meaning of autism thus becomes a contested space wherein one party's voice is given substantially more weight while the other's is frequently discounted.

In examining voice, I take my cue from Richard Ruiz and his work on multilingual education. Here, I frame voice as the ability of an individual or group to both speak and be heard. Importantly, Ruiz notes that access to voice is not always a result of having access to language, just as voice is neither expressed nor suppressed solely through language. Ruiz writes,

Language has a life of its own—it exists even when it is suppressed; when *voice* is suppressed, it is not heard—it does not exist. To deny people their language...is, to be sure, to deny them voice; but, to allow them 'their' language...is not necessarily to allow them voice. Indeed, this may be the most evil form of colonialism, because everyone, even the colonizers themselves, recognize it as just the opposite. To have a voice implies not just that people can say things, but that they are heard. (321)

As Ruiz's thinking helps illuminate, the voices of autistic people are often suppressed in two ways: firstly, through the denial of language and secondly through a tendency to ignore what autistic people communicate. Ruiz is thinking about these ideas through a lens of multilingual teaching praxis, particularly within a colonial history of English-only policies; however, these concepts are also useful for conceptualizing the ways in which autistic people are denied both language and voice.

It is all too common that autistic communication is not viewed as language. Often if an autistic person is nonverbal or semi-verbal then they are viewed as non-communicative. It is assumed that if an autistic person is non-speaking, or not speaking in normative ways,

that they are lacking in language. As Remi Yergeau notes in their work *Authoring Autism*, “...autism is typically characterized as that which contrasts—as that which contrasts with language, humanness, empathy, self-knowledge, understanding, and rhetoricity” (2). The way in which autistics are denied language is evident when it comes to the common autistic practice of stimming (also known as self-stimulatory behaviors). Stimming is often a way for autistic people to regulate our sensory experience by engaging in sensory stimulation. However, it is also how we use our bodies to communicate with the world around us, to engage in the world in intersubjective ways and to express our emotions and inner life. In their blog *Musings of an Aspie*, autistic self-advocate Cynthia Kim notes, for example, “My stims are a language unto themselves.” In contrast to this viewpoint, the medical community classifies and pathologizes stimming as “stereotyped or repetitive motor movements” (CDC). Many ABA programs make it a point to limit stimming and other autistic expressions, which they interpret as troublesome or challenging behavior rather than communication.³²

It has become a common refrain in the autistic community that “behavior is communication”—a fact well known by those who study allistic communication practices but something which is quickly forgotten when it comes to autism. The late Mel Baggs, a non-speaking autistic and disability self-advocate, pointed out this double standard, noting in

³² A common phrase used historically in some forms of ABA is “quiet hands.” This phrase was used when forcing children to not move or flap their hands (a common form of autistic stimming and expression). The aim is to make autistics appear neurotypical, while emphasizing verbal communication as the only acceptable norm. Such methods are viewed as therapeutic and successful; however, they are only successful in so far as they stop autistics from being able to communicate and express themselves in the ways that come naturally to them. The title of the anthology *Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking* released by the Autistic Self Advocacy Network in 2012 is a direct response to these methods and the phrase “quiet hands.”

hir video essay “In My Language,” that “We are even viewed as non-communicative if we don't speak the standard language, but other people are not considered non-communicative if they are so oblivious to our own languages as to believe they don't exist” (“In My Language,” 00:06:47-00:07:00). In the eyes of many allistics, autistic communication is all too frequently considered non-language.

However, even when our communication is recognized as language, we are frequently denied the privilege of being heard. Rather, autistic people are pushed to the margins in such a way that we are not fully allowed to be active co-creators of our narratives. In other words, we are denied voice. Autistic writers, speakers, activists, and individuals are infrequently seen as credible in their own accounts of autism. We are unable to express our needs or even define our own self-hood without being censored or silenced. Many individuals give accounts of dealing with professionals who have told them that they cannot be autistic because of their very ability to self-reflect and give accounts of their own experiences. Many allistics, including some parents of autistic children and researchers, argue that if an autistic individual can articulate their thoughts, needs, or experiences, then they are too “high functioning” to know what it is like to have “real autism.”³³ They then argue that the autistics they deem to be “low functioning” cannot communicate for themselves, so allistics must speak for them. In other words, if you deny them language, then you can deny them voice.

³³ Much of the autistic community has moved away from functioning labels as they are not perceived as an accurate reflection of autistic reality or the ways our individual ability to function may fluctuate based on the circumstances. Others argue that such labels reinforce stereotypes and lead to further dehumanization towards those most marginalized in the community (Sequenzia; Brechin).

Speaking to this dynamic, Jim Sinclair notes how such tactics have commonly been used to discredit various disability and self-advocacy movements. Sinclair comments that “many of us have been told that the very fact that we are able to express ourselves, object to the ways our freedom has been restricted or our rights violated, and demand change proves that we cannot truly be autistic, or learning disabled, or psychiatrically impaired” (Sinclair, “Autism Network International 34). In their work, Remi Yergeau similarly argues that autistics are frequently framed as non-rhetorical, noting how our narrative authority is undermined through a form of “demi-rhetorical halving.” Yergeau points out that “It’s not that autistics are not autistic—it’s more that autistics have too much autism and not enough autism, all at the same time, and this makes them inherently unreliable, inherently and rhetorically halved” (51). Because of this, so-called allistic “experts” and parents are given the authority to narrate our lives for us or even against us. At the same time, we are framed as non-rhetorical in ways that deny narrative agency and voice.

While our voices are pushed to the margins, it is others who get to define autism for us. We see ableist institutions like Autism Speaks constructing narratives where autism is seen as an invasive disease to be eradicated rather than a defining component of an individual’s personhood. We see research on autism which continues to ignore our explanations and needs whilst purporting harmful theories that autistics lack theory of mind and empathy. We see the continuation of ABA therapy and other behaviorist models despite vocal opposition from autistics who view the practice as abusive. We see books written by parents or other allistics dominating the discourse, while autistic folks find it exceedingly

difficult to be published in mainstream channels.³⁴ Meanwhile, actually autistic folks are left out (both as authors and participants) of the ever-shifting social myth of what it means to be autistic and what it means to be human. Instead, we are left with a collapsed, narrow, and often highly ableist idea of what autism is and can be. This creates an abject image of the autistic, an image in which we are never really allowed to perceive subjecthood. Autistic folks are thus alienated from ourselves. For many individuals coming to understand that they are autistic later in life, this lack of a truly representative social narrative excludes us from knowing ourselves, as most of us will never see ourselves, or even think to see ourselves in this image.

To return to the start of this section, this phenomenon, whereby we are excluded from the knowledge-making process, can be understood through Miranda Fricker's concept of *epistemic injustice*. Fricker identifies two forms of epistemic injustice, both which are in play in limiting autistic productions of knowledge. These are testimonial and hermeneutic injustice, which Fricker defines as follows: "Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word; hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts

³⁴ Take, for example, the book *To Siri with Love: A Mother, Her Autistic Son, and the Kindness of Machines* by Judith Newman, which was deemed a New York Times Notable Book of 2017. Despite praise from mainstream outlets, the book was lambasted by the autistic community for its ableism, resulting in the hashtag campaign #BoycotToSiri. The book, in which the neurotypical Judith narrates her experiences with her thirteen-year-old autistic son, included, among other things, Judith proposing to have her son forcibly sterilized. Books such as these are not so uncommon, and autistic author Kaelan Rhywiol notes how, in contrast, actually autistic authors have a difficult time finding publishers. Rhywiol has a chapter-by-chapter review of the book if you want a more in-depth look at the type of ableist rhetoric these works include. [@KaelanRhy](https://web.archive.org/web/20221118195122/https://twitter.com/KaelanRhy/status/936316968411439105)

someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (1).³⁵ That is, in the way in which autistic folks are systematically rendered unrhetorical, and unreliable narrators, we are subject to a testimonial injustice, harmed in our ability to create and contribute knowledge. Our contribution to knowledge is valued below other ‘authoritative’ allistic narratives. This leads in turn to a distinct hermeneutical injustice, whereby we come to lack the interpretive resources we need to understand our own experiences.

Despite the ways in which neurodivergent people are often denied voice and agency, there are still ways in which we are pushing back from the margins. In the face of hermeneutical injustice, neurodivergent people are finding resourceful ways to create knowledge, articulate their experiences, and alter existing narratives about autism. As the Neurodiversity and Self-Advocacy Movements continue to gain steam, it is possible that our voices will become more mainstream. Such resistance is happening in grassroots spaces: through blogs, social media, fandom, and activism. Some of the earliest autistic community and advocacy began in online spaces, through email lists and forums within larger, parent-run autism organizations.³⁶ Today autistics have formed their own autistic-run organizations

³⁵ In her work, Fricker uses the treatment of Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird* as an example of testimonial injustice. She notes that his court testimony is dismissed by the white jury based on racism and the perception of Tom as untrustworthy because he is black. Fricker explains hermeneutic injustice by looking at the introduction of the term/concept of sexual harassment in the 1970s. Prior to this, victims of sexual harassment would not have the language to articulate their experience. This signals for Fricker the way in which women have often been excluded from knowledge-creating processes that help us to make sense of the human experience.

³⁶ Though, soon these same organizations attempted to stifle this organization. For more on this history, see Jim Sinclair’s article on the Autism Network International in *Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking*.

(ex. the Autistic Self Advocacy Network and The Autistic Women and Nonbinary Network) and their own social media spaces organized around the hashtag #actuallyautistic. Despite the challenges, the Neurodiversity Movement continues to grow. As I have noted, the meaning of autism is a contested space. Within this contested space, autistic perspectives and understandings are simultaneously marginalized and full of resistant potential. In response to the challenges we face, neurodivergent folks have found resourceful, creative, and inventive ways to push back and harness our agency. It is my aim through this dissertation to explore these methods of resistance both within autistic and other neurodivergent spaces.

Dissertation Overview and Chapter Summaries

This dissertation consists of four chapters tracing neurodivergent and neuroqueer aesthetics. While there are many ways to connect each chapter, I have organized them as a means to sketch out two overall aesthetic techniques that I believe serve as neuroqueer tools. The first, which binds chapters one and two, is “going mad”—a phrase I use here to describe a) how neurodivergence is constructed as dangerous, abject, and epistemologically unsound, and b) how neurodivergent aesthetics reclaim processes of going mad, embracing neurodivergence and the possibilities found in the abject as a space for reimagining agency.

My first chapter, “Masked Horrors and the Horror of Masking: On Slashers and Neurodivergence from *Halloween* (1978) to Thailand’s *Dead Friend Forever* (2023),” examines how dehumanizing rhetoric around neurodivergence has been taken up and further circulated through horror media, particularly the slasher genre. I place particular focus on the rhetorical role masks play in reaffirming neurotypical anxieties around hidden mental illness, including in American psychologist Hervey Cleckley’s 1941 text on psychopathy,

The Mask of Sanity. I then draw a throughline between psychiatric discourse and popular culture via the paradigmatic American horror film *Halloween* (1978). In close reading the film, I pay close attention to the depiction of Micheal Myers, the story's unfeeling villain. His featureless white mask, I argue, stands in for neurotypical anxieties around emotional norms and humanist subjectivity, while depicting neurodivergence as unhuman(e). In the second half of the chapter, I turn to another piece of horror media that takes up and critiques this tradition: Thai horror television series *Dead Friend Forever* (*Phuean Tai DFF*, 2023-2024). This series, I argue, offers a new framework for considering masks and (a)sociality within horror media, offering a critique of social violence, abjection, and monstrosity. Crucially, I demonstrate how the show aligns with emerging epistemologies within neurodivergent cultural spaces, where "masking" now refers to how we may try to socially pass as neurotypical. This usage reverses the source of horror, revealing neurodivergent masking as a self-protective and self-injurious form of survival, rather than a sign of hidden monstrosity. Through my analysis I articulate the neuroqueer rhetorical practice of *unmasking*, an embrace of madness that highlights social violence, the performative nature of sociality, and our shared culpability in these structures.

In chapter two, "Tenemos Que Enloquecer: Silence, Debility, and Mad Latinx Aesthetics," I turn to the framework of *loca epistemologies*—a concept rooted in Latinx feminist thinking and named by Peruvian and Mexican American Diosa Femme and Chicana Mala Muñoz in their podcast *Locatora Radio*. I place their feminist grounding in conversation with other uses of the terms "loca" and "locura" (roughly translated as "crazy female" and "craziness"), and the way it signals both pathologization and a political epistemology that embraces madness and abjection. I turn to an archive of *locos/as* to

examine a neuroqueer aesthetic rooted in Latinx bodyminds and political structures. In doing so, I build on calls from neurodiversity studies and mad studies to move beyond White, Western conceptualizations, turning instead to the historical and contextual particularities that entwine mad Latinx bodyminds. My analysis centers on a close reading of two texts: the poem *Canto de la locura* (*Song of Madness*) by Puerto Rican prison poet turned mental patient Francisco Matos Paoli and Mexican American Ramón García's 1999 short story "Amor Indio: Juan Diego of San Diego"—which examines the intersections of queerness, *locura*, and el SIDA (the HIV epidemic). I examine how both works use *locura* to speak back to politics of erasure that are invested in empire, biopolitics, debility, and death. I term these processes of erasure, *locamaking*, articulating the ways in which Latinx bodyminds are rendered materially, rhetorically, and affectively abject. These texts, I argue, work to visibilize these processes while also making an ethical demand that we all go mad.

Tying together the final two chapters is a second key concept: "neuroplay." Neuroplay or "neuroclowning" was introduced by Simone René Antillón as a way of theorizing neuroqueer practices. Neuroplay is "the process of tinkering with one's neurological embodiment, in a playful, childlike way," whilst accepting that, in doing so, you might fail to meet hegemonic expectations. Building off Jack Halberstam's work *The Queer Art of Failure*, Antillón argues that "neurodivergence is a failure" given that there is an "association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique" (Antillón; Halberstam 89). Antillón further pulls on Halberstam's notion of the "silly archives," extending this archive to include clowning, improvisation, and play. This in Halberstam's words, "[opens] up new narrative opportunities" and "[leads] to unexpected encounters between the childish, the

transformative, and the queer” (Halberstam 186). Neuroplay, I argue, can also include the process of tinkering with and playing with narrative and discourse. In this light, I view neuroplay as a mode wherein narrative and form come to be played with, commented on, engaged with, and transformed to a radical degree within and through neurodivergent practices. Such practices emerge in chapters three and four of this dissertation.

In chapter three, “It’s All in Your Headcanon: Neuroqueering Online Fandom,” I examine how neuroqueer individuals are using digital spaces to disrupt and queer rhetoric surrounding difference and subjectivity. Situating my study within the field of fan studies, I examine how neurodivergence serves as an overlooked but foundational aesthetic and structuring logic of fandom. I argue that neuroplay as an aesthetic and affective practice not only thrives in fandom but is essential to its ability to function as a transformative and resistant space. In this I draw on the work of fan studies scholars such as Indian critic Rukmini Pande, whose work moves beyond the field’s focus on gender and sexuality to envision fandom as a postcolonial cyberspace. In the chapter, I grapple with a contradiction: the way in which autism is frequently associated with nerdiness in the public consciousness yet spaces like fandom are rarely envisioned as a place in which autistic people are actors and creators. Thus, the chapter as a whole puts forth an argument for rethinking fandom as a space informed by autistic and neuroqueer aesthetic practices. In this vein, I propose that digital fandom spaces have begun to reshape how we tell neuroqueer stories. I examine how this change in storytelling is playing out in digital fandom by examining the ways in which autistic fans on Tumblr come to identify and articulate characters as autistic. In doing so, I analyze posts from a corpus of around eighty Tumblr posts that I archived from 2018-2022. I argue that the interpretation of characters as autistic, particularly when these characters

would otherwise be assumed to be neurotypical, serves as a rhetorical and neuroqueer form of neurohacking, whereby we are asked to reconceptualize our understanding of the character and autism from an embodied, neurodivergent perspective.

My final chapter, “Painful Play: Neuroqueer Narratives and Self-Awareness in Qiu Miaojin’s *Notes of a Crocodile* and Hannah Gadsby’s *Nanette*,” continues to examine the neurodivergent potential to queer and crip narrative form through neuroplay. In this chapter, I look at the 1994 Taiwanese novel *Notes of a Crocodile* and Hannah Gadsby’s 2018 stand-up special *Nanette*. I read both works as neuroqueer narratives paradigmatic of a particular cognitive disability aesthetic that is at once transnational and rooted in local contexts. Through my reading of these two texts, I demonstrate how self-awareness and narrative awareness (both textual and social) constitute an essential cognitive disability aesthetic despite assumptions that often frame neurodivergence as solely equated with mindlessness. Building upon Michael Bérubé’s claim that cognitive disability disrupts our assumptions about narrative, I argue that self-awareness and metatextuality are essential tools employed by neurodivergent creators to queer both literary and social narratives. Importantly I also explore how both texts offer a playfulness, taking up modes of camp and standup respectively, while also undercutting this aesthetic through discussions of pain and trauma. Thus, both texts offer a more tender form of neuroplay. Both texts then employ self-awareness as a form of neuroplay that produces an oppositional gaze. In doing so, they make an ethical demand of the audience, asking them to take on the weight of awareness themselves—a burden typically reserved for the marginalized.

I close this dissertation with a short meditation on the ground this dissertation has covered and where I hope to expand my thinking in the future. The conclusion, “A Queer

Sort of Queerness: Queer Personalities and the Humanist Subject” begins with a meditation on the work of American psychiatrist Karl A. Menninger, particularly his classification of “queer personalities.” I consider how his work, progressive for the time, queered psychiatric norms while also reifying categories of difference. While Menninger moved away from eugenic conceptions of “normal,” arguing we all have abnormal or queer traits, he also envisioned individuals whose abnormal traits are taken too far, making them truly queer. I argue that Menninger’s work builds on anxieties around proper human sociality, interrelationality, and affect. I thus propose in future work to more fully trace this model of the human, which I term the “Empathetic Subject,” through US history and across the PanPacific. I finally wrap up with a consideration of what neuroqueer possibilities my own work has opened up.

Chapter 1

Masked Horrors and the Horror of Masking: On Slashers and Neurodivergence from *Halloween* (1978) to *Dead Friend Forever* (2023)

The 1978 film *Halloween* is often credited with sparking the golden age of slasher horror. The film popularized key tropes of the genre, including the role of an unfeeling masked killer. Director John Carpenter has explained that his inspiration for the “blank, pale, emotionless face” of the film’s villain, Micheal Myers, came when he visited a psychiatric institution and saw a boy with a “schizophrenic stare” (*Halloween* 00:39:05-00:39:05, *Halloween: A Cut Above* 00:28:52). As scholars reflecting on disability representation have noted, horror films have historically relied on and perpetuated stigma towards neurodivergence. This trend is most salient when mental illness is used to explain a villain’s violent actions. However, this stigma is also prevalent in the way films uphold notions of affective and emotional deficiency, often symbolized through masks in the slasher genre. As I demonstrate in this chapter, masks in horror films like *Halloween* help to play out neurotypical anxieties around encounters with difference.

On the other hand, the metaphor of the mask takes on a different meaning in neurodivergent, particularly autistic, cultural spaces where it refers to the ways we might try, consciously or not, to hide our differences by performing neuronormativity. Such masking is often an act of survival that comes with a psychological toll. If in the slasher, the masked mentally ill villain leaves his final victim traumatized, in the real world, this trauma is inverted. In this chapter, I explore the interconnection between neurodivergence and tropes of masking. The first half of this chapter is dedicated to tracing the emergence of this discourse, from mid-1900s psychiatry to popular horror cinema. I pay close attention to the

film *Halloween* (1978) and the slasher genre as they popularized the iconic role of an unfeeling, mentally ill, masked killer. Through my close reading I contend with the way in which films like *Halloween* use masks to evoke neuronormative fears about encounters with neurological difference. In the second half of this chapter, I turn to contemporary work that takes up such iconography only to rework and destabilize these tropes. Recent Thai horror series, *Dead Friend Forever* (เพื่อนตาย DFF/*Phuean Tai DFF*), takes up themes of masks, neurodivergence, and the failure of communal care in ways that resonate more closely with the experiences of autistic and neurodivergent masking in a neuronormative world. Through my analysis of the series, I articulate the neuroqueer rhetorical practice of *unmasking*, an embrace of madness that highlights social violence, the performative nature of sociality, and our shared culpability in these structures.

Disability Studies, Horror Studies, and the Evolution of the Psychokiller

Depictions of disability proliferate in the horror genre—from the disfigured bodies of Frankenstein’s monster and Freddy Krueger (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*) to the disturbed minds of Henry Jekyll (*Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*) and Norman Bates (*Psycho*). When it comes to neurodivergence, mental illness is often used to explain a villain’s violent actions, or perhaps doubly so to evoke our horror in anticipation of such violence. When the mental patient breaks out of the asylum at the start of a slasher film, for example, we already know, despite what twists or turns the film might bring, that we should be fearful, ready for violence to come. Meanwhile, the victims, should they survive, are always balancing on the precipice of a mental break themselves. Even in films that seek to

unsettle our expectations of what or who is monstrous, mental disability is often framed as a punishment.³⁷

Such depictions are often interpreted through the lens of narrative prosthesis, wherein disability operates primarily as a grotesque metaphorical sign of moral corruption.³⁸ Horror then takes up disability as a metaphor while using its visual language to elicit emotions of fear and disgust in viewers. It is perhaps no surprise then that the field of scholarship on disability and horror remains quite small. As film and culture scholar David Church notes, “The fantastic film seems dismissed from critical attention in disability studies because it bears so many resemblances to the disreputable phenomenon of the freak show.” Church points to this as a key reason why disability studies scholars tend to gravitate towards realist fiction over fantastic genres such as fantasy, horror, and the speculative.³⁹

This movement away from horror, and fantastic genres more generally, is perhaps also informed by a belief that disability studies analysis has little more to offer or gain than a broad critique of ableist tropes. I would push back on this in two key ways. First, central to this project is a belief that popular representations offer a dynamic insight into rhetorical,

³⁷ Take for example the 2004 Thai film *Shutter*, where a photographer (Tun) and his girlfriend (Jane) are haunted by a vengeful spirit. In a twist, the real “monster” in the story is Tun, who photographed his ex-girlfriend Natre’s rape. His punishment is made clear in the final scenes of the film. After falling out the window of his apartment, we find Tun in a mental ward. The ghost of Natre continues to haunt him, weighing on his back, while we can see stitches and bandages on his head. He stares blankly forward, signaling an acquired cognitive disability, a fate considered worse than death, via a distinct lack of affect.

³⁸ For more on narrative prosthesis see Mitchell and Snyder 2000. For work on physical disability and the grotesque see Rosemarie Garland-Thomson 1997.

³⁹ On the other hand, the field of horror studies has often overlooked disability, continuing to read it primarily as a metaphor for other forms of alterity, such as femininity, queerness, and race.

political, and affective economies that construct the human(e). When considered alongside broader historical, rhetorical, and political contexts, analysis of such texts has much to offer in regard to the complexities of how disability is figured. Horror in particular is a highly affective genre with much to say about how difference gets figured affectively and rhetorically. It is for this reason that I center the first half of this chapter on a critique of neuroableist tropes in horror. My aim is not to reiterate or further entrench a broad, flat claim that horror employs problematic depictions of disability. Instead, I hope to demonstrate how such tropes function in dialogue with wider psychiatric and public understandings of neurodivergent subjectivity. I do indeed argue that such depictions are dehumanizing, but more importantly, I point to the particular mechanisms and broader discourses that enable such depictions in the first place. In this respect, turning towards horror, even from a critical position, is productive, offering insight into neurodivergence's abject placement in relation to the humanist subject.

Secondly, I choose to embrace horror for its crip possibilities. No genre is static; there are infinite opportunities for works that push back, even in part, on the norms of horror. As Sami Schalk notes in her work on disability and race in speculative fiction (in which she includes horror), "The focus on realism as the proper or preferred avenue for politically effective literature for marginalized groups like black women and disabled people overlooks the immense possibilities of speculative fiction as well as the limits of realism" (19). In her own work on horror, disability, and eugenics, Angela M. Smith has noted that many horror films cannot easily be situated into distinct ableist or anti-ableist categories. She gives mad scientist films as an example. Despite often operating amidst eugenic logics, such films also force us to acknowledge the limitations of human control as scientists prove

unable in the end to create a more perfect human. These films thus undercut their own eugenic impulses leaving us with a multifaceted text that offers multiple co-existing interpretations (Smith *Hideous Progeny*, “Episode 002”). As a diverse genre, horror has also historically been capacious enough to include texts that refuse to reduce the marginalized to the monstrous. Disability studies scholar Melinda Hall has discussed this alternative tradition of horror, pointing to works such as *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) and *Carrie* (1976) as texts that offer a form of “reversed empathy.” Hall discusses how such works illustrate a competing tradition that demands we be “*horrified by ableism*.”⁴⁰ Building on Hall, I will at times refer to such works as “empathetic horror.” In the second half of this chapter, I will turn to a Thai horror series, which I figure within this tradition, arguing that it intervenes in the neuroableist tropes of earlier Hollywood slasher films.

It is with these approaches in mind that I offer here a brief history of how neurodivergence has been taken up in western horror films, with a particular focus on works that would go on to shape the slasher genre, such as *Psycho* (1960), *Black Christmas* (1974), and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974).⁴¹ I will turn then in the next section to a deeper analysis of *Halloween* (1978), which further popularized the genre. Crucial to my analysis is an understanding of how such films dialogued with psychiatric discourses, moving

⁴⁰ It should also be noted that many western films in recent years have intentionally centered disability outside of the villain to varying results. Films such as *Hush* (2016) and *A Quiet Place* (2018) feature mute and deaf characters, for example. In her work on horror, Angela M. Smith discusses how such pieces “associate disabled characters with the potentiality of human adaptation” while, at the same time, primarily offering individualized models of disability. She turns instead to films like *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016) and *His House* (2020) as examples of recent films that offer “depictions of disabled collectives” (“Involution” 216).

⁴¹ While I primarily discuss slashers as an American phenomenon, using Hollywood as a shorthand, here I extend this to include the Canadian film *Black Christmas* which heavily influenced *Halloween*.

psychiatric formulations into the sphere of popular culture. In the case of *Halloween*, I will examine how metaphors of masking moved from psychiatric work on psychopathy to become physical iconography in slasher films. Here, in the years preceding *Halloween* and the slasher boom of the 1980s, I briefly consider how films such as *Psycho* responded to moral panics around sexual psychopaths, entrenching the psychokiller as a staple of horror and slasher cinema.

While the scholarship on disability in horror is small, work on neurodivergence is even more scarce. The majority of work focuses on depictions of mental illness in the context of depression or trauma.⁴² Even in such cases it remains rare to see a neurodiversity framework applied.⁴³ While discussions of horror's propensity for mentally ill killers is frequently discussed in brief passing in scholarship, the discursive, historical, and cultural implications are often untapped. One prominent exception is Anthony Carlton Cooke's work on the history of moral panics and deinstitutionalization in popular culture. Cooke's work traces the folk devil role of the "sexual psychopath," a figure that emerged in the US during the 1930s and developed in pop culture alongside anxieties around deinstitutionalization. Cooke notes that the sexual psychopath is a "cultural figure" who is "an unrepentant, untreatable, violent, sexual deviant whose propensity for physical and moral contamination of others necessitates his or her removal from society in the interest of the public good"

⁴² For some work on mental illness and horror see Krone 2024, Balanzategui 2011, Riggs 2018, Sheldon 2019, and Smith 2020.

⁴³ Angela M. Smith's work proves one exception. In classifying different forms of disability representation in horror, Smith discusses works that at first seem to align with neurodiversity and mad studies models, where mental illness is figured as a part of human futurity. Such films, however, turn to undercut this model and "reconfirm disability as a monstrous regression" ("Involution"). She gives examples such as *Split* (2016), *Hereditary* (2018), and *Midsommar* (2019).

(5).⁴⁴ This figure arose during a period when a new diagnostic category was being formed in response to the failure of eugenics-era classifications (namely feeble-mindedness). At the time, feeble-mindedness was a catch-all diagnosis that framed all social ills as genetically rooted in cognitive deficiency. This included criminality and other moral failings.⁴⁵ Eugenists placed high value on the idea that external features reflected inner traits. However, when put to the test, Cooke notes, these categories could not hold up to actual psychiatric examination, as many people institutionalized as “feeble-minded” had normal cognitive abilities. As a result, psychiatrists came up with a new diagnostic category that would maintain the perceived link between mental illness and criminality: psychopathy.

The figure of the psychopathic killer would work its way into US popular culture, evolving alongside anxieties about crime and mental illness. While not the first film to deploy the trope, Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 film *Psycho* is easily the most influential. *Psycho* is often cited as an “appointed ancestor” of the slasher genre (Clover 23). The film would go on to heavily shape American horror cinema, spawning many remakes and imitations. Its influence is perhaps only rivaled by the 1978 release of *Halloween*, which popularized and formalized many of the most recognizable tropes of the slasher genre including masks. *Psycho* for its part would popularize the role of the psychokiller, building off the folk devil of the sexual psychopath.

⁴⁴ Cooke notes that the “sexual psychopath” emerged out of and is not wholly distinguishable from the eugenics-era folk devil figure of the “feeble-minded offender.”

⁴⁵ Because those labeled feeble-minded were believed to have a younger mental age (a eugenicist concept), it was often assumed they had no control over their criminal impulses and that their victims would typically be children. Both incarceration in mental institutions and forced sterilization were commonplace and justified as a means to protect the public and the genetic pool (Cooke 13-16).

Both the film, and the novel it was based on, were influenced by the crimes of Wisconsinite Ed Gein, which were heavily publicized in 1957. Gein was arrested after it was found that he kidnapped several women and stole from local graves, using body parts to create paraphernalia. His story was further sensationalized after he claimed to have done all of this due to a desire to be a woman (Cartwright 87). Gein would be committed to a hospital for the criminally insane with a diagnosis of schizophrenia (Cartwright 102). Gein's story fit neatly into pre-existing models of the sexual psychopath while proving sensational enough to influence horror films beginning with *Psycho*. This would establish the mad killer as a staple of horror cinema. It would also establish an ongoing trope of "psycho-trans" killers mirrored in films like *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) (Phillips). In their analysis of the news coverage of the time, Ryan Lee Cartwright notes that public understandings of diagnostic categories were inconsistent. Gein was referred to in popular media as a "psychopath," "psycho," "schizophrenic," "split personality," "simple-minded," and "foolish," demonstrating the fluidity with which categories of mental illness were understood at the time (89).

Psycho walks an interesting tight rope in this respect. At the film's conclusion, a psychiatrist spends almost five minutes of screen time offering an explanation of the killer, Norman Bates, and his psychology. He establishes that, after killing his own mother, Norman could not handle what he had done, so he became his mother, making it so his "mind houses two personalities" (1:46:47). While specific diagnostic language is not used, the film relies on psychiatry to provide a safe interpretive framework. When asked if he is trying to provide groundwork for a legal plea for Norman, the psychiatrist clarifies that a psychiatrist "doesn't lay the groundwork, he merely tries to explain it" (1:42:52-1:42:55).

This established the role of the psychiatrist in such films as an objective authority, a dynamic that is taken up again in *Halloween*, as I will unpack later. At the same time, *Psycho* still refuses to provide a specific diagnosis and relies on sensationalized public understandings of cognitive difference. In this respect, it managed to propel the ambiguously defined psychokiller into mainstream horror cinema while giving this trope an air of authority. As a result, the figure of the psychokiller, influenced by Gein and taken up in *Psycho*, would stand in for mental illness broadly conceived, not tied to any specific diagnosis in contemporary terms. Psychological pathology in its broadest sense was attached to criminality, sexual perversion, and now killing.

This fluidity and ambiguity would go on to shape future slasher films. This comes to the fore in films such as *Black Christmas* (1974) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). Both films would take up the trope of the psychokiller. However, they would no longer rely on a strictly psychiatric lens to code their villains as psychos. In *Black Christmas*, a film that heavily influenced John Carpenter's approach to *Halloween*, a group of sorority girls is targeted with disturbing phone calls before being killed one by one by a man hiding in their attic.⁴⁶ The caller's face is never fully revealed, hidden primarily by the use of camera angles from his visual perspective. This hidden identity would build on early genres such as the Italian giallo, while serving as a precursor for the role of masks in slashers.⁴⁷ The killer's

⁴⁶ *Black Christmas* was one of the earliest films to adapt the popular urban myth where a babysitter receives threatening phone calls only to be informed by the police that the call is coming from inside the house. While there are many variations, certain versions include the detail that the caller is an escaped mental patient. It is this version that is depicted in the 1979 film *When a Stranger Calls*.

⁴⁷ Giallo is an Italian film genre that mixes serial killings with sexual material and murder mystery elements. Frequently the killer remains unexposed until the end of the film.

identity and mental state are not explicitly stated, but rely on popular tropes of mental illness to evoke fear. In the phone calls the man changes registers frequently, moving from vulgarities to death threats to speaking in different voices—shifting from a young boy named Billy to the voices of his parents as they react to the killing of a baby. Unlike *Psycho*, where a psychiatrist thoroughly narrates Norman’s mental state, here the killer’s psychology and motivations are left as ambiguous as his identity, relying instead on coding alone to affect viewers. This coding was readily apparent, as is evident in a 1975 New York Times review that calls the killer a “skulking psychopath” while simultaneously describing his motives as “foggy business” (Weiler 45).⁴⁸ The psychokiller no longer needed to be identified through psychiatry. Instead, audiences themselves could identify him through visual and auditory codes, responding with fear. Masks, as I will demonstrate later, would then become further coding, a visual marker of cognitive difference.

Released the same year as *Black Christmas*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is another film that picks up on the tradition of equating mental difference with killing. In the film, a group of teens travel into rural Texas only to end up being picked off by a family of cannibals. Among this family is, now pop-culture icon, Leatherface, who for much of the film is depicted wearing a series of masks made from human skin. Like *Psycho*, the film took inspiration from Ed Gein in its depiction of cannibalism and human trophies. The family’s eldest brother also fits quite neatly into the trope of the psychokiller, acting in a frenetic and sadistic manner. However, the film makes a break from this model through

⁴⁸ The film took a year to come out in the US after its original 1974 release in Canada. The impulse to read the killer as mentally ill is present even today, though typically interpreted within the firmer diagnostic categories we rely on today. There are a number of posts on reddit, for example, dedicated to discussing what disorder the killer presents with (Eldritch-Cleaver).

Leatherface, who is depicted not as unfeeling or sadistic, but as child-like, killing because he is ordered to. This depiction draws directly on intellectual disability rather than the more established psychopathic model that had been popularized since 1960. This is not incidental as the actor who played Leatherface, Gunnar Hansen, drew direct inspiration from visiting a “state school for the mentally retarded” where his mother worked. He drew on the physicality of these children to inform Leatherface's awkward gait (“Gunnar Hansen”). The film would establish many of the tropes that *Halloween* would further popularize, including the physicality of the killer, a hulking figure with a mask and phallic weapon.

Both 1974 films are also notable for the way they move the psychokiller into the realm of the metaphorical. Unlike *Psycho* which stages the mentally ill killer at the center of its horror narrative, both *Black Christmas* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* draw on the fear the psychokiller elicits in order to comment on other thematic concerns. *Black Christmas*, for example, uses the killer's frenetic re-enactment of a child's murder to parallel the concerns of one of the sorority members, Jess, who has just found out she is pregnant. Her plans to have an abortion are not taken well by her boyfriend Peter. Much of the tension in the film's final act relies on audience uncertainty over whether Peter is actually the killer. In this sense, the psychokiller stands in not for a particular moral panic over mental illness but for male violence and the various ways male-led institutions fail women. On the other hand, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* figures insanity as a metaphor for the political realities of the early 1970s, including the graphic coverage of the Vietnam War. The director, Tobe Hooper frames his usage of masks in this context, saying “man was the real monster here, just wearing a different face, so I put a literal mask on the monster in my film” (Cook 17). In this sense both films take up neurodivergence and traditions of visual coding as a form of

narrative prosthesis. This divorces the trope from its earlier more explicit attachment to psychiatry, erasing these rhetorical histories while still very much relying on the affect they produce.

In the wake of these films, *Halloween* was released in 1978, becoming one of the most profitable independent films in US history. *Halloween* takes influences from each of the films discussed so far, while further modifying and popularizing tropes of the slasher genre. On the one hand, it takes the visual tropes established in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, presenting us with another hulking masked killer, Micheal Myers, known in the script only as “the shape.” On the other hand, the film places this in conversation with the psychokiller figure specifically through a. Micheal’s role as an escaped mental patient and b. the presence of a psychiatrist who contextualizes Micheal’s evil nature. Despite the emergence of masks in the earlier *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, I center my analysis here on *Halloween* for the way it more directly attaches masking to the psychokiller trope. Moreover, while not so didactic as *Psycho*, the film offers an approach that does not so readily displace its representation of mental illness into metaphor. Beyond these reasons is the deeply influential nature of the film and its franchise, which would go on to spawn a slew of imitation slasher films in the 1980s. It therefore serves as an emblematic film to understand the role and motif of masking in conjunction with mental illness. In the following section, therefore, I will closely analyze the film for what it has to say about constructions of neuronormativity and the bounds of the human(e). I place this in dialogue with American psychiatric discourse on psychopathy, which already deployed the metaphor of masking before it was taken up by horror. Masks, I argue, are mobilized, both in

psychiatry and the slasher, as a means to grapple with neuronormative anxieties around encounters with cognitive difference.

Blank, Pale, Emotionless Faces: Masks as Metaphors from Psychiatry to *Halloween* (1978)

Released in 1978, *Halloween* holds a larger-than-life presence in the history of horror cinema. The film is often credited as the birth of contemporary slasher cinema due to its huge success and outsized influence on horror films to follow. As Anthony Carlton Cooke puts it, *Halloween* “[set] the formulaic parameters for subsequent slasher horror to the extent that later films all follow *Halloween*’s basic plot structure: a group of friends terrorized by a mentally ill killer” (80). As this suggests, *Halloween*, and many slashers to follow, would draw heavily on stigma towards mental illness to drive the plot and affective responses of viewers. As I have shown, the film is certainly not the first to equate villainy with cognitive difference. However, *Halloween* would popularize the convention in conjunction with the visual trope of masking. In analyzing the film, I hope to show how these elements work in tandem. The film, I argue, draws on popular psychiatric rhetoric of the time, such as American psychiatrist Hervey Cleckley’s 1941 work on psychopathy *The Mask of Sanity*. Such work reflected fears of neurodivergent people, especially anxieties over mentally ill people who were able to blend into society. After all, the psychopath, in Cleckley’s formulation, could hide dangerous impulses and an unfeeling, affectless nature behind a performance of sanity. Despite being filmed almost thirty years later, I read *Halloween* as a continuation of this discourse. Filmed in the wake of deinstitutionalization efforts, the film materializes the metaphor of masking, cementing neuroableist fears in a material, visual form.

Halloween (1978) opens in the small town of Haddonfield, Illinois in 1963. On Halloween night, six-year-old Micheal Myers dons a clown mask and stabs his older sister to death. Fifteen years later, Micheal escapes a mental institution and heads back to Haddonfield, where he dons a new mask to stalk and kill a trio of babysitters, all young teen girls. Throughout the film, Micheal is pursued by his psychiatrist Dr. Samuel Loomis who continually reminds the audience, and the local sheriff, how inherently dangerous Micheal is—it is a matter of when he will kill, not if he will.⁴⁹ In one scene, Dr. Loomis explains that Micheal is pure evil:

I met him fifteen years ago. I was told there was nothing left. No reason. No conscience. No standing. And even the most rudimentary sense of life and death, of good or evil, right or wrong. I met this six-year-old child with a blank, pale, emotionless face, and the blackest eyes. The devil's eyes. (00:38:45-00:39:16).

Crucial to this description is the fact that Micheal's evil, his lack of humanity that hides behind the figure of a child's face, is signaled through a lack of emotion, a lack of both external and internal affect. Loomis views Micheal's face as a site to determine his humanity. His lack of visible emotion, or rather emotion legible to the psychiatric gaze, is viewed as a moral failure and a visual sign of his inhumanity.

This gestures to an anxiety around differences in affect and non-verbal expression historically identified in neurodivergent populations and pathologized by psychiatric narratives. For example, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders II, published by the American Psychiatric Association in 1968, described schizophrenia as featuring “constricted and inappropriate emotional responsiveness and loss of empathy with

⁴⁹ Dr. Loomis' name was inspired by the character of Sam Loomis in *Psycho*.

others” (33). This anxiety moves outside of psychiatry and into the public consciousness, emerging in films like *Halloween*. This is perhaps most clear in director John Carpenter’s own explanation for Micheal’s characterization. In the documentary *Halloween: A Cut Above the Rest*, Carpenter explains that part of his inspiration for Micheal Myers came from taking a trip during college to a local mental institution where he encountered a twelve or thirteen-year-old boy with a “schizophrenic stare”—“It’s a schizophrenic stare is what it is. It’s a real evil stare. And it was unsettling to me. It was the creepiest thing I’d ever seen just because it’s a stranger. It was completely insane” (00:28:52-00:30:00). Carpenter’s comments make clear the connection between affect, or rather a lack thereof, and mental illness in the popular imagination at the time.⁵⁰

Crucially, this also centers the neurotypical as an authority on narrating neurodivergent internal realities. Through their encounters with mentally ill patients, both Carpenter and Dr. Loomis respectively take on an authorial gaze, interpreting the neurodivergent bodymind. In so doing, they mirror psychiatric narrative practices. Such practices then shape how neurodivergent bodyminds become narrated within the space of

⁵⁰ It should be noted that the DSM III was released in 1980. It would revise the language around schizophrenia and affect: “The disturbance often involves blunting, flattening, or inappropriateness of affect. In blunted affect there is severe reduction in the intensity of affective expression. In flat affect there are virtually no signs of affective expression; the voice is usually monotonous and the face, immobile” (183). This would also be the first version of the DSM to distinguish autism (infantile autism) from childhood schizophrenia. Crucially, Carpenters’ encounter occurred in, or a few years before, 1968 when schizophrenia was still a broader diagnosis. Because of this we might interpret his reaction as one that encompasses and cuts across a number of contemporary diagnostic categories. I read it then as a reaction to madness and neurodivergence as it was/is perceived broadly in the public consciousness. This ambiguity is central to the mad slasher killer, targeting a wide range of neurodivergent traits while creating a mythic figure that is an amalgamation of many forms of cognitive and behavioral difference.

the horror film.⁵¹ This authorial gaze relies on and perpetuates existing interpretations of neurodivergence. The audience is encouraged to read the bodymind of Micheal in the film in similar terms, preparing them to interpret his neurodivergent affect and expression as both absence and threat. With Dr. Loomis' warning, viewers are prepared to translate Micheal's embodiment, interpreting him through the lens of horror and fear, mirrored in the equally emotionless mask he will wear for the bulk of the film. In this way, both Carpenter and the film hand us an interpretive lens for our encounters with neurodivergent subjects. As I will argue, this interpretive framework heavily relies on the use of physical masks to signal the unhuman and inhumane nature of the mentally ill Other.

The association between neurodivergence and lack of affect can also be seen in the psychiatric work on psychopathy that would influence the popular figure of the psychokiller. Such psychiatric discourse would figure masks and masking as central metaphors for conceptualizing neurodivergent alterity. Crucial to public and academic views of American psychopathy was Hervey Cleckley's book *The Mask of Sanity* (1941). While not the only literature on the topic at the time, and despite criticism from some contemporaries, the book would go on to be the most influential work on the topic to this day, heavily influencing both academic and public understandings of neurodivergence. In Cleckley's formulation, the psychopath is unable to genuinely care for others, fundamentally lacking true internal emotions—from humor and anger to joy and grief. He describes the psychopath as incapable of “object-love,” with a “general poverty of affect,” even going so far as to argue that the psychopath lacks the kind of consideration towards others that even “cannibals” and “callous murderers” retain (243, 247). In this comparison, Cleckley associates the

⁵¹ Note that this also mirrors the ending of *Psycho*.

psychopath with the monstrous, painting such forms of neurodivergence as hyper-dangerous. Cleckley specifically argues that the “flat and hollow affect” described in schizophrenia should be extended to the psychopath, at least to describe the psychopath’s inner state (258).

This distinction is important in Cleckley’s work, as the psychopath displays a disconnect between internal pathology and an external mask of sanity. Cleckley’s diagnostic profile describes the way asociality operates under a performance or “simulation” of normal behavior (246). The emphasis on affect is important here, merged with anxieties of the criminal mentally ill who can put on a mask of sanity to blend in and hide their dangerous nature. On the one hand, there is an assumption that the neurodivergent individual’s internal state is one of emptiness, with a lack of internal affect that leads to asociality and monstrosity. On the other hand, there is a fear that the mentally ill might be able to mirror neurotypical emotional expressions, hiding this internal lack via a performance of external affect and normalcy. Such stigma and fear are expressed potently through the metaphor of a mask. The mask of sanity plays on the idea that masking is an act of hiding and secrecy. It operates on the assumption that there is something to be revealed. Though, in this case, it is not one’s identity, but rather dangerous inner qualities, something that must be uncovered, rooted out lest inevitable harm come.

The mask of sanity, I argue, was adopted in a more literal form through popular culture.⁵² Now iconic within the slasher genre specifically, masks in horror translate

⁵² As historian Anthony Carlton Cooke notes, popular writings from psychiatrists and anti-psychiatrists alike often blurred the distinctions between mental illness, schizophrenia, and psychopathy, often using them interchangeably in ways that would influence symbolic figures such as the masked killer in horror who becomes a stand in for a wide myth that encompasses a range of neurodivergences.

psychiatric discourse to a popular audience, offering narratives that reinforce proper sociality and determine what is considered human and humane. As Alexandra Heller-Nicholas notes in her work on masks and horror, masks tie together traditions of performance, ritual, and the transgression of norms. The dangerous mentally ill figure, following Cleckley's model of psychopathy, thus puts on a performance, transgressing norms through their hidden presence in normative society. Heller-Nicholas also productively notes that masks are tied to identity. It is after all a common belief that the face houses the person. As the face is often read as the primary site of emotion in neuronormative frameworks, emotion becomes tied to notions of identity and personhood. To return to *Halloween*, we see this model taken up by Dr. Loomis as he reads Micheal's inhumanity through his face and gaze.

In neuronormative figurations, neurodivergence is already abject, lacking in personhood. Neurodivergent people must then lack emotion and what emotion they do express can only be a mask, a performance hiding a dangerous, affectless inner self. Within the landscape of *Halloween*, the two masks Micheal wears allow him to transgress norms, acting out his hidden nature. This transgression, on the one hand, allows a presumed neurotypical audience to revel in a freak show spectacle, indulging in fear, while, on the other hand, allowing them to enter, perhaps to their relief, a space where the psychopathic killer cannot hide, their "true nature" becoming legible once more.

Halloween then is a prime text to examine as it furthers the connection between masks and neurodivergent killers gestured to in the work on psychopathy. The film plays out anxieties about affect and the (il)legibility of neurodivergence for a presumed neurotypical audience. Here, I return briefly to the opening of the film reading it in dialogue with the

mask of sanity, before turning to a more in-depth interpretation of Micheal's now famous blank, white mask. In the film's opening scenes, the camera brings us into Micheal's perspective. We see the world through his eyes and then through the view of the clown mask he puts on. This perspective shifts when his parents return to find him alone on the lawn. As they pull off the mask, we see Micheal for the first time. Apart from the bloody knife he is holding, there is nothing to suggest to his parents what he has just done. His face remains mostly neutral, if a bit shocked, but certainly nothing that indicates wickedness or cruelty. In fact, in the original screenplay written by John Carpenter and Debra Hill, Micheal is described as "a bright-eyed boy with a calm, quiet smile on his face" (Carpenter and Hill 4). Far from loud expressions of madness or cruelty, he is framed as a calm, innocent, proper suburban white child—a strong contrast to the "wild paroxysm" as he "[slashes] the sister mercilessly" just moments before (Carpenter and Hill 4). From these opening scenes we get a separation between Micheal's internal state (affectless, dangerous, evil) and his external appearance as an innocent child, as human. In a reversal, it is the Micheal without the clown mask in this scene who is wearing the mask of sanity, playing out anxieties over how mental illness and evil can be hidden in plain sight, in your neighborhood, in the heart of neurotypical normalcy.⁵³

⁵³ The film has also been discussed for the way it moves horror to the suburbs, figuring normalcy as a predominantly white space.



Figure 1. A masked Micheal Myers reaches into a closet to attack his victim.

For the rest of the film's run, Micheal's face is never seen. Instead, when the camera shows him, he is wearing his iconic mask. The mask, which he steals from a local shop, is white, smooth, and lacking in distinct features. The eyes, while hollow, only show black. Micheal's mask then is a physical embodiment of what Dr. Loomis saw in him as a child: "a blank, pale, emotionless face, and the blackest eyes." As a child, Micheal's evil hid in plain sight, only visible to the expertly trained eye, relying on the normalizing gaze of Dr. Loomis to interpret, narrate, and make legible. However, through the rest of the film, Micheal's internal corruption is externalized materially through the transformative qualities of his white mask.

Rather than working to conceal his identity (we already know it is Micheal), this mask becomes a cure for Micheal's mask of sanity; it allows his "true nature" and impulses to be exposed and play out. In her work, Heller-Nicholas discusses Micheal's mask as an example of blank masks. Such masks allow audiences to impose their own meaning on "the blankness itself" (116). In the case of *Halloween*, she argues that this invites audiences "to imagine the horrors [Micheal] is capable of because more usual communication systems – language, facial expression, emotion – are simply not there" (116). While true, what I would

add is that this lack of emotion is not just a blank canvas, but also a direct evocation of the association between neurodivergence and affective abnormality. Because emotion is felt or expressed differently for many neurodivergent people, it is often perceived as a lack—a blank space to be filled with assumptions about empathy and morality. Perhaps then, it is no coincidence that in the screen play, Carpenter and Hill refer to adult Micheal as only “the shape,” a means of distinguishing the mask of sanity or Micheal, from the affectless threat lying beneath.

It is this assumption of absence that allows Dr. Loomis to narrate and interpret Micheal’s bodymind, to rhetorically frame him in the role of a villain. And in this case, he chooses to equate such differences in affect as “evil” and in/unhuman. As masks reveal, our understanding of identity and the human are deeply tied to normative expressions of emotion, while abnormal affects are rendered illegible, overwritten as signs of the Other, the inhuman, evil incarnate. For neuronormative audiences, then, the mask in *Halloween* signals that which they fear, but it also serves as a form of narrative control over neurodivergence. The mask Micheal wears at once signals his dangerous qualities, while also offering the audience reassurance that they have re-entered a space where the hidden specter of insanity is comfortably visible rather than hidden behind a mask of sanity. Here, in a return to eugenic logics, the external matches the internal, making it interpretable not just to an expert like Dr. Loomis but to all viewers.

Halloween and Theory of Mind

Such interpretability re-enforces a model in which the neurodivergent Other is perfectly legible to the normative gaze, yet unable to understand people themselves, making them dangerous. This formulation has been reified in psychology through the concept of

theory of mind—the ability to intuit the thoughts, feelings, and interiority of others. As I will expand upon, recent research shows that, while traditional figurations propose some categories of neurodivergent people lack theory of mind, this is not the case in practice. Instead, both neurotypical and neurodivergent social actors face equal difficulty in interpreting one another. I argue that this difficulty produces an anxiety that neurotypical communicators are unable to grapple with. After all, the human is defined through the exclusion of neurodivergence. To find oneself lacking the ability to fully interpret and empathize with another threatens the stability of one’s subjecthood. Therefore, it must be the Other who is lacking in affect, in empathy, in theory of mind. In this light, masks in slashers like *Halloween*, become a means to displace and *mask* the anxieties that encounters with neurodivergence produce.

Micheal Myers’ depiction draws on a broad popular understanding of mental illness, using the psychopathic figure to convey anxieties about neurodivergence in a broad sense outside of specific diagnostic categories. However, this depiction resonates and intersects with narratives surrounding autism in important ways as well. Like the psychopath, autistic people have long been interpreted both in scientific literature and popular culture as lacking in emotion and empathy. In their work on autism and emotion, Bergenmar et al. argue that such depictions are rooted in an “affective deficit perspective” of autism that pathologizes autistic people as having “an absolute and global absence of emotional responsiveness” (202-203). In this model, autistic people lack not only internal affect but any understanding of others’ emotions. Such a model perpetuates normative standards for “human emotionality,” rendering those who fall outside the norm non-human (201). The figure of the psychopath, as an amalgamation of attitudes towards cognitive difference, we might argue,

is also viewed through this model, extending the affective deficit beyond autism, while also always gesturing towards it. The psychopathic figure in slasher horror in particular ties affective abnormality to grotesque violence and cruelty. In this way, mentally ill characters in films like *Halloween* are rendered both unhuman and inhumane.

Psychopathy and autism are also connected through the related concept of theory of mind, which posits that in normal development we acquire the ability to intuit the internal lives of others. This concept was built on the assumption that autistic people lack this ability. Prominent psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen, whose work on theory of mind and autism is considered highly influential, would go so far as to argue that autistic people have “mindblindness,” making them unable to understand that other minds exist. Baron-Cohen did not propose mindblindness until the 1990s. Yet we can see a precursor to this model in earlier psychological frameworks that figured mentally ill people as lacking in affect and empathy. Cleckley’s model of the psychopath is an informative precursor as is the way such discourse was carried into popular media such as slashers. I would go so far as to argue that work on theory of mind is a continuation of this same tradition, emerging as a tactic to soothe uncomfortable confrontations with cognitive difference by figuring neurodivergent people as a problem.

We see this framework show up in *Halloween*. As Heller-Nicholas puts it, Micheal’s mask serves as a physical barrier, separating him from his human victims and allowing him to enact violence. But we also see this modeled through Micheal’s kill pattern. He continues to kill young babysitters in a cycle that re-enacts the murder of his sister, as if these women are interchangeable, and have no perceptible internal lives that distinguish them. The film

thus relies on the fear of someone who lacks understanding of established norms of relationality, painting this lack as monstrous and downright dangerous.

This throughline from psychopathy to autism and theory of mind is made explicit in psychiatric work on popular culture, which as recently as 2017, saw professor of psychiatry Fernando Espi Forcen identify Micheal Myers as autistic. Forcen's book *Monsters, Demons and Psychopaths* is part of a body of scholarship that attempts to use popular culture representations to teach psychology. In a chapter on slashers and psychopaths, he specifically describes Micheal Myers as "an individual with impaired social skills and communication," noting that he "lacks theory of mind and empathy" (154). Forcen goes on to argue that, following the DSM, we can view him as someone who "suffers from autistic disorder" (154). This work might be critiqued for a number of reasons, including the attempt to draw diagnostic boundaries on a character that is purposefully built on a history of rhetorical abjection towards neurodivergent people broadly conceived. This also elides the way psychiatric discourse has participated in shaping the monsters and folk devils Forcen uncritically discusses. However, what this effectively demonstrates for our purposes is a throughline between notions of psychopathy and figurations of theory of mind in autism.

In contemporary discourse around autism and theory of mind, a distinction is often made between affective and cognitive empathy. In attempts to recuperate autistic empathy, it is common to argue that autistic people only lack cognitive empathy, while having plenty of affective empathy—meaning they resonate with others emotionally but may not understand or be able to intuit what others are thinking. This model of autistic empathy is then contrasted with psychopaths by arguing they are the exact opposite: they lack affective empathy while their cognitive empathy remains intact. A 2024 review of the literature on

autism and psychopathy makes just this distinction, arguing that psychopaths are more likely to commit crimes and that their “Diminished affective empathy, paired with the ability to mentalise, enables psychopaths to successfully manipulate others for personal gain” (Maguire et. al.). This once again draws on the idea of a mask of sanity, whereby they hide criminality behind a manipulative mask. This time around, that mask is understood as cognitive empathy or theory of mind.

I would argue that this distinction is not productive for the very reason that the psychopath functions as a larger stand in for cognitive difference more broadly in popular discourse. By accepting this distinction, we feed into long held associations between normative affect, morality, and personhood, rescuing for now autistic people with high empathy, but at the cost of continuing to deny personhood to those autistics and other neurodivergent people who experience and express affective empathy in other ways. As autistic writer Devon Price notes in his work “Some Autistics can read people’s emotions so easily that it’s overwhelming; others empathize with animals or objects, but not people; some of us have zero emotional empathy. But all of us are full-formed humans with a capacity to care for others and behave ethically” (29). Given the intertwined discursive history of autism with psychopathy, it behooves us to not reify rigid definitions of the human. After all, the humanist subject relies on the policing of such affective and relational norms.

In recent years, the idea of theory of mind has been usefully challenged by a number of scholars and autistic writers.⁵⁴ One crucial intervention into this model has been Damian Milton’s concept of “The Double Empathy Problem.” In this figuration, it is not just autistic

⁵⁴ See for example Dinishak 2016 and Yergeau 2013 and 2018.

people who fail to correctly interpret others. Rather, there is a mismatch in communication styles built from very different experiences with the world. While autistic people may struggle to interpret allistic people, this communication difficulty goes both ways. Allistic people equally struggle to interpret autistic people. Milton compares this to the kind of communication difficulties that arise when two people do not speak the same first language, or when there is a strong difference in cultural backgrounds. However, despite the fact that the struggle goes both ways, it is routinely autistic people who are blamed and pathologized for this breakdown.

This model brings to mind the work of Rosina Lippi-Green and her concept of “the communicative burden.” She talks (in the context of accented English) about how speakers with more privilege often give up the struggle to communicate with others when difficulties arise, whereas those with less privilege are forced to do extra work to navigate unstated expectations and conform. While allistic to autistic communication is different from the contexts Lippi-Green is writing about, the idea of “the communicative burden” is still immensely useful for understanding these encounters. I would argue that, like the privileged native English speakers Lippi-Green studied, many allistics when encountering this interpretive mismatch cannot handle the anxiety it produces. For example, in a 2019 study by Sasson et al., it was found that allistics frequently make quick judgments of autistic interlocutors, viewing them unfavorably with “reduced intentions to pursue social interaction” (1). Not only must the burden be passed onto the autistic person, but this anxiety must be contended with, given a source and justified. We can see this in the broad pathologization of autistic communication styles and forms of expression from Cleckley to Carpenter to Baron-Cohen.

What *Halloween* reflects is a deep anxiety over potentially having to navigate such encounters—encounters that would seemingly be on the rise in the late 1970s due to the ongoing project of deinstitutionalization. Differences in neurotype mean differences in communication style and cues as well as in affective expression. To both sides, the other may feel illegible. However, given the normative position neurotypicals hold, it becomes easy for them to blame this difficulty and the anxiety it produces on the neurodivergent interlocutor. This anxiety, the negative affect this encounter produces, must then be relocated in the bodymind of the neurodivergent, rather than being recognized as the product of navigating a difficult social encounter for the first time. It is the neurodivergent or mentally ill figure who now elicits fear rather than the neurotypical fear of not accurately gauging the emotional or cognitive states of autistic or otherwise neuroatypical people. I should note that while I use neurotypical as a shorthand, I also recognize that neurotypical is a constructed, always unattainable goal that figures the humanist subject. If empathy and theory of mind come to define the human, then communicative friction becomes a threat to one's subjectivity, which must be enforced through neuronormativity.

Horror stories like *Halloween* thus become prime sites to play out this anxiety in ways that affirm neurotypical subjectivity. The negative affect and fear they feel is reframed as the understandable fear of someone who is inherently evil and dangerous. Micheal Myers is, then, a symbol of a breakdown in communication. He represents the threat of not being able to interpret the emotions or intentions of another, the fear of not being able to intuit the thoughts of others, of a lack of theory of mind. At the same time, the film continually does work to make him legible, to write him into neuronormative narratives in ways that reaffirm the idea that it is only the abject Other who would struggle to understand people. This is set

up quickly in the film, with Dr. Loomis, able to see with a glance of the neurotypical psychiatric gaze, what lies beneath Micheal's affectless demeanor. Micheal's mask too serves just this purpose—allowing for a neurotypical fantasy where they remain perfect mind readers who can trace the anxiety and negative affect they feel back to the evil within him. This not only affirms their assumptions but assuages fear and guilt. In this way, *The Mask of Sanity*, *Halloween*, and even theory of mind serve a similar purpose, responding to such anxiety by offering narratives that help to manage negative affect. Such affect is produced from social encounters where one party is not able or willing to take up the burden of communication. In this vein, these psychiatric and popular narratives both respond to and (re)produce the strict bounds of the humanist subject.

Reclaiming the Mask: Autistic and Neurodivergent Masking

As we have seen, the metaphor of masking has been used in psychiatry and popular culture to express and assuage fears towards neurodivergent people and the precarity of neuronormative subjectivity. In the horror genre, this is made quite explicit as psychokillers and their masks (whether those that hide their insanity, or those that reveal it) become a site of horror. Meanwhile, their victims scream in terror, reflecting back an outpouring of emotion, of affective norms. Such distress is the supposed natural reaction to an encounter with cognitive difference. However, despite this history, the metaphor of the mask has been taken up in more subversive ways within some neurodivergent communities. This is especially true within the autistic community, which now commonly discusses the concept of “autistic masking.”

Autistic masking refers to the idea of hiding one's neurodivergent traits, consciously or unconsciously, to avoid the consequences of stigma. The term came into usage in the

autistic community within the last ten years, and has been a topic of discussion on blogs, forums, and social media.⁵⁵ This has given language to express the experience of performing as normal. While the term itself may be relatively new, the concept has been written about in other forms, with some autistic writers using the term “passing” as early as 2010 (Vivian).⁵⁶ Autistic masking has been compared to other forms of passing, such as passing for white, straight, cisgender, etc. Similar to these other forms of passing, autistic masking is a response to social stigma and a “phenomenon of social exclusion” (Price 8). Autistic traits are stigmatized and thus viewed as something to hide. Devon Price, in his work *Unmasking Autism*, puts it this way: “When an Autistic person is not given resources or access to self-knowledge, and when they’re told their stigmatized traits are just signs that they’re a disruptive, overly sensitive, or annoying kid, they have no choice but to develop a neurotypical facade” (8). In this perspective, masking is a form of conformity that is enforced through forms of epistemic erasure and social stigma—it is a forced and enforced performance of neuronormativity.

This concept of masking, while originating as a term in the autistic community, can be expanded to other forms of neurodivergence. Price gestures to this expansion in his own work, noting how all neurodivergent people face stigma and have shared the experience of being “crushed under the weight of neurotypical expectations” (12). In this vein, instead of “autistic masking,” from here on I will refer to “neurodivergent masking.” This touches

⁵⁵ Google Ngram shows the term “autistic masking” emerging in late 2015 to early 2016, though this may not accurately account for colloquial usage or earlier developments in autistic communities.

⁵⁶ The collection *Loud Hands: autistic people, speaking* includes an essay on passing by Amanda Forest Vivian, which first appeared on their blog adeepercountry.blogspot.com at the end of 2010.

usefully on the way this concept expresses shared neurodivergent epistemologies. Likewise, it becomes useful in considering how this contrasts with the mask of sanity and masking in horror films, which likewise touch on cognitive difference in broader terms than any single form of neurodivergence.

On the surface, the idea of neurodivergent masking is not dissimilar to the mask of sanity, wherein the neurodivergent performs neuronormativity. However, there is an important distinction. While the mask of sanity frames this performance as latently dangerous to neurotypicals and normative society, neurodivergent masking reframes the site of horror. It is society and its rejection of neurodivergent being that is the true villain. While slasher masks narrate neuronormative myths about neurodivergent people, neurodivergent masking becomes a way of discussing and expressing neurodivergent realities. This form of masking offers a direct intervention into the discourse on neurodivergence, refiguring the mask as a model for understanding the horrors neurodivergent people face.

It is society that demands neurodivergent people mask, that we perform normalcy. The mask is forced upon us, not taken up in deception. Unlike Micheal Myers who picks up and places his mask on his own face, “...Autistic people are born with the mask of neurotypicality pressed against our faces” (Price, 8). And it is this mask that wears us down, harms our sense of self, and takes a psychological toll. We take up the mask, sometimes consciously, often unconsciously, as a forced act of survival, because we know the rejection that will follow if we do not. We know that we will be viewed as un/inhuman, as dangerous, as harmful. We wear it having learned the trauma of social exclusion and the threat of harm, including violence and poverty. Yet, under the mask, the weight of this performance takes a heavy toll, from burnout and deteriorating mental health to suicidal ideation (Sedgewick). If

we scream out in our own language, it remains illegible to society, unlike the cries of neuronormative victims in horror films. Their pain, their trauma, is expressed and expressible in normative ways, making it hyper-legible. But, we suppose, if we suppress our own screams, perhaps we can be the final girls in the horror story of our lives, forever traumatized but alive.⁵⁷ The toll of the mask is rendered invisible to neuronormative society by that very performance, our cries for help hidden and illegible.

Horror Masks and Neurodivergent Masking in *Dead Friend Forever* (2023)

Since *Halloween*, the repeated use of masks across more than four decades of films has transformed them into familiar iconography of slasher horror for audiences and filmmakers alike. Through new films, sequels, and remakes, these masks have become stable and reliable symbols of the monstrous. Yet each new repetition is an opportunity to comment on and rework these narratives.⁵⁸ One recent horror series, *Dead Friend Forever* (*Phuean Tai DFF*, 2023-2024), does just that, offering a new framework for considering masks and (a)sociality within horror media. The show dialogues with and intervenes in the pathologizing tradition I have outlined, offering a critique of social violence, abjection, and monstrosity.

⁵⁷ “Final girl” or “final girls” refer to the survivor(s) in slasher films. Most slashers, after killing off all the other characters, will leave one character to escape or survive at the end of the film. This character historically was often female in films like *Halloween*. This gendered dynamic was first discussed by Carol J. Clover in her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, in which she coined the now popular term “final girl.”

⁵⁸ Within the American horror sphere, there are a number of films that have attempted to subvert and critique slasher tropes, such as *Freaky* (2020), *The Final Girls* (2015), and the *Fear Street* trilogy (2021). The interventions of these films are valuable, offering deconstructions of gender, queer sexuality, and to a lesser extent race. However, it is rare to find works that directly speak back to the neuroableist framing of slashers and the psychiatric narratives that inform the genre.

Dead Friend Forever (DFF) is a twelve-episode, limited-run Thai television series produced by Be On Cloud that aired from late 2023 to early 2024. The show was directed by Ma-Deaw Chookiat Sakveerakul and Chantana Tiprachart and co-written by Ek Eakasit Thairaat, Isaree Siriwankulthorn, Yui Kanokphan Ornrattanasakul, and Issaraporn Kuntisuk. Marketed as a queer horror production, *DFF* integrates western slasher tropes alongside Thai horror conventions, while also directly dialoguing with neurodivergence, marginalization, and our perception of the monstrous.⁵⁹ The show, I argue, aligns more closely with neurodivergent understandings of masking. This usage reverses the source of horror, revealing neurodivergent masking as a self-protective yet self-injurious form of survival, rather than a sign of hidden monstrosity. *DFF* attempts to rewrite the script through genre-aware critique, challenging Hollywood myths of mental illness, while explicitly framing such narratives as genocidal. In doing so, the show takes up a rhetorical practice of *unmasking*, highlighting social violence, the performative nature of sociality, and our shared culpability in these structures. In light of this, the show puts forth an argument for collective awareness and change that requires we all embrace practices of *unmasking*.

DFF cold opens with two young men emerging from a house before running frantically into the surrounding woods. Encountering a mysterious shrine, one boy panics, abandoning the other. Alone, the remaining boy calls after his companion before recoiling in fear. The camera angle changes, and the audience sees the back-lit outline of their pursuer: a

⁵⁹ The show had popularity both domestically in Thailand and abroad, reaching number one on X in Thailand for the first nine episodes. It also reached number one on the global streaming platform iQIYI for “Soaring Dramas Thailand.” The studio of the show, Be On Cloud, has been orienting their work to both domestic and global audiences, working with Thailand’s Ministry of Commerce to promote Boys Love and Girls Love content as a soft power. Such series generate complicated discussions around genre, queer representation, and marketing that are beyond the scope of this chapter.

black-cloaked figure carrying an ax. The boy falls to the ground, and before the ax comes down and blood splatters his face, we get a glimpse of the killer, or, rather, the killer's mask—a black papier-mâché face with a large nose, wide white eyes, and an eerie, white-toothed grin.



Figure 2. The masked killer from *Dead Friend Forever* as hallucinated by Fluke.

This forty-second opening establishes genre expectations for the show's local and transnational audiences. Within Thai cinema tradition, domestic horror films are called *nang phi* or “ghost movies.” These films have roots in post-World War II film traditions that reflect rural Thai beliefs. *Nang phi* make up a large majority of horror films in Thailand and generally revolve around the supernatural, for example animist spirits, black magic, or vengeful ghosts. The shrine that the boys encounter gestures to this tradition of folklore-influenced horror. These films now exist alongside *nang sayong kwan* or “terror films,” which align more closely with thrillers, slashers, and torture porn, influenced from Hollywood and pan-Asian horror traditions. *Nang sayong kwan* emerged more fully in the

2010s. They often depict sources of horror that are more distanced from the supernatural while centering urban, middle-class anxieties (Ancuta 6, 23; Ainsley 157). *DFF* operates in this complex genre landscape. Through a cold-open that references both domestic and transnational horror, the show demonstrates an ability to navigate, play with, and comment on these varied film traditions. Of particular note for my own analysis, is the show's metafictional engagement with the slasher genre.

The show follows eight young men (Por, Tee, Top, Fluke, Jin, Phee, Tan, and White) as a trip they take to a remote vacation home takes a turn for the worse when a masked killer begins targeting them. During their first night, Phee accidentally plays a student film that Por, Tee, Top, Jin, and Fluke made during high school. The film is a slasher starring the same masked villain from the cold open. As the film finishes, extra footage rolls. The actor playing the villain takes off his mask to reveal a ninth character—Non. Phee and Tan, who joined the friend group after the student film was produced, and White, who is on the trip as Tee's boyfriend, are only told that Non disappeared. As the night progresses, the masked figure from the film begins to pursue them in real life. Por, whose politician father owns the vacation home, is impaled with a tree branch, and the group's attempts to get help are continually thwarted by the masked figure's appearance. These early episodes take clear influence from Hollywood slashers, particularly adopting the tradition of the masked killer. At the same time, the show follows Thai and pan-Asian slasher traditions where the possibility of the supernatural is intermixed alongside slasher kills, such as in films like *Black Rat* (Japan, 2010) or *Night of the Killer Bears* (Thailand, 2022). As the boys grapple with their fears of being hunted, they debate whether they are dealing with a human or

Non's ghost, leaving viewers to also wonder whether this slasher killer is human or supernatural.

However, it quickly becomes clear something more is at play than the initial slasher model might suggest. In episode four's final moments, Top points to Tee and says, "You know so well what you did three years ago" (40:19).⁶⁰ The next episode begins in the past, during the boys' second year of high school. The bulk of the next episodes show how the group of boys bullied Non by harming him emotionally, psychologically, and physically, all of which ultimately resulted in his disappearance and death. We learn the friend group (at this time Por, Tee, Top, Fluke, and Jin) wanted to take part in a student film contest.⁶¹ They

⁶⁰ All translations from the iQIYI streaming service.

⁶¹ Interestingly, the film contest's theme is "modern Thai" ("Episode 5" 01:35). In brainstorming the group throws out various eyeroll inducing proposals like wearing traditional Thai costumes and dancing or doing a period piece. Por responds by telling them not to turn his film into a comedy. As they negotiate the genre of their film, we likewise get insight into how *Dead Friend Forever* is positioning itself relative to Thai horror and ideas of authenticity. Horror comedies are extremely popular in Thailand, but *Dead Friend Forever* chooses to explicitly distance itself from this subgenre. The boys note that they need their film to be Thai but stand out and be different, not simply like all the rest. This perhaps could be read as a commentary on the more recent trend of Folk Horror that became popular in the late 2010s and early 2020s. As Thai horror scholar Mary Jane Ainslie notes, the turn to folk horror follows a larger global trend along with films like *Midsommar* (2019) that tend to gesture to cults, rural settings, and ideas of "unspoiled tradition" (182). Within a Thai context, folk horror reflects an attempt to market Thai "authenticity" to global audiences and to urban, middle-class Thais. It comes after a trend in the 2000s of films that moved to urban concerns, and it contrasts earlier *nang phi* films that focused on rural traditions but were rooted in and aimed at rural, low-class audiences. Folk Horror by comparison, as Ainslie puts it, becomes another way for social elites to "[appreciate] and [consume] products associated with a 'lowbrow status'...as a means to address [their] supposed 'authenticity-insecurity'" (184). The fact that the film contest in *Dead Friend Forever* is concerned with Thainess, gestures to the way the show is in dialogue with concerns over horror and its role in producing ideas of what is or is not authentically Thai. Interestingly, the show chooses to spend the bulk of its time in an urban setting, moving away from signs of rural "authenticity" to explore and critique social inequalities and the cruelty of said social elites.

were running short on ideas when Non, an aspiring writer, came to offer one: a found footage slasher film.⁶² Jin was the only member of the group who truly welcomed Non, though it is strongly implied that he was motivated by his attraction to him. Meanwhile the others, led by Por, took advantage of Non's desire to be a writer—and to be accepted in the group—by making him do all the work. Things escalated from casual bullying when Top broke their filming camera. With Tee's help, Top framed Non for the damage. Non's family was poor, so he could not cover the cost, and he was quickly roped into smuggling money for an illegal casino run by Tee's uncle. Meanwhile Por, whose family originally bought the camera, increasingly lashed out at Non. He took over the script and forced Non to play the role of the killer. Eventually, Tee, tasked with bringing Non to his uncle, spiked Non's drink with a sedative during a filming shoot and kidnapped him. When Tee realized his uncle's men, who had already severely beaten Non, would kill him, he arranged for Non to work off his debts at the casino. Unfortunately, Non died of his injuries anyway, making the identity of the modern-day killer a core mystery of the show's plot, as I discuss later.

⁶² In her work on contemporary Thai horror, Mary Jane Ainslie notes that there is a long tradition of self-reflexivity and breaking the fourth wall in Thai film history that has roots in communal traditions and viewing practices. She points to a number of Thai pieces that include films within films, noting that Thai works are concerned with navigating between technology and the ongoing need to co-exist with the supernatural. As such, she argues that such films have a separate history from global digital horror and found footage traditions that concern themselves with “the intrusiveness of technology in the digital age” (132). *Dead Friend Forever* is interesting in this respect. By incorporating a film within a film (or in this case a TV series), the show gestures to this tradition of communal viewing and self-reflexivity. However, the piece also directly draws on the themes of global digital horror, calling on found footage through a direct reference to the genre and its most famous film *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). Later moments in the show also clearly explore the concerns over technology being too “intrusive” with Jin filming and circulating a video of Non having sex with his cram school tutor. This culminates in a sequence in the finale where Jin, in a series of hallucinations, grapples with his own fear of being filmed. In this way, *Dead Friend Forever* pulls on both global and Thai specific traditions.

What is important for now is that the bullying and its deadly consequences are intertwined with Non's poverty, queerness, and mental illness. Non's diagnosis is unspecified, but he uses medications, specifically Lorazepam, Sertraline, and Quetiapine, which are prescribed for a range of conditions including anxiety disorders, depression, OCD, bipolar, and schizophrenia, among others.⁶³ Additionally, his father expresses concern over his mental state by warning Non that he could end up hospitalized if he gets too stressed, suggesting previous interactions with the mental health system. In a typical slasher, Non's mental illness would prove to be a sign of his dangerous potential, an indicator that he is the villain. However, *DFE* does not lay out the narrative of a mentally ill boy taking up a mask to kill. Instead, it is invested in examining the effects we have on one another within the context of systemic inequality.

As I will show, *DFE* offers a more socially conscious model of horror. This aligns with Thai revenge horror of the aughts. In her work on Thai horror film, Mary Ainslie associates this tradition with films such as *Shutter* (2004), *Art of the Devil 2* (2005), and *Body* (2007). These films are critical of power dynamics and social violence towards the marginalized, offering social critique through stories of haunting and revenge.⁶⁴ This

⁶³ One of the writers for the series, Isaree Siriwanikulthorn (pen name Sammon), is a trained doctor, making the choice of drugs likely not incidental.

⁶⁴ Such films are often contrasted with heritage horror films that were being produced in the late 90s to early aughts, such as *Nang Nak* (1999). Both types of film commonly drew on the idea of women spirits entering and remaining in the human world, causing disruption to the norm. However, heritage films remain much more conservative, holding up existing power structures while looking towards an idyllic past. Films like *Nang Nak*, for example, resolve the threat to normalcy by forcing the threat (often a female spirit) to leave (Fuhrman, Ainslie). The revenge films of this period, on the other hand, refuse to end with a return to balance. As Ainslie points out, in these films "the ghost is not pacified or destroyed for refusing to conform to the status quo," instead she often lingers, continuing to exert her revenge into the present and future. Ainslie notes that such ambiguous endings gesture to

approach can also be framed as “empathetic horror,” a concept I described earlier in this chapter wherein horror is evoked at society rather than the abject Other. *DFF* first offers a slasher frame that situates viewers in proximity to well established tropes of villainy and mental illness, before pivoting to socially aware traditions of horror. This subversion unpacks tropes of alterity and neurodivergence deeply rooted in Hollywood horror, while also offering localized critique of inequality in Thailand.

Though *DFF* grapples with multiple forms of marginalization I focus on neurodivergence and its relationship to masking, monstrosity, and the performative nature of sociality.⁶⁵ *DFF*, as I will show, takes up slasher iconography in a metafictional spirit, highlighting the violence of traditional Hollywood slasher narratives and the way their logics slate neurodivergent people for abjection and death. In parallel with the tradition of empathetic horror, *DFF* inverts this tale; society becomes the villain for treating the mentally ill and neurodivergent as disposable victims. In this regard, the show aligns closely with neurodivergent takes on social masking and forced conformity. Through an exploration of this social violence, *DFF* further reveals the performative nature of sociality, a performance we all are implicated in as we strive for the unreachable standards of “normal” and “neurotypical.” Through this critique, *DFF* highlights the collective nature of social violence, demonstrating that liberation cannot come from individual resistance alone, but must be rooted in collective change—collective *unmasking*.

and critique abuses in Thai society “[suggesting] that such a system cannot continue and Thai society in its present form must be dismantled” (123).

⁶⁵ For readings on queerness and horror see Elliot-Smith and Browning 2020, Vallese 2022, and Petrocelli 2023. For more on haunting and queerness in Thai cinema see Fuhrmann 2016. For some readings on class in horror see Ainslie 2024 (Thai context), Simmons 2017, and Mylonas 2025.

Unmasking Social and Narrative Violence

Unlike films that play out fears of a mask of sanity, *DFF* demonstrates the cost of being unable to hide one's difference, a lesson which resonates with neurodivergent epistemologies. In doing so, *DFF* reveals the rhetorical violence embedded in Hollywood slashers. These narratives, as Non's story shows, are deadly. In the present, the boys fear that Non has returned as a masked villain or as a ghost to kill them; in the past, we learn that Non was treated as an easy target for manipulation and harassment, eventually dying unceremoniously in the back room of an illegal casino.

Throughout the show, Non struggled to fit in with the group and tried unsuccessfully to mask his differences. Despite his efforts, he was nevertheless made a target of social and narrative violence. This is evident in Non's first interaction with the group within the show. As the group brainstormed ideas for the film contest, Non came to offer his own idea. Non was quiet and reserved in his facial affect, but too serious about his interest in horror as he barreled into and out of the conversation with an intensity marked by eerie music cues and overly intense eye contact. This eerie framing mirrors how Non is interpreted by others and draws on traditions of coded mental illness in horror and slasher cinema. Autistic scholar Rua Mae Williams has noted similar reactions to their own neurodivergence. They note that even when others are not aware, "when they interact with me, they immediately clock me as uncanny" (03:48-03:53). Non is depicted as uncanny, just off enough socially to signal his social alterity and neurodivergent coding. Throughout Non's story, he tried continually to be accepted by the group. He worked tirelessly on the script, acted as their errand boy, and

answered to the unflattering nickname, “Greasy.”⁶⁶ It is clear from their first encounter that the boys sensed Non’s differences, despite his efforts to fit in, and rejected him for it. After pitching his film idea, Non left the room, while the group, with the exception of Jin (and Fluke, a silent bystander), reacted negatively.

TOP. (Laughing) What is he talking about?

POR. That’s what I thought. Greasy’s head is so lame. That’s why no one wants to talk to him.

JIN. I think what Non said is really interesting.

TEE. I don’t even understand a fucking word he’s saying.

(“Episode 5” 06:45-07:02)

The boys expressed unwillingness to engage with Non—to them he was illegible. It was as if he was speaking another language. Thus, they were unwilling to cooperate with him socially. We can read this as a moment where neurodivergence is affectively and socially rejected. The boys found Non’s difference too much effort to navigate, so they reacted with disgust and frustration, not trying to “understand a fucking word he’s saying.” This dynamic resonates with Damian Milton’s formulation of the “double empathy problem,” mentioned earlier in my discussion of theory of mind. Milton notes that autistic and non-autistic people equally struggle to understand one another, but it is autistics who are framed as lacking—and thus expected to make up for the mutual communicative mismatch. We see this dynamic as the boys blamed their discomfort on Non, saying his “head is so lame.” While Jin initially tried to understand Non, the others only worked with him conditionally to get what they

⁶⁶ The Thai term used is *meuuak* meaning “slimy” or “mucous” (“bpen meuuak”).

wanted. His perceived difference placed him in a lower social status, justifying in their minds the escalating cruelty and disregard that led to Non's death.

This initial moment of rejection also takes on cultural dimensions. In Thailand, the head is considered sacred. In describing Non's "head as lame," Por not only lobbed an insult ripe with ableist undercurrents, but also dehumanized and degraded Non more broadly, placing him in a low and demeaned status. This ties closely to the Thai cultural concept of *nata*, which is often translated as *face*. *Face* bears resemblance to the western idea of public image but is more expansive. Anthropologist Larry S. Persons notes that *face*, at its heart, is about "claims...and judgments of worth" (Persons, xiii). In this model, you might act in ways that would "save *face*" for yourself (and, by extension, your family, friends, and community). Conversely, you would avoid doing things that make you or others "lose *face*." Within a collectivist society, managing *face* serves as an important tool for social cohesion, while also managing social norms and hierarchies. Yet a more literal translation of *nata* is "face-eyes," which indicates influence and prestige, or the external appearance of such. This can come through having certain skills, visible signs of wealth, or by holding positions that benefit the community (ex. priests, doctors, teachers, etc.). With social prestige comes social capital; people are more likely to interact with and cooperate with someone who appears to have "face-eyes" (Persons, 12-15). This, however, is only one part of the conceptual framework of *face* as a whole. Two other relevant aspects of *face* include *kiat* and *saksi*. *Kiat* refers to honor, as externally recognized through titles that formalize social capital, yet it also implies internal qualities of moral goodness. *Saksi* is an individualistic dimension of *face* meaning "endogenous worth" (36). To slight this sense of self is to attack one's value. Since all aspects of *face* are deeply intertwined, when one loses other aspects of *face*, they

may also see this as a loss of *saksi*. While *saksi* is something all people inherently have, it is also confirmed and judged by others based on conformity to respectable behavior and proper face management. If someone falls out of these norms, they may be accused of lacking *face* and *saksi* (38).

Non's differences were felt and intuited by those around him. He therefore was unable to properly manage *face* in a way that would earn social inclusion. His marginalization made him extremely vulnerable to losing *face* and to violence. Because the group did not view him as one of their own, they easily dehumanized Non thus denying him *saksi*. Non did not have value in their eyes, so it was easy to throw him under the bus. This played out through an escalating domino effect up until Non's death. When Top accidentally broke their expensive filming camera, he saw Non as an easy scapegoat. When Tee's uncle, who ran an illegal casino, needed people to open bank accounts, Non was the first person Tee targeted. When a cram school instructor realized Non was struggling, he tried to groom him. And when Jin found out Non was not the innocent boy he thought he was falling for, he spread a sex tape of Non and his cram teacher. Non's inability to fully hide his difference is a fundamental reason why he was treated the way he was. Ultimately, he was not able to play the social game in a way that would ensure his survival. This aligns with ethnographic work suggesting neurodivergent Thais navigate *face* from a precarious position, as "societal stigma and pressures to hide and mask neurodivergence are vigorously enforced" and noticeable difference ensures they operate at a loss (Mallory 3). In Non's case, his inability to mask marks him as disposable.

DFF inverts the mask of sanity trope by portraying society and forced conformity as the true horrors. People must hide their differences, and if they cannot, they are slated for

marginalization and violence. As previously noted, this dynamic has been discussed in autistic cultural spaces through the reclaimed metaphor of “masking.” Unlike the mask of sanity, the practice of neurodivergent masking articulates an opposing epistemology, referring to the ways we hide our differences by performing neuronormativity. The mask in this formulation is not taken up to hide latent villainy, but rather a forced act of survival that does harm to neurodivergent people. Sometimes, the practice of masking becomes so ingrained that it occurs unintentionally. Regardless, the weight of this performance takes a heavy toll. As Phatcharacom Nopacoh, a neurodivergent Thai artist puts it, “I am good at masking, but at the expense of myself” (Boonlert). In *DFE*, we see this in small ways as Non’s efforts to fit in and work with the group become exhausting. Even when he tells those around him that he is fine, he wears shirts that say “I’m sick of everything” or another that has a low battery symbol on it. From burnout and deteriorating mental health to suicidal ideation, masking comes with consequences. The horror then is not hidden mental illness but social conformity.

DFE literalizes this understanding of neurodivergent masking, specifically when the group forces Non to wear the masked costume in their film. Through most of the production, Non had been the writer and editor. However, late in the filming process, Por (who had been directing) demanded Non replace Top in the role of the killer. Non objected, as they had already filmed so much material. Por pushed back, asking Non: “Can you just do what I say, Greasy?” He asks Non to do as he is told, to conform, to both literally and figuratively put on a mask and play the role Por wants him to play. Because he cannot effectively mask in actual social situations, Non must don the villain’s mask in a fictional one. By being forced to act in a slasher narrative, Non is coerced into a mask of sanity against his will, explicitly

saying, “I don’t wanna play a murderer” (“Episode 7” 23:18). Such narrative dehumanization aligns with existing stigma and mirrors the violence he has already faced. Thus, the film’s mask operates on three entangled levels: as a literal object, as a metaphor for social masking, and as a genre trope for monstrosity.

DFF taps into the neurodivergent realities of masking and offers a counternarrative to neurodivergence as monstrosity. The show reimagines the iconic meaning of masks within slashers and asks us to read a new meaning into them—moving us from a mask of sanity to neurodivergent masking. In this vein, the iconography of masks offers a means of understanding trauma and violence by providing an empathetic model of horror. The physical mask in *DFF* becomes a metaphor for enforced normalcy, for the social performance we must enact in order to survive and for the ensuing violence when such a performance is deemed insufficient. This operates in deliberate contrast to films like *Halloween*, for example, where Michael’s physical mask literalizes the logics of the mask of sanity. *DFF* moves us away from this tradition and directly critiques the violence of narratives that mark the Other as latently monstrous. If the mask of sanity argues that the mentally ill take up a false performance of normalcy, neurodivergent masking reveals that this is actually a forced performance in a society that positions neurodivergent people as disposable.

Social Performativity and the Monstruous

In taking up themes of performance, *DFF* demonstrates that it is not only neurodivergent people who perform, but all social actors. *DFF* places masks and masking within the realm of performance, revealing the constructed nature of sociality and the monstrous. As Non was forced into the villain’s role, all he could do was confirm the

humanity of others, affirming the boys' stable sense of hierarchy and normalcy. As Persons notes in his discussion of *face*, "someone with alleged prestige...casts a compelling appearance of worth into social space," and while this may be based on real substance of character, "at other times it is mere window dressing" (15). *DFP* critiques this mismatch. The other boys navigate *face* more effectively than Non but are shown to lack the *kiat* that should ostensibly substantiate their outward social status. To assuage this dissonance, they reaffirm their own sense of goodness by forcing Non into the role of a monster.

Non's difference is disciplined until he is literally forced into the abject role of a monster. He is forced into pre-existing narratives about alterity, because these narratives reaffirm existing structures of power and social identity. Yet Non's death reveals that such models of sociality are defined through neurodivergent exclusion. This dynamic can usefully be described through the framework of the abject. Within horror studies, the abject is often used to describe the powerful affects of fear and disgust the genre evokes. In Julia Kristeva's original formulation, the abject is what we suppress in order to maintain a stable sense of subjectivity. Things like blood, feces, and dead bodies cause revulsion because they remind us that the body is an object rather than a living subject. This formulation has been extended to consider social oppression, or those who are positioned as less-than-human, or abject, in order to uphold normalcy and structural forms of subjectivity. Judith Butler goes so far as to argue that the abject is needed to define the bounds of the subject, without which the subject could not exist. In this expanded model of the abject, the social Other is suppressed because its very presence reveals the constructed nature of structural norms, thus evoking feelings of

fear and disgust. Similarly, the horror genre typically figures the Other as monstrous, reaffirming fear of the abject.⁶⁷

In this figuration, Non's difference must be disciplined, as it is a reminder of the boys' own fragile subjecthood and the precarity of their social standing should their own performances be revealed. This precarity hovers in the background: Por's politician father is abusive and worried about Por losing him *face*; Tee secretly grapples with poverty and is a caretaker for his mentally ill father; and Fluke remains a bystander to preserve *face* for his mother, who wants him to become a doctor. *DDF* does not suggest these stressors justify the boys' actions, rather the show contextualizes their behavior within social systems that require us all to perform for survival. As Rua Mae Williams productively notes, "There's no such thing as a neurotypical, only those who act in service of neurotypicality. And that service is violence" (Williams et al.). As Non's death shows, failure to be sufficiently proximate to this unreachable norm is traumatic and deadly.

In this context, horror becomes a narrative structure to cope with this fragility. For example, even after Non's death, the boys interpret themselves as victims in a slasher or haunting tale. This culminates in the final episode, where it is revealed that Non's brother New assumed the identity of Tan to infiltrate the group and avenge his brother's death.⁶⁸ He

⁶⁷ For discussion of the abject and neurodivergence in the gothic and science fiction genres respectively, see Sophie Rossi and Ryan J. Morrison.

⁶⁸ There is much that could be said about New's position within the narrative and his own practices of social masking. As he pretends to be Tan, New struggles to manage two identities. For example, he shows up at his mother's funeral dressed as Tan. He also is depicted using the visual tropes of a mad scientist as he develops a drug to use on the boys. This calls back to stories like *Jekyll and Hyde*, as well as the early model for the psychokiller, Norman Bates, who moves between being himself and his mother. At the same time, the narrative is careful to situate his struggle socially. He responds to the destruction of his family (Non disappears and both their parent's commit suicide in the aftermath) in destructive ways, but this is not the fault of neurobiology or latent monstrosity. In fact, we

drugs the other boys with a homebrewed hallucinogen, which causes their fears and guilt to play out before them. In some of their visions, Non remains the masked killer hunting them. Fluke, for instance, is chased by the masked killer, who takes off the mask to reveal Non covered in blood, laughing with a crazed look on his face. Top similarly sees himself being attacked by the killer, whose face oscillates between Non and the mask. By framing Non as h(a)unting them, Top and Fluke attempt to establish and reinforce their desired roles as victims.

Even in death, the mask of sanity remains firmly attached to Non. As Simon Bacon notes in his work on monster theory, "...it is our desire for monsters that brings them back from the grave..." (7). While Bacon refers to vampires and the subconscious, the passage also evokes a broader understanding of the monstrous: we long for and need the abject to shore up humanist subjectivity and notions of normalcy. We need it to the extent we will raise the dead. Crucially, Non never actually chooses to haunt this tale. He is dead, leaving only a blank space, a mask on which the boys can write their own slasher and ghost stories, stories where they remain the victims. In order to ensure their own proximity to the norm, they raise the dead. Non becomes a villain against which their own subjectivity is measured.

see this as a masking process that is psychologically destructive for New in its own right. His lost sense of self mirrors the way many neurodivergent folks talk about masking as a process that leaves them struggling to know who they really are under the neurotypical performance. New's sense of identity is cut off further when his father, shocked and hurt by his lies, tells him "from now on, you and I are no longer related" ("Episode 9" 41:38). At that moment, New/Tan loses the last social connection he has as New, losing his social identity. We see this process break him further as he starts to sample his own drug (another common element of mad scientist stories). After his father also commits suicide, Phee finds New dangerously high, and New tells him: "I got nothing left in my life anymore. Help me die, Phee. I've got nothing left" ("Episode 9" 45:56). New's story therefore mixes the effects of trauma and loss with the dangerous process of masking one's identity, offering another alternative to horror tropes around madness.

Yet, this very process also conceals the harm these systems do to all of us, the boys included. The hallucination literalizes this phenomenon by making the boys violently harm themselves and each other. Fluke stabs his own eyes out and grapples with Top, mistakenly thinking he is battling Non. Both boys fall over a banister, dying on impact. The horror narratives the boys tell themselves, then, literally hide the fact that we are all implicated in and harmed by the construction of normative sociality and its exclusions.

(Collective) Unmasking: A Neurodivergent Rhetorical Tool

In this section, I argue that *DFF*'s critique of narrative and social violence offers viewers a distinct neurodivergent rhetorical tool: *unmasking*. Within Western neurodivergent spaces, unmasking is viewed as a way to liberate and recuperate neurodivergent selfhood. Price frames it as "a radical act of self-love" and "a revolutionary act of disability justice" (11). *DFF* allows us to extend this tool, showing how *unmasking* can operate at a rhetorical level to reveal ableist narratives and hidden injustices. The first step for change is collective awareness, an *unmasking* of violence. *DFF* plays out rhetorical *unmasking* through moments of physical masking and unmasking in the show, demanding reflection from viewers of all neurotypes.

On the day of Non's disappearance, he chose to physically take up the killer's mask before physically unmasking to confront the boys. After his sex tape was leaked, Non took action, using the masked role forced on him to vent his hurt. He took a knife to their filming session, scaring the group when he went from playing the masked killer in their film to actively swinging the knife at them, blurring the lines between performance and reality. In making this move, *DFF* leans on the tradition of Thai revenge films, which at times evoke the mental break as a way of showing the toll of an oppressive society on the marginalized.

Regardless of whether mental illness is directly called on, these films conjure up deep affective empathy towards the marginalized, framing their revenge as justified if gruesome. Through this affective reversal, the audience comes to see through the villainizing role Non is expected to play. If Non is forced to take on the mask, he will take control of the narrative too, highlighting others' cruelty. This deliberate performance draws parallels to drag, wherein hyperbolic performances highlight the performative nature of gender.⁶⁹ Non's attempted performance of a revenge sequence turned the mask itself into a tool that *unmasks* the performativity of both madness and neuronormativity alike.

As he pursued the boys, Non made this *unmasking* literal. He took off the physical mask and at the same time unmasked socially, demanding they face his humanity. He aired out everything done to him: "You guys are shameless!... You took advantage of me. You tortured me. Bullied me. And you stole my work. Now I don't have anything left" ("Episode 8" 25:52-26:17). Non oscillated between anger and tears, demonstrating the deep emotional life Cleckley argued a psychopath lacks. Non took the mask off in order to force the group to recognize his humanity. From a neurodivergent perspective, he was socially unmasking, taking off his neurotypical mask. As he did so, he tried to transform himself from an outcast into someone the other boys could sympathize with. This moment demanded the boys and the audience alike shift their understanding of alterity, in a third, rhetorical form of *unmasking*. It is a demand that society recognize neurodivergent interiority and acknowledge the effects of social violence, rather than narrativizing us as dangerous.

Yet the show also questions the liberatory potential of individual attempts to unmask, pointing instead to the need for collective change. Asian Canadian autistic, Joy Lu, has noted

⁶⁹ See Butler's *Gender Trouble*.

similar limitations with calls to unmask that come from western contexts. Speaking to Chinese culture specifically and collectivist cultures more broadly, Lu notes the dangers of unmasking, which might result in “extreme rejection, isolation, and harm” in such contexts where “conformity is valued over individuality” (56). Rooted in and speaking to a collectivist culture, *DFF* also places a heavy emphasis on the limits of individual unmasking alone. Non’s ability to put forth a new narrative through unmasking was stopped in its tracks. Just as Jin began to apologize, Non passed out from a drug Tee placed in his drink earlier that day. Non was then brought to the casino by Tee where he would quietly die of internal injuries not long after. Non’s *unmasking* was unable to enact broad narrative or interpersonal change. This event demonstrates how normative systems adapt to and absorb critiques from those with little social capital, particularly when the burden of navigating normative performance is placed solely on marginalized social actors. The political weight of this moment was left inert, unable to make needed changes narratively or socially at the same instance Non officially disappeared, his disruption to the norm safely contained.

At first glance, this seems like a cynical perspective on the power of *unmasking*. Diegetically, Non’s attempts at unmasking fail to connect him with his peers. Yet, this failure works extra-diegetically on the audience. Non stared at the boys, receiving little recognition back, but the show itself stares at the viewer, implicating us. Throughout the show, we are asked to bear witness to violence that the boys themselves are not equipped to recognize. On another level, Non’s failure operates alongside a broader skepticism of individualism. *DFF* lodges an important critique of the power dynamics that dehumanize neurodivergent people and suppress our epistemologies. However, through the use of horror, the show argues for a path forward: collective care.

This is shown through absence of collective responsibility and care within the show itself and the way this leads to tragedy. This is most evident in Non's story, which highlights the exclusion of neurodivergent and lower-class people from unconditional social care. However, this theme is also brought home in the final minutes of the show. After New gasses everyone, Phee wakes up and saves Jin, Tee, and himself. In a traditional slasher these would be the survivors, the "final girls."⁷⁰ Phee and Jin seem to get a happy ending. Meeting up after two years, Jin expresses his thanks for Phee's forgiveness, before lamenting the fate of Tee. Tee survived, but only after killing his lover, White, while hallucinating. As a result, he is mentally broken. We get a shot of Tee alone in bed. He cries out for White, hits his head with his hands, and seems dissociated from reality. His fate plays on the trope of trauma and cognitive disability as punishment.⁷¹ Tee had perhaps the largest role in Non's death, delivering him to his uncle for punishment. He realizes his mistake and tries to help Non, but it is too late. In this sense, the narrative rewards Tee by saving his life, but punishes him by compounding guilt to the point of a mental breakdown.

Yet the show quickly subverts this ableist trope. As they talk, Phee suddenly sees Non walking behind Jin. He realizes they are still hallucinating; they never left the house and no time has passed. This bait-and-switch ending does interesting work in terms of what it has to say about neurodivergence and care. Discussing Tee's fate, Jin expresses that he wants to help him but does not know how. In response, Phee tells Jin, "No one can help [Tee]. He must get through this by himself" ("Episode 12" 33:08-33:13). Phee's attitude

⁷⁰ See Carol J. Clover's seminal work *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*.

⁷¹ Cognitive disability as punishment for guilt is a trope in other horror films, such as *Shutter* (Thailand, 2004).

presents an individualistic perspective on trauma and mental illness. It is no coincidence that these comments are embedded in a false ending that plays on an established genre trope, where a select few survivors become heroes. This offers a reflexive critique of the way slashers often perpetuate hyper-individualism and abjection.

This false ending is also purposeful in centering Tee as the traumatized survivor, not only for his last-minute change of heart, but because of Tee's own social and economic vulnerability. As a result of his father's mental illness, Tee is his household's sole provider. This dynamic is shown in a flashback where Tee returns home to find a neighbor yelling at his father. His father behaves similarly to how Tee is depicted in the false ending: crying, hitting his head, repeating a single phrase ("I want my land"), and generally being dissociated from reality. Their neighbor's reaction is particularly revealing. She tells Tee, "If he gets like this, you should lock him in the house," before threatening to call the police ("Episode 11" 20:42). For good measure she yells at him again to "lock your dad away" (20:58). In this moment, mental illness is framed as an individual problem, a burden on social cohesion, rather than a matter to handle collectively through social care and support. Without communal support, it falls on Tee alone to take care of his father while still a minor himself. The show does not try to excuse Tee's actions, but it does situate them in a larger system where the failure of collective care reinforces and propagates cycles of violence and harm.

This point is driven home in the final moments of the show. We get one last glimpse of the vacation house shot from the outside. Alongside the gate is a sign, reading, in both Thai and English, "No Entry"—a marker of private property. Social reciprocity is stopped at the gate, with the neurodivergent Other locked out. Neurodivergent people have long been

stereotyped as hiding behind a mask, a wall, an “Empty Fortress,” a mask of sanity. Here the violence of these encounters is inverted; it is the neurotypical who stands behind the shuttered gate. *DFF* highlights the violence of these exclusions, the harm of neuroableist narratives, and the performative nature of neuronormativity. However, it also offers a new way out of the house if we can ever manage to find it—collectivism and collective *unmasking*.

Conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, I have sketched a throughline from psychiatric discourses of masking to the figure of the psychokiller in slasher cinema to work on theory of mind. All of these serve as attempts to narrativize the neurodivergent Other in the face of anxieties over the precarious bounds of the human subject. Neurodivergence is figured as that which moves outside the bounds of the social. This figuration shores up the belief that there is a perfect social actor who can understand the minds and feelings of others without friction or limitations. This paints neurodivergence as abject, as not human or humane. *DFF* dialogues with this tradition, transforming it and *unmasking* the violence at the heart of such narratives. In doing so the show resonates with recent figurations of masking and unmasking that emerge from neurodivergent communities. Rooted in a Thai context, however, *DFF* demonstrates the limitations of individualistic models of *unmasking*, calling instead for a collective madness, a collective *unmasking*.

Chapter 2

Tenemos Que Enloquecer: Silence, Debility, and Mad Latinx Aesthetics

Introduction: Mad Aesthetics and Loca Epistemologies

In the 2019 collection *Ugly Music*, Dominican American poet Diannely Antigua opens her poem “There is Nothing,” writing:

There is Nothing
comparable to masturbating in a psych ward,
in a room with a bed nailed to the floor.
There are only 10 minutes to get it done,
until they open the door...” (44).

The poem captures a stolen moment. In ten brief, but unmonitored minutes, the speaker turns to sexual pleasure in the midst of the psych ward. The ward, with nailed-down furniture and locked doors, operates as a site of surveillance and control over the bodymind. However, the explicit discussion of sexuality pushes back, opening up space for pleasure, if brief, within the psychiatric institution as a site of normalization. In doing so, the poem taps into psychiatry’s long history of pathologizing the bodyminds of women of color. “There is Nothing” situates itself alongside a number of poems in *Ugly Music* that speak directly to experiences of depression and anxiety, reflecting at various points the psychiatric system and its promises and threats of control. Yet, in the midst of this, “There is Nothing” steals ten minutes to evade such constraint, all the while offering a non-medicalized definition of pleasure. Antigua writes “They say to feel pleasure again / is to be cured. / You don’t need the med changes. You need / an orgasm...” (44). Rather than medically defined notions of normative emotion, the speaker forges her own mad epistemology of pleasure via the body.

Outside of her poetry, Antigua has spoken about her experiences with mental health, including major depressive disorder and clinical anxiety. She describes this experience as an inner battle “against something within me that doesn’t want me to be alive” (Lezra). While Antigua locates this struggle internally, she places this in relation to external factors: “I think that voice inside me is a product of many things, including systemic racism. My continuing to live is a form of resistance.” In light of this Antigua emphasizes kindness, offering herself what the world has not. What Antigua centers, then, both in her poetry and her own personal philosophy, is an affective oasis that pushes back against systems of power and their violence to the Other—whether that power be exerted through formalized institutions like psychiatry or broader racist systems.

Thus far, I have referred to Antigua’s approach as a “mad epistemology.” In this I draw on the thinking of Peruvian and Mexican American Diosa Femme and Chicana Mala Muñoz. In their roles as public intellectuals and hosts of the podcast *Locatora Radio*, Femme and Muñoz present the framework of “loca epistemologies.” They root the concept in Latinx feminist thinking, defining a *loca* as “anybody who does not conform to what is expected of her” (08:59-09:04). They note that in a Latino context, *loca* can hold both punitive and positive meanings. On the one hand, it may refer to a woman who is not living her life on terms that are socially expected of her. On the other hand, a *loca* can refer affectionately to a woman who “don’t give a fuck” (09:05-09:46). Femme and Muñoz choose to reclaim the term, while considering the way *loca* operates rhetorically to silence women of color. For example, they note how *loca* is often used to describe and dismiss women and queer folk who are survivors of sexual, domestic, or social violence. In this

deployment, *loca* becomes a rhetorical tool that perpetuates epistemic injustice towards women.

At the same time, Femme and Muñoz take up the label of *loca* for its power to resist these silences by locating madness not solely in the individual but larger social systems. It is these systems that they describe as “crazymaking” or “locamaking” (08:44, 10:10-10:12). *Locamaking* as a term does interesting work to articulate the relationship between madness and society. First, it conveys the psychological damage of living in oppressive conditions. As the podcasters note, “I’m a *loca* by design, by environment” (32:06-32:10). They thus address how living in “really ridiculous conditions” has a material toll on mental health (10:28-10:31). For example, having faced “patriarchy and machismo, and fat shaming, and slut shaming,” they argue that it is no surprise that young women deal with anxiety and depression (11:13-11:39). Second, *locamaking* also names how those in abject positions, including women, are constructed as *loca*—through a speech act that renders them dismissible and dangerous.

In this vein, to name *locamaking* reveals the constructed and performative nature of *locura* (madness) and *cordura* (sanity). Such rhetorical figuration places blame on the individual rather than the conditions that make up their wellbeing. As Diosa notes, while mimicking this rhetoric, “You don’t have anything to be depressed about. You don’t have anything to be anxious about. You’re just being a *loca*. You’re making it up” (11:40-11:47). Like Antigua, Femme and Diosa locate mental health struggles both internally and externally. A similar formulation has been discussed by disability studies scholar Julie Avril Minich in her theorization of “radical health.” In her work, Minich argues that Latinx expressive culture can offer a model of health that opposes dominant US health paradigms.

She defines an ethic of radical health as “an insistence on destigmatizing pathologized bodies and minds without celebrating the injustices that produce them” (146). In reclaiming the term *loca*, Femme and Muñoz take up similar aims. They seek on the one hand to destigmatize their own mental health struggles and on the other hand to visibilize broader systems of power that are built on psychological violence.

In light of this reclamation, Femme and Diosa also present an archive of *locas*, people who have contributed their own loca epistemologies. They include figures like la Malinche and la Llorona who have been refigured as feminist figures by Chicana feminists. They also place in this archive Sandra Cisneros (a Chicana writer who prioritizes solitary happiness over traditional milestones such as marriage) and the Ni una menos movement against femmicide in Latin America. We might productively consider Antigua’s work as part of this same archive that Femme and Muñoz have articulated.

In this chapter, I turn to an archive of *loca/os* to identify a neuroqueer aesthetic rooted in Latinx bodyminds and political structures. I examine how Latinx writers and thinkers are reclaiming madness or *locura* within the framework of loca epistemologies. In the previous chapter, I examined the aesthetic and rhetorical practice of *unmasking*. This chapter takes a similar approach, considering the politics, rhetoric, and affect of madness, turning to artists who explore the creative and ethical possibilities of going mad. In this chapter specifically, I consider further how we might understand neuroqueerness outside of the universal. In this I draw on recent calls from neurodiversity studies and mad studies to move beyond White, Western conceptualizations and frameworks.⁷² This involves an

⁷² See for example *The Routledge International Handbook of Mad Studies*; Imada’s “A Decolonial Disability Studies?”; Carlos Cea Madrid’s “Latin-American Mad Studies”; Pickens *Black Madness: Mad Blackness*; Nair, Farah, and Boveda’s “Is Neurodiversity a

attention to historical and contextual particularities, “the structural contexts and relations of power within which Mad subjectivities, embodiments, experiences, and engagements play out” (Menzies et al. 15-16). *Locura*, here, does similar work to “mad” or “neuroqueer” at their most radical, but calls to bear Latinx positionalities, epistemologies, and histories. The chapter turns to crip Latinx thinkers, artists, and writers and the various ways they are engaging with *locura* as a resistant aesthetic and politics.

My thinking on loca epistemologies originates with the *Locatora Radio* podcast. However, I will place *Locatora Radio*’s feminist grounding in conversation with other uses of the terms *loca/o* and *locura*, and the way they signal both pathologization and a political epistemology that embraces madness and abjection. I will do so primarily via close reading of two texts. First, Francisco Matos Paoli’s forty-page poem *Canto de la locura* (*Song of Madness*). Matos Paoli was a Puerto Rican writer arrested in 1950 for treason under a gag law that targeted nationalists (those who supported Puerto Rico’s independence from the US). Matos Paoli spent five years in prison and the rest of his sentence in a psychiatric institution, where he wrote *Canto de la locura*. His work offers insight into *locura* as a material as well as political and aesthetic experience. Second, I will examine contemporary Chicano writer Ramón García’s 1999 short story “Amor Indio: Juan Diego of San Diego.” The story follows a cholo junkie who has visions of La Virgen de Guadalupe before dying of el SIDA (AIDS). Described as a *loco*, Juan Diego is connected in death to the *locas* at the local gay bar offering connection through abjection.

Global Northern White Paradigm?”; and Tam’s “Wither Indigenizing the Mad Movement? Theorizing the Social Relations of Race and Madness through Conviviality.”

Taking my cue from *Locatora Radio*, I will unpack how each text reveals processes of *locamaking*. In so doing, I offer three modes of *locamaking*. First, material—to place in conditions that damage mental wellbeing. Second, rhetorical—to label as *loco/a*, and in so doing, undercut political and rhetorical credibility. And third, affective—to place within an affective economy of disgust and to thus render abject and disposable. Through this analysis I am also interested in how these works shed light on the relationship of *loco/a* and *locura* with systems of colonialism, (neo)liberal empire, and a corresponding ethics of political struggle. I examine how these works shed light on which bodyminds are viewed as unnarratable (queer, Latinx, *loca*) and the various ways in which the state renders them disposable and abject. The act of reclaiming *locura* engages not just a practice of individual liberation but is tied to wider coalitional politics that speak back to systems of silence invested in upholding empire, biopolitics, and death.

Enloquecer: Material and Rhetorical Locamaking in *Canto de la locura*

Published in 1962, *Canto de la locura* (Song of Madness), is a forty-page poem written by Puerto Rican writer and nationalist Francisco Matos Paoli. The poem reflects on his intertwined experiences of political oppression and madness. Matos Paoli wrote *Canto de la locura* in 1961 during his time in a public asylum to which he had been sent in 1955 after a diagnosis of schizophrenia. Matos Paoli's time in a psychiatric institution served as an extension of his political incarceration. In 1950 he was sentenced to twenty years in prison for his role in Puerto Rico's nationalist movement. While he served as the Nationalist Party's Secretary General, his participation primarily consisted of speeches in favor of Puerto Rican independence. On October 30th, 1950, the Nationalist Party staged armed uprisings that would result in mass arrests of the party's leadership. Matos Paoli was

charged under Law 53 for patriotic speeches “incitando al derrocamiento del régimen a través de la lucha armada” (Waldron 93, Matos Paoli 16).⁷³ Law 53, also known as *La Ley de la mordaza*, was a gag law implemented in 1948 that suppressed public or private opposition to the island’s US-appointed Insular Government. Paoli would spend the next five years in the Insular prison *La Princesa* alongside the Nationalist Party’s leader Pedro Albizu Campos and other nationalist figures.

In 1953, the incarcerated Albizu Campos was examined by psychiatrists at the behest of then mayor Luis Muñoz Marín. Albizu Campos was given a pardon on the basis of poor mental health. Two years later, Matos Paoli would also be examined by psychiatrists and social workers, receiving a pardon alongside a diagnosis of schizophrenia. While Albizu Campos argued against the label of *locura*, framing it as a means to discredit him, Matos Paoli would acknowledge his past experiences with madness, holding it as both a material reality and a political construction.⁷⁴ In his *Autobiografía espiritual* (Spiritual Autobiography), published in 1982, Matos Paoli links the conditions of his imprisonment with his resulting loss of sanity. He writes:

...no pude resistir el confinamiento solitario y como consecuencia fatal enloquecí, perdí la razón. Me acuerdo que tuve un altercado personal con Don Pedro Albizu

⁷³ “...inciting the people to take up arms to defeat the actual regime” (26). All translations of Matos Paoli’s work by Frances R. Aparicio.

⁷⁴ Albizu Campos was examined after he accused the government of running radiation experiments on him and other prisoners. In the transcripts of his evaluation, he refused to consent to a psychiatric examination on the grounds that he did not want to undermine the legal case he was fighting. He notes that the government might use these psychiatric experts to discredit him. Scholars such as Carlos Gil (Puerto Rican historian) note that while it is uncertain if these experiments occurred for Albizu Campos, the US has a history of similar experimentation on prisoners (Part II, Section G).

Campos. Este no se había dado cuenta de que yo había enloquecido en la cárcel, debido a la presión psicológica del encierro y a las pésimas condiciones inhibitorias de toda prisión. El hombre ha nacido libre y no se concibe la angustia de su despersonalización en la cárcel. (16)⁷⁵

Here Matos Paoli offers his own understanding of *locura*. It is an experiential reality, but one induced by the dehumanizing and isolating conditions of incarceration. Matos Paoli makes the material reality of his experiences explicit in his autobiography where he refers to *Canto de la locura* as a “canto nacional influido por la experiencia pasada de la locura...” (18).⁷⁶ As such, his work sits at the convergence of the personal and the political, offering insight into processes of *locamaking*, in this case via the exertion of power by the state.

His work then highlights material *locamaking*, in which empire and the state exert violence that results in the destruction of mental wellbeing. Matos Paoli draws such a connection in *Canto de la locura*, writing:

Si ustedes quieren llamarme loco,
no pongo ningún impedimento a la afrenta.

Sé que soy el precito,
el inolvidable abyecto de la sombra,
el vencido sereno,

⁷⁵ “...I was unable to resist solitary confinement. As a result, I lost my sanity and became mad. I remember having a personal discussion with Don Pedro. He had not realized that I had lost my sanity because of the psychological pressures of confinement and the base, living conditions of any prison. Man was born free and the anguish of his deindividuation in jail is inconceivable” (26).

⁷⁶ “This national song, influenced by the past experience of madness...” (27).

el esclavo que a la luz perdona. (106)⁷⁷

Here he explicitly acknowledges the label of *loco* as derogatory in intent, as “la afrenta.” However, he embraces the label, connecting it directly to his position as a prisoner, as someone conquered by the state. As I will discuss later, Matos Paoli simultaneously uses *locura* as a lens to articulate the political violence he faced and to convey an alternative epistemological expression in the midst of this silencing. Here he situates being called *loco* alongside his experience as a prisoner, or “precito.” This harkens to his more direct comments from his autobiography. As his translator Frances R. Aparicio puts it “Madness became the price Paoli had to pay for his activism against the U.S. government” (32). In this light, *locura* describes a state of mental deterioration induced by wider systemic forms of control and violence. This aligns with the first formulation of *locamaking*, similarly articulated by Antigua and *Locatora Radio*, where mental illness is a lived reality produced by wider societal failures and systemic violence.

A similar dynamic has been written about by feminist critic Jasbir Puar in her work *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. Puar discusses the way that neoliberal structures systemically figure certain bodies as maimable, or more likely to come to bodily harm, often in exchange for neoliberal progress. These bodies are seen as extractable. She argues that current power structures ensure that certain bodies are “slated for death or slated for debilitation” wherein “power is made visible on the body” (x). Importantly, Puar critiques mainstream liberal disability rights frameworks, arguing that they do not account

⁷⁷ “If you want to call me madman, / I will not oppose the affront. // I know I am the small prisoner, / the unforgettable vileness of the shadows, / the conquered yet calm man, / the slave who forgives the light” (107).

for the ways that certain bodies are made more vulnerable to harm, thus excluding who gets included in the category of disabled and leaving these concerns invisible. In a neoliberal, rights and identity-based society, disability fails to include certain people, and moreover, its very existence is often predicated on the exclusion of and violence towards non-white, queer, and otherwise marginalized bodyminds. Thus, Puar turns to “debility” instead as a way of conceptualizing how certain bodies are positioned socially, economically, politically, and materially as maimable.

We might productively situate material *locamaking* alongside the concept of *debility* in order to figure how US empire renders certain populations more vulnerable to mental illness as a result of systemic violence. From Antigua to Matos Paoli, we see a connective thread of *locura* as a product of debility, whether that be through the experiences of political repression and incarceration or systemic racism. Both poets, writing sixty years apart, speak of the toll of oppression on their mental health, speaking to the material rendering of the bodymind as *loco/a*. Political struggle takes a toll on the bodymind, becoming personal struggle.

While Matos Paoli acknowledges his lived reality with *locura*, his poetry and experiences can also be understood through rhetorical *locamaking*. His diagnosis of schizophrenia functioned within the power structures of psychiatry operating as a tool for empire. Matos Paoli’s experience with the label of *locura* must be understood within the rhetorical framing of mental illness from the 1940s-1960s. The first asylum in Puerto Rico was opened in San Juan in 1844 in honor of Queen Isabel II of Spain’s birthday. Like most asylums of this era, the institution served primarily to isolate the mentally ill, vagrants, and other undesirable populations from mainstream society (Gil, Part II, Section A). However,

two large shifts in psychiatry occurred in the 1940s and 1950s in both Puerto Rico and the US, which would begin moving *locura* out of institutions and into the realm of public and national health—the Mental Hygiene Movement and the emergence of antipsychotic medications.⁷⁸ I will primarily focus here on the Mental Hygiene Movement, which heavily intersected with the growth in Puerto Rican psychiatry of the 1940s and 50s (Díaz, 74).

The 1900s saw the rising influence of the Mental Hygiene Movement, which would situate mental-wellbeing as crucial for social cohesion and health. Mental hygiene began as a reformist movement originating in 1908 with the publication of Clifford Beers' best-selling book *A Mind that Found Itself*. The work gave account of Beers' experiences as a patient in psychiatric institutions and discussed the abuses he faced. He would go on to found the Connecticut Society for Mental Hygiene and National Committee for Mental Hygiene in 1908 and 1909 respectively (Parry). While the movement's original aims centered around eliminating abuse, their goals quickly expanded to broader social health efforts, including education campaigns for mental hygiene and the development of psychiatric clinics (George et al.). Mental well-being and mental deficiency were now something that all citizens should strive to manage. In 1912, former President of the National Committee for Mental Hygiene, Dr. Llewellys F. Barker described the aim of mental hygiene campaigns as "a continuous effort directed toward conserving and improving the minds of the people, in other words, a systematic attempt to secure human brains, so naturally endowed and so nurtured, that people will think better, feel better, and act better, than they do now" (qtd. in Beer, Mental Hygiene Movement 297). A large

⁷⁸ The second big shift was chemotherapy, or antipsychotic medications. Antipsychotics became the focus of large studies in the mid to late 1950s and would result in a large shift in treatment, with lowered inpatient populations.

emphasis was placed on avoiding deleterious events in childhood that would lead to later insanity or delinquency. Education campaigns would give advice to individuals, parents, and psychiatrists on how to best promote prevention and recovery.

At first blush, this shift seems to move in a direction that would begin to align with local epistemologies as it began to situate insanity as something that could be socially induced and advocated for broad social treatment. However, the Mental Hygiene Movement still retained quite conservative notions of sociality, not straying too far from eugenic principles. Continuing his speech, Barker would go on to describe three classes of patients:

Now, such unfortunates are looked upon as patients with disordered or defective nervous systems, proper subjects of medical care; some of them are curable; some are incurable, but still educable to social usefulness; a part of them are socially so worthless, harmful or dangerous as to make their exclusion from general society necessary, or desirable. (qtd in Beers, Mental Hygiene Movement 298).

Here, social usefulness and non-disruption still remain the primary benchmarks by which the destigmatized patient is divided from the delinquent, insane, and psychopathic. This divide would continue into the 1940s serving as a benchmark to regulate social conformity, while the systemic violence of institutions, including psychiatry, continued uncritiqued. A hygiene textbook for college students from 1946 represents the continuity of this thinking:

Those lacking a developed social impulse constitute the greatest drag on civilization. At best, such a person is *asocial*, neither for nor against the social welfare, but virtually against, since he is not for. At worst, he is *antisocial* and turns his hand against society in criminal acts, or he becomes mentally ill. It is perhaps lack of

social feeling more than anything else that distinguishes the mentally ill from the mentally well. (Meredith 780).

While the movement emphasized social duty, the blame lay solely on the individual, while social well-being remained in the realm of the biopolitical.

By the mid-twentieth century, numerous mental hygiene departments and organizations had been established both in the US and internationally. In 1940, Puerto Rico too would see the establishment of El Negociado de Higiene Mental y Educación Sanitaria (the Bureau of Mental Hygiene and Health Education). The overall stated goal was to disseminate information about mental hygiene to the public in order to prevent the emergence of mental issues, personality disorders, and delinquency (Gil Part II, Section E). However, in practice it served as a means of conformity. In a 1945 health bulletin by the Insular Department of Health, mental hygiene is described as “algo más que una tragedia familiar: constituye también una amenaza para la colectividad” (299).⁷⁹ Here, collectivism is weaponized as a rhetorical means to punish non-conformity and enforce social utility. Matos Paoli’s own description of his psychiatric treatment reflects the divides made between curable citizens and the insane:

Lo llamo Manicomio y no Hospital de Psiquiatría porque fui alojado en un almacén de locos, sin esperanza alguna de recuperación en mi salud mental. En el Manicomio estuve varias veces recluido. Fui sometido a electrochoques, a la quimioterapia, a la psicoterapia, etc. Un día, extraña paradoja, un psiquiatra, desesperado porque yo no daba visos de curación, me trasladó al pabellón de los locos irremediables donde

⁷⁹ “Something more than a family tragedy: it also constitutes a threat to the collective” (translation my own).

vivían los casos crónicos sin esperanza alguna de salvación. Llegué a la conclusión de que los psiquiatras no curan a los enfermos mentales. (17)⁸⁰

This description conveys the degree to which the psychiatric system had absorbed mental hygiene. Beers' original critiques about treatment and advocacy for recovery only extended to those who could demonstrate social utility.

Much like the wider movement, mental hygiene in Puerto Rico would operate as a form of social control, in this case deeply tied to the politics of US empire. Perhaps most striking is the fact that Albizu Campos was diagnosed by US trained psychiatrist and mental hygienist Luis M. Morales (Gil Section II, Part G). Both Albizu Campos and Matos Paoli would be caught up in psychiatric systems and discourse tied to the state. Regardless of his lived experience with *locura*, Matos Paoli's diagnosis itself was deeply embedded in biopolitical discourse that rendered political opposition as a threat to the collective, as *loca/o*.

Such political and rhetorical *locamaking* extended, however, beyond individual political dissent. In his work on the history of psychiatry in Puerto Rico, historian Carlos Gil notes the merging of the political with public health, leading *locura* to be tied to notions of public safety and national security. Gil brings up an important touchstone in Puerto Rican politics. In 1950, Puerto Rican governor Luis Muñoz Marín spoke with the US Congress

⁸⁰ "I call it asylum, and not a mental hospital, since I was placed in a warehouse of madmen, with no hope whatsoever of recuperation. During my stay, I was placed in solitary confinement a few times. I received electroshocks, chemical therapy, psychotherapy, etc. One day, paradoxically, a psychiatrist transferred me to the ward for the hopelessly insane, with the hopelessly chronic cases. He was desperate since I did not show any signs of recovery. I concluded that psychiatrists do not cure the mentally ill" (26). Chemical therapy here refers to psychiatric medications, most likely antipsychotics which had been discovered, tested on patients (without consent), and widely implemented from the late 1950s onward.

regarding the law that would ultimately grant Puerto Rico its own constitution and partial self-governance. In his defense of the bill, Muñoz Marín attempts to put congress members' minds at ease, telling them "You know, of course, that if the people of Puerto Rico should go crazy, congress can always get around and legislate again" (Gil Section II, Part H, Subsection 1). This led Puerto Rico's government to develop a legal system that would keep Puerto Rico "sane" in the eyes of congress, resulting in policies such as *La Ley de la mordaza* and the intertwining of the legal sphere with psychiatry. As Gil puts it "...si el pueblo de Puerto Rico actuara contrario a lo que es ser un buen ciudadano americano, el Congreso podría volver a legislar sobre el país, para *curarlo*. Actuar contrario a la buena ciudadanía es una forma de locura" (Gil Section II, Part H, Subsection 2).⁸¹ Mental illness then became tied not just to individual conformity but to the wider conformity of Puerto Rico to US imperialism and notions of appropriate colonial citizenship. In this vein any threat to the careful balance of Puerto Rico as a territory must be rhetorically and legally made *loca* lest Puerto Rico as a whole be further caught up in colonial processes of rhetorical *locamaking*.

Through his poetry, Matos Paoli explores the consequences of such *locamaking* and the silence it produces. Throughout *Canto de la locura* Matos Paoli grapples with the way *locura* and political suppression have displaced him from commonly understood frameworks of language and meaning. This comes to the fore in lines such as "no sería el idiota entre / la comunicación y la incomunicación" and "nunca pedí la nada" (102, 104).⁸²

⁸¹ If Puerto Rico were not to behave like a good American citizen, congress would return to legislate the territory, in order to cure it (translation my own).

⁸² "I would not be the idiot left between / communication and non-communication", "I never asked for nothingness" (103, 105).

He acknowledges the way *locamaking* abjects him from shared structures of meaning. Literary critic John V. Waldron, in his work on the poet, notes that Matos Paoli often expressed shame over his *locura*. Waldron argues that this discomfort came “precisely because they [depression and *locura*] take him beyond the limits of word and the political” and “signal an end to language” (93-94). This opens possibilities to forge new meaning, while also being a product of epistemic injustice. I will later explore how Matos Paoli reclaims *locura* as a means to convey new epistemological realities. However, it is productive to consider the means by which such epistemic rewriting becomes necessary.

As articulated in the introduction to this dissertation, epistemic injustice is a concept introduced by philosopher Miranda Fricker. It refers to the ways we come to be systematically harmed in our capacity as knowers, limiting knowledge production. Fricker identifies two forms of epistemic injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker is “given a deflated level of credibility,” while hermeneutic “occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (1). When Matos Paoli was incarcerated, the state directly attempted to censor his perspective and epistemologies, erasing poems he would write on his cell walls. Despite this, he managed to compose two collections of poetry while in prison, though he was forced to smuggle his writings out with his wife (Waldron 100). By rhetorically labelling Matos Paoli as *loco*, the state took this further, reducing his credibility alongside the credibility of nationalist ideas. I would argue that this is not simply a matter of lost reputation, but also rhetorical power. In their work on autistic rhetoric, rhetorician Remi Yergeau has articulated the way that autistic people are framed as non-rhetorical, if not abjected from rhetoric altogether. We might view rhetorical *locamaking* as

operating on similar principles. If direct control of Matos Paoli's words and poetry did not work, then labelling him *loco* provided a means to eject him from political and rhetorical spheres.

To label Matos Paoli *loco*, places him in a chronic state of rhetorical abjection. In some ways this harkens back to early definitions of *locura* within medieval Spanish law and later colony law. Here *locura* was seen as a fluid and flexible condition, where one might have periods of madness and periods of sanity. One's responsibility under the law was based on which state an individual was in. In his work on this history, Gil gives an example of marriage, where one must be in a sane state to consent (Gil Section I, Part D). This calls to mind J.L. Austin's conception of speech acts and performative utterances. Austin argues that all language performs action but only so long as it is deemed "felicitous," meaning it meets the conditions to be performed. A main example Austin gives is saying "I do." In the context of a wedding where there are witnesses and an officiant, this would complete a legal action. In the context of the Spanish legal system, one's mental state would similarly factor into whether a speech act is deemed felicitous or infelicitous. Moving to the 1940s and 50s in Puerto Rico, we see that in the context of mental hygiene, *locura* is now viewed as a flexible state or an incurable one based on standards of social utility. In Matos Paoli's case, despite later improvement, he was sent to a ward for chronic cases, where *locura* was seen as a permanent state deserving of isolation. Within this context, to be labeled *loco* also rendered all speech infelicitous, unable of rendering action, of creation, whether artistic or political. In this sense, when Matos Paoli mentions being "entre la comunicación y la incomunicación" he references at once his abjection from the rhetorical, from performative language, and from communal knowledge making.

As mentioned previously, despite being abjected, Matos Paoli chooses to embrace nothingness, the borderlands of *locura*, as a means to render new logics outside existing political and ontological structures. Waldron argues that it is at this “threshold marked by the sign *locura*” that Matos Paoli is at his most political, as “*locura* constantly challenges him to come up with a different response to colonialism” outside of purely nationalist frameworks (94).⁸³ Far from perfectly liberatory, the poem oscillates between such new possibilities and a return to the imaginary of nationalism. It moves between the guardrails of existing language and new possibilities. Matos Paoli’s work also turns to the spiritual and the notion of immanence. While he expressed a lack of belief in psychiatry’s ability to cure mental illness, he felt that he was able to heal through his “fe religiosa en la Virgen María,” leaving him “...de bastante salud mental, a pesar de que todavía, sobre todo, por las mañanas, experimento alguna depresión nerviosa” (17).⁸⁴ Here, Matos Paoli figures his own experience with *locura* as managed and mediated by religion. Significantly, his experience with *locura* after such a revelation is one that embraces fluidity and experimentation. This is in contrast to the psychiatrists who would render him chronically *loco* and abject. It is this reclaimed fluidity that allows Matos Paoli to explore the epistemological possibilities of *locura*.

Matos Paoli reclaims *locura* to render legible that which has been rendered unspeakable through processes of *locamaking*. In a significant stanza, he writes:

⁸³ Waldron also offers an important critique towards nationalist logics. Waldron does not elide the importance of anti-imperial struggle but also points out that nationalism still operates within colonial frameworks of the nation state. Such critique is important for considering the possibilities in Matos Paoli’s work without veering into the utopian.

⁸⁴ “...religious faith in the Virgin Mary”, “I enjoy sufficient mental health, even though still, sometimes in the mornings, I experiment certain states of nervous depression” (27).

Yo se que de la saliva de aquel loco
brotó el ramo rojo de rosas,
brotaron las constelaciones,
el aéreo andar
que redime la planta encanecida. (60)⁸⁵

Here it is the saliva of the *loco* that is generative; he performs a speech act in his own idiolect, producing a bouquet of roses where speech would normally emerge. Roses also tie closely with the Virgin Mary and figure prominently in the story of la Virgen de Guadalupe. In the story, a Nahua peasant, Juan Diego or Cuauhtlatóhuac sees an apparition of the Virgin Mary who asks for a church to be built in her honor. When Juan Diego goes to a local bishop, he is not believed. This recurs multiple times until the Virgin tells him to gather flowers as a sign. He does so, finding castile roses, which are not native to Mexico. She also imprints her image on Juan Diego's tilma or cloak. With these signs, the bishop finally believes Juan Diego (Medina). The reference to this story in Matos Paoli's work draws a parallel between Juan Diego and his own experiences of *locura*, importantly touching on themes of disbelief, where one is deemed non-credible. Yet, it is such knowledge that brings revelation and change. The madman's tongue holds wisdom and the potential of new realities. Madness becomes its own language, an idiolect that circumvents the legal and psychiatric logics of the state. Therefore, reclaiming *locura* as an epistemology opens up new possibilities.

⁸⁵ "I know a red bouquet of roses sprouted / from the madman's saliva, / constellations emerged, / an aerial walk / that redeems the graying plant" (61).

It is perhaps for this reason that Matos Paoli calls for *locura*, arguing “Tenemos que enloquecer” and “Pero hay que enloquecer” (62, 72).⁸⁶ He calls for madness as an alternative epistemological framework with generative power. In her own work on Matos Paoli, literary critic Wanda Rivera-Rivera, argues that he employs “madness as a call to collective action,” a literary move that “unveils the logic of the colonial government in Puerto Rico” (198, 212). Loca epistemologies in Matos Paoli’s poem, then, work to identify and call attention to the violence of the state. As he calls for everyone to go mad, he articulates the stakes of not doing so: “Pero hay que enloquecer, // No me conformo con el mar adoquinado / de supinas estelas. / (Cristo mata la muerte)” (72).⁸⁷ He makes a clear contrast between madness and conformity. To conform is associated with moral passivity and death, with the image of lying supine on one’s back. This at once condemns those who would fail to act against political wrongs while also conjuring up the toll of state violence. Through poetry, then, Matos Paoli reclaims *locura* as a means to make visible the logics and rhetoric of existing power structures.

However, Matos Paoli makes it clear that structural change is not a burden that can be carried by one madman alone. He writes, “Yo no puedo / esperar / la palabra, / ser el maestro loco que afina el horizonte” (60).⁸⁸ He cannot wait for language or existing structures to include him. However, he cannot change things (“afina el horizonte”) on his own. Others must also go mad; they must be aware and take part in co-creating new

⁸⁶ “We must go mad” (63), “But the world must go mad” (73).

⁸⁷ “But the world must go mad. // I won’t conform to the sea paved with supine wakes. (Christ kills death)” (73).

⁸⁸ “I cannot / wait / for the word, / or be the mad teacher who tunes the horizon” (61).

frameworks in the borderlands of *locura*. To go mad, *enloquecer*, is to find new epistemologies and new generative possibilities in the abject. It works alongside but in opposition to forms of *locamaking*, embracing the knowledge produced from these margins and from lived experiences of madness, while rejecting the structures that render one *loca/o*, whether via debility or rhetorical silencing.

Loco and Locas: Affective Locamaking in Ramón García's *Amor Indio: Juan Diego of San Diego*

In the previous section, I mapped out two forms of *locamaking*: material and rhetorical. This section turns to articulate a third form of *locamaking*—affective. I will explore how processes of disgust get tied to particular bodies, rendering them abject and primed for disposability. To do so I turn to Ramón García's 1999 short story *Amor Indio: Juan Diego of San Diego*. Through my analysis I also examine how García's text reclaims *locura*, figuring other affective and interrelational possibilities in the abject.

Amor Indio follows the titular Juan Diego, a cholo junkie who has visions of La Virgen de Guadalupe. He is referred to by a local flower salesman as a “*loco* with visions in his eyes” (143). The story begins with Juan Diego cruising down Imperial Avenue while high. He sees a woman at an intersection and stops to flirt with her, before he begins to confuse her for the actress Maria Félix from the movie *Tizoc*, *Amor Indio*. She, however, introduces herself as “Maria, *La Doña*, *La Devoradora*, *La Immortal*, *La Indomitable*, Maria, *La Unica*, Nuestra Señora de San Diego” (142). She hands him a bed sheet and asks him to fill it with roses. When Juan Diego returns with the flowers, the woman disappears leaving him with a bedsheet imprinted with the image of María Félix from the film. He takes the sheet to his local priest Father Carlos, who recognizes that Juan Diego is sick and dying.

As the story comes to a close, Juan Diego dies of el SIDA (AIDS). The bedsheet is donated to the local gay bar where the mistress of ceremonies is a Maria Félix impersonator. At the bar, the mistress lights candles to honor those who died of el SIDA, including Juan Diego.

García's story draws together two kinds of *loco/as*. First is Juan Diego himself, a drug addict whose visions place him in conversation and ultimately, through death, fellowship with the local Latinx community, or *locas*. García's story comes from the collection *Virgins, Guerrillas, Locas: Gay Latinos Writing About Love*. The use of *loca* in the title draws on the use of the term to refer to queer Latinos, largely effeminate gay men and trans women. It is this same connotation that the story evokes through the local gay bar and its mistress of ceremonies. The two kinds of *loco/as* are drawn together via el SIDA, through a virus and a community that honors their lives in death. However, the shared use of *loco/a* here also gestures to and names another shared status—that of abjection.

Both groups (queers and drug users) have historically been seen as Other, as problems to fix. This is evident in shared histories of psychiatric pathologization and institutionalization. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, drug users who entered the US legal system were often sent to asylums alongside other patients (Mendocino). With the onset of eugenics, drug addiction would be closely attached to the idea of degeneracy, feeble-mindedness, and negative hereditary traits (Larsson). Alongside the Mental Hygiene Movement, drug use became associated with personality disorders and delinquency. Queerness was also pathologized as early as 1886, when psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing argued that non-heterosexual behavior was a form of psychopathy, or psychopathic

personality (Gruenewald).⁸⁹ Through the eugenics era, queerness would also be a target. For example, many early cases of sterilization were associated with sodomy infractions (Stern).⁹⁰ By 1973, the American Psychiatric Association had removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (Drescher). However, the following year, George Rekers and Ivar Lovaas, would publish their first paper on the Feminine Boy Project. This would go on to form the basis of gay and trans conversion therapy as well as Applied Behavioral Analysis (a mainline therapy for autistic children often criticized by autistic activists). It should also be noted that this history is deeply intertwined with race. For example, during the eugenics era, diagnoses of feeble-mindedness were often doled out based on race, and a number of analyses have shown that Latino/a Americans were sterilized at increased rates (Lira and Stern, Novak et al.). While this has been only an overview, I hope to capture how both drug users and queer people, the *loco/as* of García's story, have historically been caught up in the institutional logics of psychiatry, labeled as degenerate and mad.⁹¹ In this sense *loco/a* becomes an appropriate term, capturing these histories of

⁸⁹ In this case “psychopathic” is meant in a broad sense to refer to psychological pathology, not the term’s later meaning of psychopath as appears in the 1900s. It was used at the time to refer to what psychiatry viewed as pathological personalities, or egos in the psychoanalytic model.

⁹⁰ According to Alexandra Minna Stern, a review of sterilization records from the Jeffersonville Reformatory in Indiana shows around a third of cases listed sodomy as the infraction. Indiana passed the first sterilization law in the US and globally in 1907.

⁹¹ This does not, of course, touch on the further intersection of this history with the evolution of the US carceral state and the ways in which race, disability, queerness, and drug use coalesce via criminalization. See Che Gossett’s work on AIDS activism for a discussion of drug criminalization and HIV criminalization as they intersect with race and necropolitics.

institutional *locamaking*, while also capturing in a broader sense how such systems render specific groups of people as abject.

While *loco/a* in the story indexes these histories, it does not do so directly. Rather *Amor Indio* centers on el SIDA as a means to articulate shared experiences of state sanctioned disposability. In her work on the history of HIV/AIDS activism, Deborah B. Gould speaks to this expendability, describing the US as:

...unmoved by the deaths of hundreds, thousands, and finally hundreds of thousands of its own inhabitants, largely because the overwhelming majority of them were gay and bisexual men, and the others were seen as similarly expendable: drug users as well as poor men and women, a disproportionate number of whom were black and Latino/a. (Gould 45)

In his story, García intentionally draws together those at these marginal intersections, they are the *loco/as*, the abject. Literary scholar Julie Avril Minich, has described such works as “unprotected texts,” gesturing to narratives that explore both the precarity of HIV positive status as well as the way such subjects are rendered unprotected by the state. Put another way, *Amor Indio* is a narrative that highlights the operations of necropolitics. Theorized by Achille Mbembe, necropolitics refers to “the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die” (66). It is a companion to Michel Foucault’s notion of biopower, where biopower controls life and necropower controls death. In the case of el SIDA, we have an example of necropower, operating through silence and abandonment, where it is the abject who are rendered disposable.

When I discussed Matos Paoli’s work, the focus was on active forms of rhetorical and biopolitical control. Here, in the shadow of necropolitics, we find a third form of

locamaking, one that operates affectively to co-construct abject Others. In her work on AIDS metaphors and mestizaje, Victoria Carroll offers a productive turn to affect. Drawing on Sarah Ahmed, Carroll argues that HIV/AIDS is an object of disgust, and this disgust is built by a chain of associations:

Disgust is, therefore, deferred along a chain of signification: HIV/AIDS is abject because it signifies gay sex; gay sex is abject because it signifies femininity; femininity is abject because it signifies penetration; penetration is abject because it signifies a loss of control, the relinquishing of sacred bodily borders to the other.

(693)

In this vein, the stigma attached to HIV/AIDS relies on discursive histories and previous associations that are impressed on an object. While these histories may be forgotten or obfuscated, the affect, the disgust, remains. I would argue that these deferred associations include histories of psychiatric stigma and abjection that were previously discussed. These expand through further associations to cling in the present to drug addicts, to queers, to Latinx bodyminds. In this sense *locamaking* moves through and beyond the rhetorical to the affective. Such affective *locamaking* constructs the *loco/a*, the abject figures that make up García's text.

It is this process of *locamaking*, of abjection, that the text works to highlight through loca epistemologies. While affective *locamaking* weaponizes disgust, operating through a "chain of signification," Juan Diego forges his own chain of visual signification. In her work on affect, Ahmed describes disgust as "sticky," associating it with touch and contamination. In contrast, García's story operates through sight, creating a competing visual language. From the beginning of the story, Juan Diego is described as "cruising down Imperial,

looking for the ultimate vision” (141). He of course finds this vision when he sees the woman standing on the corner. There ensues a series of visual overlaps, a chain of visual signifiers. The woman is at once Maria Félix and Nuestra Señora de San Diego. Of course, she is not just Maria Félix but Maria Félix from the film *Tizoc*, “a vision straight out of Canal 12’s *Cine Millonario*.” In the film Félix plays a woman, also named Maria, who is described as looking like the statue of *La Virgen* in the fictional village’s local church. Her image is then transposed onto the bedsheet, and in the final lines of the story, we are given one more mirrored image as we learn the mistress of ceremonies at the local gay bar is a Maria Félix impersonator.

This chain of signifiers uses vision(s) to draw connections and highlight necropolitics. From the “*loco* with visions in his eyes” we move through this chain to a drag queen, connecting them briefly in life before Juan Diego’s death to el SIDA. Juan Diego’s visions are passed on visually in two ways. First, to his mother, who saw “*La Virgen de Guadalupe* in Juan Diego’s eyes in his last moments on earth” (145). Second, to the local queer community through the bedsheet that becomes part of a memorial for all those the community has lost to el SIDA. His visions, then, create an interrelational network that honors both biological family and other more abject connections. In her own work, Carroll argues that HIV can be viewed as “a form of queer inheritance, one that questions but does not necessarily erase existing models of kinship” (698). My consideration of kinship here draws on this formulation while thinking alongside *locura* as an epistemological and affective framework that similarly restructures relationality. In the wake of el SIDA, to locate those connections and kinships, pushes back on the silent erasures of necropolitics.

The story represents this resistance visually, through the memorial, an “image of love and salvation,” and the lit candles representing every life lived and lost (146).

Amor Indio, however, does not limit the scope of its criticism to el SIDA alone. When the woman hands Juan Diego the bedsheet, she asks him to fill it “with roses, the color of blood, the color of the blood of your people, the color of memory and genocide” (143). Here, she gestures to deep histories of colonialism and genocide. This connection is brought to the fore more firmly as Juan Diego is often called Indio by his friends for his dark skin and high cheekbones. His name also links him with Juan Diego from the legend of La Virgen de Guadalupe creating a shared and overlapping history. In this way, the story links the present narrative of abandonment under el SIDA to larger racialized histories of death and necropolitics under colonialism. This is conveyed once again through visual language; red becomes a metonym for roses, but then becomes a metaphor for blood, which in turn is a metonym for historical trauma. Arguably, the turn to visual language works to create associations that connect people through time and space. They work at the level of affect, drawing up the histories that necropolitics (via disgust) works to obfuscate. In doing so, the story models how to generate new forms of interrelationality in the abject.

Loca epistemologies in García’s work map new affects, attachments, and interrelationalties. This dialogues with José Estaban Muñoz’s work on affect and feeling brown. In his work, Muñoz conceptualizes brownness as rooted not in fixed racial identity but rather a shared affective position emerging from abjection that he terms the “depressive position.” He notes that “feeling brown” captures the “ways in which minoritarian affect is always, no matter what its register, partially illegible in relation to the normative affect performed by normative citizen subjects” (679). Therefore, it is not just the history of

normative affects (such as disgust) that is obfuscated, but alternative experiences and performances of affect by minoritarian subjects as well. However, Muñoz also conceptualizes feeling brown as a recognition of the Other whose tears and “histories are elided” (686). Muñoz finds in this recognition a potential for “feeling together in difference...through sharing a status of being a problem” (Chico 39). In García’s story, *locura* operates on similar principles, drawing together those who are “a problem,” while gesturing to histories and affects that are elided.

In this reclaimed model of *locura* there is not disgust, but desire, an impulse to see similarities, to see a drag queen as the Virgin Mary, to draw connections. This vision of *locura* also has parallels with thinking on mestizaje in Chicana feminism, including Gloria Anzaldúa’s 1987 work *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Anzaldúa conceptualizes the borderlands as “una herida abierta,” an open wound, “where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (3). This painful space is occupied by a range of abject people: “the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (3). For Anzaldúa this space is painful but also possesses a coalitional possibility. She draws together the mestizo and the queer as a blended figure “that proves that all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned out of similar souls” (85). Anzaldúa further articulates this as a “mestiza consciousness,” where binaries are broken down and new meanings and interrelational possibilities are created. She notes that this work “makes us crazy constantly, but if the center holds, we’ve made some kind of evolutionary step

forward” (81). Here too perhaps Anzaldúa articulates *locamaking* as well as a feminist epistemology that offers steps forward.⁹²

This also aligns with Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez’s articulation of a “politics of abjection,” where, through performative abjection, there is a possibility to “[destabilize] the borders between normal and deviant, insider and outsider, sameness and difference, health and illness, life and death” (548). We might add *locura* and *cordura* (sanity) to this list as Shayda Kafai does in her work on “the mad border body.” Kafai draws on Anzaldúa’s borderlands to conceive of epistemological mappings that do not place sanity and madness as a binary. In her figuration, “the mad border body reminds us, just as the mestiza and queer border body do, that identity categories are not given but constructed; identities are created in the act of edging, in the in-between living that dominant culture often scrutinizes and assumes invisible.” For both Sandoval-Sánchez and Kafai the binary of normative and abject too is constructed. Yet in the in-between there is possibility. For Kafai this is in the act of telling and retelling that transforms stories around madness. Meanwhile Sandoval-Sánchez envisions a politics of abjection in which forms of abject performativity map new affective terrains. It is perhaps not coincidental then that García’s story draws on the performative, through various iterations of performance, from an actress to a drag queen.⁹³

⁹² Anzaldúa also turns to the visual in ways that resonate with García’s story. In her work she discusses projecting stories “in the inner screen of my mind” (69). She notes that she used to think she “was going crazy” or “having hallucinations” but over time she saw it as part of her writing process. Anzaldúa describes this as a full-body experience, using it to unearth and heal from trauma.

⁹³ In their work on gender performativity, Judith Butler gives drag queens as a significant example, wherein gender is exaggerated to such an extent that its very constructed nature is highlighted.

This might be compared to Matos Paoli, who I already noted grappled with the loss of language and performative agency in the face of rhetorical *locamaking*. He created his own abject idiolect through a rose on a madman's tongue. Both works, in this vein, draw on the same iconography and the same religious story of La Virgen de Guadalupe. Matos Paoli does not tap into the visual so heavily as García, choosing to attend more closely to the boundaries of language. If his work made the rhetoric of *locamaking* heard, then García's work makes the affect of *locamaking* visible. Both seek to find new creative and performative possibilities in the abject and in *locura*. While Matos Paoli emphasizes a collective maddening where we all join him in *locura*, García's work traces the possibilities when those already rendered *loco/a* come to forge connections.

Conclusion: We Must All Go Mad

I want to return here to the work of Diannely Antigua which opened this chapter. Antigua begins her poem "The One With the Cat and the Hospital" writing,

When I google *disability for depression*,
they want to know how crazy I am before
I can benefit. They want to know how many
hospitals I've slept in. I can't walk
to the mailbox some days.
I can't boil the water. I forget
to feed the cat, change the litter.
She bites my feet when I walk past the couch.
She scratches my face after I give her a treat." (54).

What does it mean to narrate madness? Here, Antigua articulates a tension between her own daily experiences of depression and the narrative data that is legible to legal and psychiatric systems. These systems want data, such as the number of times she has been to the hospital. But instead, she paints daily experiences, embodied, personalized experiences that are invisible, meaningless, and unnarratable to the state. They do not fit universalized psychiatric models, models that are unable to map personal pains and pleasures, let alone abject epistemologies and affects. As Muñoz notes, affect is typically only mapped for “the universal white subject.” Rather, feeling down emerges from a “kind of affective particularity” associated with brownness and queerness. This too is something Antigua gestures to when she associates her depression with systemic racism.

What then does it mean to narrate madness in a Latinx bodymind? The authors explored here locate their experiences in the specificity of time, place, and race. Their bodyminds become sites on which processes of *locamaking* are crafted materially, rhetorically, and affectively. Yet each author chooses to find something in the madness, in *locura*. *Enloquecer*, to become mad, to convey that which has been deemed disgusting, disposable, and unnarratable. *Locura* operates as one possible neuroqueer aesthetic mode emerging from Latinx epistemologies. Like we saw in the previous chapter, such aesthetics fuck with established narratives, while drawing attention to epistemologies that are systematically rendered unnarratable.⁹⁴ Here, each author draws our attention to processes of abjection and the material, institutionalized, often deadly consequences of *locamaking*. They each grapple with how to forge new epistemological and affective frameworks when

⁹⁴ Here I refer in part to the deployment of *loca*, articulated by Locatora Radio where it refers to a woman who “don’t give a fuck.” I also refer to Remi Yergeau’s claim that “neuroqueer subjects fuck with rhetoric” (60).

operating in the in-between of communication and non-communication. It is from this abject position, from a perspective rooted in local epistemologies, that they make an ethical demand: “tenemos que enloquecer,” we must all go mad.

Chapter 3

It's All in Your Headcanon: Neuroqueering Online Fandom

In December 2001, Wired.com published an article entitled “The Geek Syndrome.” The author, Steve Silberman, noted how at the time there was a marked increase in the rates at which children were being diagnosed with autism and Asperger’s syndrome within families working in the tech sector of Silicon Valley.⁹⁵ Silberman emphasized the genetic underpinnings of autism, arguing for a link between “mild” forms of autism and technological prowess. Ultimately, Silberman’s article helped cement a connection between autism (particularly Asperger’s syndrome) and geek culture in the public consciousness. This connection has also been advocated for by figures like Temple Grandin, who argues that “geeks, nerds, and people with mild Asperger’s syndrome are often one and the same thing” (“The Way I See It,” 172). The Asperger’s Geek figure has, moreover, bled into popular culture, becoming one of the more popular representations of autism in Western television, film, and literature. Perhaps the most pervasive example of this trope is the character Sheldon Cooper from the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*. While the show’s writers and producers have shied away from labelling the character, many viewers interpret the character as autistic or autistic-coded (Waldman). At the same time, reception of Sheldon Cooper by autistics has been mixed, from those who strongly relate to the character to those who find him to be an offensive stereotype. The link between autism and nerd or fan culture is far from uncomplicated.

⁹⁵ At the time Silberman wrote the article, Asperger’s and Autism were two separate diagnoses. They were united in the DSM V as Autism Spectrum Disorder.

What is perhaps at once interesting and troubling is the contradictory way in which nerdiness has become heavily attached to autism in the public imagination, yet little research has been done to examine the contribution of autistic and neurodivergent people to geek or nerd culture. Here, I take fandom as my central framework of exploration. Despite the way in which autistic people are linked to fandom and geek cultures in the public consciousness, we are simultaneously viewed as marginal within these spaces. The contributions of autistics to nerd and fandom cultures are rarely explored in any depth, inside or outside of academic scholarship. While there is invaluable research being done on what might draw autistics to certain forms of alternative media engagement and entertainment, less attention is paid to the ways in which autistic people are using and manipulating these spaces in agential ways. Moreover, even less attention has been paid to the way in which autistic modes of creation, embodiment, and subjectivity may be essential to the foundation of these spaces. Frequent discussions of autism and fandom often focus on the benefits of fandom to autistic people but rarely acknowledge or conceptualize how neurodivergent people construct fandom or expand its structural or discursive possibilities.

This is not to argue that all autistics are nerdy, nor is it the goal of this chapter to provide a numerical account of how many neurodivergent individuals participate in fandom. Rather, the aim of this chapter is two-fold. First, I hope to put forward a theoretical account of fandom that demonstrates how such space is rooted in often overlooked neurodivergent practices. In this, I am arguing for a view of fandom that examines how neuroqueer aesthetics and discursive practices are foundational to fandom as well as the playful, at times resistant practices that it engenders. My second aim is to examine how autistic fans are utilizing fandom spaces in creative, agential, and rhetorical ways. Thus, the second half of

this chapter will examine how autistic fans are using headcanons (non-canon interpretations of a work) as a way to address problems of autistic representation.

Rethorizing Fandom as Neuroqueer Space

Fan Studies and Marginal Positions

Fan studies has long positioned fandom as a transformative space, arguing that the transformative works that fans create (fanfiction, art, headcanons, videos, fanzines, etc.) do important work to destabilize and subvert existing narratives.⁹⁶ In recent years, fan studies has greatly emphasized how fandom, particularly digital fandom, has become a space that allows minorities to speak back in agential ways. Importantly, this work has emphasized how this alternative space has opened up room for women and LGBTQIA+ folk to explore gender and sexuality, particularly through slash.⁹⁷ Such research has been an important

⁹⁶ This interpretation has roots in the oft-cited work of Henry Jenkins on textual poachers and subculture from 1992. Rukmini Pande argues that the first wave of fan studies was primarily concerned with “reclaiming the image of the fan from the stereotype of being uncritical consumers of lowbrow popular culture” (3). This means that much of fan studies is built upon emphasizing the subversive and resistant practices of fans. While this utopian view of fan practices has been complicated in important ways over the years, there is still an interest in how fandom functions as a space for subversive practices.

⁹⁷ Fanfiction has been interpreted in some instances as a space for women to explore sexuality through the writing and consumption of alternative forms of pornography. “Slash” refers to the fan practice of romantically or sexually pairing two characters of the same gender. Typically, it refers to male pairings, whereas the pairing of women is often referred to as “femslash.” The common explanation for the term’s origin is that it emerged in early *Star Trek* fandom and fanzine culture. Fanfiction writers would use a slash between the names “Kirk” and “Spock” to indicate romantic or sexual content. This was in contrast to the use of an ampersand that indicated a platonic pairing. This distinction is still used in fandom spaces such as the archival site Archive of Our Own (AO3). Much like fandom culture itself, slash has roots in early science fiction fan communities. Slash has been interpreted as a way of queering popular media, and, given its wide popularity among women, a subversive way of exploring women’s sexuality. These discussions surrounding

contribution to a growing recognition of fandom as a transgressive and queer space. However, this focus on gender and sexuality has often been at the exclusion of other important vectors of identity, limiting our understanding of the internal tensions that exist within fandom culture and of the full transformative potential of fandom. As Indian scholar Rukmini Pande notes in her work *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*, “racial and ethnic identity is somehow seen as additional to gender and sexuality” and thus rarely taken into rigorous theoretical consideration (8). Pande further argues that one “rhetorical strategy that is increasingly common in the field is an acknowledgement of the diversity of participants (usually in a footnote or an aside), which is followed up by a simultaneous disavowal or deflection of the need to actually engage with these issues” (7-8). Pande’s work is thus concerned both with exploring the internal tensions that fans of color face in fandom spaces and with theorizing fandom as a postcolonial cyberspace whereby its subversive potential takes on specific valences rooted in postcolonial discursive practices. In a similar vein, I hope to examine the complex ways in which neurodivergent fans participate in and contribute to fandom. Moving beyond simply interpreting fandom’s transformative possibilities along the lines of gender and sexuality, I hope to also root fandom’s subversive tendencies in a neuroqueer aesthetic, thus, honoring the contributions and specific practices of neurodivergent fans.

I argue that fandom and its practices are heavily informed by neuroqueer practices. This connection, while not fully explored, has been noted or implied by a few scholars and writers. In his work *Neurotribes*, which attempts to articulate a history of autism, Steve

fandom and sexuality began in the first wave of fan studies in the late 80s and early 90s (Lamb, Veith, Bacon-Smith, Penley, Pande).

Silberman examines writer, inventor, and editor Hugo Gernsback, noting Gernsback's large influence on early science fiction fan culture as well as the science fiction genre itself.⁹⁸

While Silberman does not directly credit neurodivergent people with starting science fiction fandom, by featuring Gernsback in a work on the history of autism, Silberman implicitly draws a connection between neurodivergence and early fan culture. Such a connection is more explicitly proposed by Elizabeth Fein in her ethnographic work on role-playing subculture and autism. Fein notes that while autistic people are not the only ones to engage in alternative subcultures, their neurodivergent traits serve to organize these spaces and structure nerd identity. Fein notes that "manifestations of neurodiversity...serve as a potent force for the organization of cultural symbols, practices, narratives and relational ethics into a robust and recognizable schema" (315). In other words, while nerd culture (and for Fein specifically role-playing culture) draws a wide, neurodiverse range of people, its structuring logics have roots in neurodivergent practices.

Beyond these emerging observations, I believe early connections between neurodivergence and fandom can also be seen in the particular anxieties that surrounded both autism and fans in the second half of the twentieth century. In her 1992 piece *Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization*, Joli Jenson argues against a prevailing concern about fans at the time, namely the 'obsessed fan.' Jenson notes how fans were portrayed in two ways, either "the obsessed loner" who might go on to kill the celebrity of their affection or "the hysterical mob" (14). These understandings of fans arose

⁹⁸ In the fourteen years between the publication of "The Geek Syndrome" and *Neurotribes*, Silberman's thinking on and understanding of autism considerably evolved. While there are still critiques to be made of *Neurotribes*, the work is much more informed by autistic voices and is cognizant of neurodiversity.

during the rise of celebrity culture that predated the internet. At the time, the main focus of the media and fan studies was on the inherent danger posed by fans, such as those who ended up killing celebrities or those who were deemed hysterical. Often such depictions had gendered undertones. Jenson notes the way fans become pathologized as obsessive and mentally unstable through these stereotypes. More importantly, Jenson argues that these negative depictions of fans are rooted in modern anxieties about alienation and “mass persuasion.” On the one hand, the “obsessed loner invokes the image of the alienated, atomized ‘mass man,’” while on the other hand, “the frenzied crowd member invokes the image of the vulnerable, irrational victim of mass persuasion” (14).

The pathologization of specific interests as obsession is not new to neurodivergent people. What we now term “special interests” in the autistic community, or “hyperfixations” in the ADHD community, are frequently pathologized by the medical community as “perseverative interests” or “interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus” (CDC). Both fandom and neurodivergent ways of expressing and engaging in interests are pathologized as obsession. Even more striking perhaps is the way in which the media has historically depicted autistic people in a similar manner to the “obsessed loner” that Jenson identifies. In her work on the images surrounding autism in the media of the 1960s and 2000s, Jennifer C. Sarrett notes how tropes of “fragmentation and the imprisonment of children with autism” dominate. It is hard not to draw parallels to the alienation and atomization of the “obsessed loner” fan. Arguably, such anti-fan sentiments have been built on the same foundations and anxieties that drive anti-autistic sentiments: modern changes and shifting understandings and anxieties about human subjectivity. Thus, we could argue that fandom as an alternative space has been singled out precisely for the ways in which it challenges neurotypical norms.

At the roots of fandom's subversive power is the way in which neurodivergent subjectivity, communication, and modes of expression and engagement challenge ingrained notions of humanist subjectivity.

While the rise of the internet and the increasing popularity of fandom has shifted some of these dynamics in recent years, the ways in which fans continue to be stigmatized are often directly connected with autistic forms of expression. Since the 2010s, we have seen the rise of "cringe culture." Originating on reddit in 2012, cringe culture usually involves the posting of videos, photos, or other media that depicts people doing something or engaging in an activity that is deemed "cringeworthy" or embarrassing (Alfonso). More often than not, this is an excuse to cyber-bully other people based on behavior or interests that fall outside of the acceptable norm. Unsurprisingly, this harassment is often directed at neurodivergent people, especially when they express strong emotions such as excitement or are having a meltdown. Neurodivergent people also get harassed for having interest in topics or media that is deemed too "cringy," especially when their interests are deemed as "childish." More broadly, cringe culture is perhaps better known for how it commonly targets fandom culture, particularly more niche fandoms or fandoms based around source material where the intended audience is children, such as *My Little Pony*, *Undertale*, or *Minecraft*.

Often, cringe culture is critical of forms of entertainment and expressions of enjoyment that fall outside of popular norms (Cringe Culture; thecaffeinebookwarrior). A number of neurodivergent fans have noted how this implicitly targets and harms neurodivergent people, such as X user @cassunzels who writes "i feel like most allistic ppl dont understand tht cringe culture is tied 2 autism & ableism irt autism." Similarly, Tumblr user grrlofswirls notes that "a lot of the stuff that is commonly considered 'cringe culture'

tends to have a large, or highly visible, autistic fanbase.” Through this we can see how critique of fans and fan culture has often been closely linked to negative views of neurodivergent people, including their interests, aesthetics, and forms of self-expression.

Neuroplay and Tinkering with Stories

The way in which neurodivergence gets caught up in anti-fandom rhetoric demonstrates a strong connection between fandom and neurodivergent practices. Here I further this connection in more positive ways by examining how fandom is inherently shaped by neurodivergent aesthetics. In doing so, I want to explore the idea of neuroplay, which I briefly discussed in the introduction to this dissertation. Neuroplay or “neuroclowning” was conceived of by Simone René Antillón as a way of conceptualizing how neurodivergent people deploy failure, clowning, and play as tools to queer and disrupt neuronormativity. As Antillón notes, “Neurodivergents are often unable to ‘produce’ in the traditional, ‘business-as-usual’ way and this queers the hegemonic narrative of success that rules such norms, thus threatening the whole structure.” Neuroplay is a form of failure in the spirit of Jack Halberstam’s work on queer failure, in which he views failure as central to a subversive, queer praxis. As Antillón describes it, neuroplay, or neuroclowning, “is chaotic, disruptive and transformative. It evokes youthfulness and sacred folly, like that which a clown presents. This is how play contributes to the neuroqueering of humanity.” Importantly, we might argue that if neurodivergence is framed as a failure to be human to the degree that it evokes deep anxieties about humanist subjectivity, then to express one’s neurodivergence becomes a subversive act that queers the human.

In their conceptualization of neuroplay, Antillón, adopts Halberstam’s notion of a “silly archive,” which includes an alternative collection of cultural products that fail to have

high cultural value, such as animated films. Halberstam argues that such an archive might allow us to “open up to new narrative opportunities” that “have led to unexpected encounters between the childish, the transformative, and the queer” (186). Antillón expands this archive to include clowning, improvisation, and play. One might argue then, that to be neurodivergent is often to express oneself in ways that will be deemed childish, but which are also often transformative and queer. Neuroplay, I argue, flourishes in fandom spaces, in spaces that have perhaps been traditionally seen as childish themselves. Fandom is a space where ‘canon’ and ‘narrative’ are played with, commented on, engaged with, and transformed to a radical degree. In this light, neuroplay, I argue, can also include the process of tinkering with and playing with narrative and discourse. Therefore, I view neuroplay as a practice wherein narrative and form come to be played with, commented on, engaged with, and transformed to a radical degree. Such practices thrive in fandom and are an essential part of its creative culture.

My reading of neuroplay as a neuroqueer aesthetic has parallels with Julia Miele Rodas’ work on autistic poetics. In her work, Rodas explores commonly agreed upon aspects of autistic language, attempting to articulate what an understanding of autistic expression would look like when framed as rhetorical and poetic. Rodas notes how many of the traits that are pathologized in autistic people are prized in literary circles. Here, I take up Rodas’ conception of autistic ricochet, discretion, and invention—three key autistic poetic practices. Expanding these notions beyond poetic techniques to narrative techniques, I intend to briefly demonstrate how such autistic aesthetics inform fandom practices.

In her work, Rodas notes how autistic repetition, what she terms ricochet, is often framed as meaningless and non-receptive. She argues, however, that such repetition does

important work as it “also posits an imposing, even a threatening abundance” (34). Echoing, or ricocheting, this sentiment, Remi Yergeau notes that “there is a queer pleasure in echoing” (“Authoring Autism” 199). Fan works might be thought of in terms of ricochet, as fan art, fanfiction, and other works indulge in an exploration and repetition of canon narratives, characters, and worlds. Here we might classify certain fan responses as falling outside of typical norms of reception, whereby instead of taking the source material as it is, and being a consuming/receptive audience, the fan instead “erupts with language” and creation, indulging in the playful recreation and exploration of fictional worlds and narratives (45). Like autistic people, fandom is critiqued for its egocentric excess and failure of reciprocity.⁹⁹ Yet, it is these very qualities and practices that make fandom a subversive and creative space for engaging with narrative. As Rodas puts it, ricochet might also be understood as ““an endless exchange of question and answer”” (Onions et al qtd in Rodas 45). In a similar vein, fandom and the works fans create thrive on an endless questioning and answering of narrative possibilities—the playful “what if?”

The “what if?” at the center of fandom practices is also deeply in line with the ordered thinking of autistic people. Rodas terms this “discretion,” noting that “...autistic orderers are builders and inventors...[they] are imaginers, alert to what-might-be, building structures and places, arranging facts, composing information, arranging visual and verbal phrases into orders that signal and express these possibilities” (63). As I have noted, fandom thrives on the idea of asking “what is possible?” Fans are constantly reshaping stories to

⁹⁹ Fandom creation has typically been viewed as the wrong type of participation within a capitalistic model where the ideal fan would reciprocate by being a consumer. If fans are using their time to create, they are spending less resources on merchandise. Thus, fan creators are often framed as non-reciprocal in a market framework.

explore new and endless connections and possibilities. Fandom is also a space where traditional boundaries are often dissolved. Take for example, the “AU”, or alternative universe fanfiction. These fan imaginings take characters from one story and place them in another, often crossing genre boundaries and creating unexpected connections between works that the original creators might have never anticipated. Ultimately, fandom thrives on fan practices that refuse or fail to live up to the original creators’ interests and expectations, while at the same time drawing connections and exploring possibilities that could only exist through a playful disregard of existing boundaries.

Such playfulness also aligns with Rodas’s conception of autistic invention. Rodas defines invention as “the elaboration and repurposing, the hacking and modding of ready-made language to transform it into startling new expressive patterns” (64-65). Here, we might usefully expand Rodas’ conception of autistic invention to include the seizing and transforming of narrative. Rodas focuses particularly on wordplay, on the autistic tendency to play with language, to create new language, and to think critically about language. She notes, in particular, the tendency towards puns, the way puns form a playful critique of language structure, and the way in which the neurotypical response to puns usually starts and ends with a groan. Rodas thinks about invention as trickster language, noting how puns and satire are often “abhorred...for [their] trickster language, the concealment of [their] critical dagger.” Fan productions are similarly dismissed as trivial, cringeworthy, and too playful.

The playfulness inherent in fan work is often built on inventive tendencies—the desire to draw out tensions, to critically point out the original work’s flaws, mistakes, and erasures. While fandom often responds with direct criticism (meta-commentary, for

example) another response is to creatively explore the alternative possibilities for a work through headcanons, fanfiction, and fan art. The fix-it fic is just one example of this, where a fan writer directly addresses some aspect of the canon narrative that they felt was done poorly. Other examples of criticism can be found throughout various fanfictions. Take, for instance, the fanfiction *Eight Little Candles* by Pargoletta, which reimagines the Marvel Cinematic Universe as much more queer and culturally diverse. Among other changes, the fanfiction gives Steve Rogers (Captain America) a male love interest and reimagines him as Jewish. Thus, *Eight Little Candles* critiques the original work through an exploration of the possibilities for representation the films leave. Similar to puns or satire, fan work is often dismissed as trivial precisely because of its resistance and the anxiety such resistance creates.

Fandom thus becomes a playground in which to transform works and tinker with narrative possibilities in a way that is playful and neuroqueer. This becomes evident in the very way in which fandom thrives on autistic aesthetic and linguistic practices. If autistic practices help us to rethink fandom as a neuroqueer space, fandom also helps us to think further about neuroqueer aesthetics and the subversive possibilities to be found in neuroqueer and neuroplayful spaces. In the next section, I will explore this further by examining one particular way in which neurodivergent fans are engaging in transformative, neuroqueer practices: the autistic headcanon.

Reshaping Stories: Agency, Headcanons, and Neurohacking

In the months before starting my PhD program, I learned that I was autistic, and it changed my life. So much of who I am and what I have experienced makes sense to me now, and it has given me the opportunity to truly embrace myself in a way that was simply

not possible before. Like many people, before my discovery, I knew little about autism or neurodiversity apart from the narrow and ableist narratives that dominate the cultural consciousness. To me, autism just was not a possibility. I did not understand that I could be autistic, because, like many people, I did not understand the diversity of what autism actually looks like or, more importantly, what it feels like as an embodied experience. I certainly never found myself in the dominant cultural definition. I did not see myself in Sheldon Cooper, or diagnostic definitions, or any depiction of autism from an allistic perspective. How could I ever see myself in something that is so often defined as being opposed to agency and subjecthood—the very things we are told we should strive for, even if in reality they are never truly attainable?

Instead, I recognized myself for the first time unexpectedly through fandom. While engaging in online fandom on Tumblr, I ran across a post where a favorite character of mine was explicitly being read as autistic. This character is not autistic in the source material but is often interpreted as such by the autistic fan community. The posts explained why and how the blogger saw the character this way, and everything started to click for me. I began looking into autism by seeking out autistic spaces online—Tumblr, YouTube, blogs, spaces where autistic individuals and autistic knowledge-making exist outside more mainstream channels. In the end (or perhaps the beginning) I found out an essential part of who I am through fandom.

As I have noted, however, within fan studies neurodivergence is primarily a side note. Frequently the connection between neurodivergence and fandom is explored through the ways in which fandom might constitute a form of therapy for autistic people. In other words, fandom becomes framed as that which acts upon autistics rather than a space in

which we are the actors and creators. This follows clearly on the trend articulated by Remi Yergeau whereby (rhetorical) agency is often denied to autistic people (“Authoring Autism”). Despite this, recent work has begun to explore autistic participation in fandom in more rich ways, particularly through an examination of fanfiction that includes autistic characters. This scholarship is paving the way for more nuanced understandings of the disruptive potential of fandom and fanfiction when it comes to neurodivergent subjectivity. For example, Black et al. and Lugo et al. have examined representations of autism in *Harry Potter* fanfiction on the site fanfiction.net. While these studies examined works by both autistic and allistic writers, they proposed that these works have the potential to reshape meaning around autism. Similarly, Scott Folsom has examined *Sherlock* fanfiction wherein Sherlock Holmes is written as autistic. Folsom notes that while stereotypes may still exist in some fan works, autistic depictions in fanfiction “create an image of autism that is not bound by what society thinks about autism” (Folsom). This scholarship acknowledges how autistic representation within fandom spaces poses disruption to dominant narratives about neurodivergence.

Building on this work, I want to explore how autistic fans employ neuroqueer rhetorical techniques that challenge and rework existing narratives surrounding autism. To do so I will examine posts by autistic fans on Tumblr that identify characters as autistic even when such characters are assumed to be neurotypical. Such posts are one manifestation of what is termed in fandom as “headcanons.” Headcanons are a common feature in fandom; they are simply put, “Elements and interpretations of a fictional universe accepted by an individual fan, but not found within or [directly] supported by the official canon.” (“headcanon”). Headcanons come in many forms. However, in online spaces like Tumblr it

is not uncommon to see fans headcanoning characters as, for example, trans, queer, disabled, racially diverse, autistic, and so on—thus reading marginal identities into characters. I will argue that in this capacity, the writing of headcanons is a fundamentally neuroqueer act that works to reshape the discourse surrounding autism and autistic subjectivity.

Representing Autism: The Pathology Paradigm and Autistic-Coding

My story is not entirely uncommon. Many neurodivergent and neuroqueer folks find out who we are through online spaces. As a community we have come to use online spaces, particularly fandom spaces, to articulate our experiences, to claim and narrate our own stories. There is power in claiming a neurodivergent identity; in doing so, we become disorderly, we queer a system that wants us to strive for an unreachable notion of the normal subject. However, this claiming becomes exceedingly difficult when there is little space in the dominant narrative for autistic voices to communicate our experiences let alone to see and identify ourselves. Within popular media, there is a lack of substantial autistic representation. If we look at characters on the spectrum, they are rarely diverse, often stereotypical, and created with little input from autistic people themselves.

Before I jump into a direct examination of autistic headcanons and neurodivergent practices in fandom, it is important to lay out the wider dynamics of representation that are at play. Here I will examine a few key ways in which autistics are represented in literature, film, and television. Further, I will lay out the complicated way in which autistic-coding colors autistic representation and fan responses. This is important for understanding the media and fandom environments in which autistic headcanons exist and to which autistic fans are responding. Media representation of autism is of course a shifting landscape. Yet despite this, stereotyped representations of autism loom large. Most examples of explicit

representation are often problematic in some form, typically following a pathologizing perspective. Characters, such as Max Braverman in *Parenthood*, for example, have been criticized for the way that the narrative focuses on how autism affects the family/caregivers (while perpetuating metaphors of isolation and fear), rather than exploring a full-dimensional autistic character (Holton).

Explicit representation of autistic people is rare, and good representation is even rarer.¹⁰⁰ Much more frequently, what we get are autistic-coded characters. These are characters that are not explicitly stated to be autistic, but who are clearly being written with autistic traits in mind, whether intentionally or not. Christa Mullis notes how writers frequently draw on autistic traits when they try to write “quirky” characters, even if writers rarely acknowledge this connection. As Mullis notes, when it comes to television, most show runners tend to side-step the responsibility of identifying their characters as autistic, even while being comfortable depicting autistic traits in their writing. This includes *The Big Bang Theory* producer Bill Prady as well as the creator of *Hannibal*, who implied in the show’s pilot that one of the characters is autistic only to refute this later (Faye). Mullis notes that for these writers/creators “Autism is too big, too scary, too real, too hard, and more

¹⁰⁰ In more recent years, a few promising gems have cropped up, though typically these are far and few between. In 2020, Kayla Cromer became the first openly autistic person to play an autistic character in a lead role, playing the character of Matilda on the Freeform show *Everything’s Going to be Okay* (Gomes). The 2022 Australian series *Heartbreak High* would also see an autistic character played by an autistic actress. In 2017, Sesame Street added an autistic Muppet named Julia with input from the president of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) Julia Bascome. This representation had a positive impact overall (Anthony et al.). Unfortunately, in 2019 Sesame Street chose to partner with Autism Speaks on their “Screen for Autism” initiative, which included promoting the organization’s “100 Day Toolkit,” which, among other things, encourages parents to go through the Kübler-Ross stages of grief as if their child has died (Luterman). Due to this, ASAN officially ended their partnership with Sesame Street (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, “ASAN Has Ended Partnership”).

importantly, autistic personhood, is far too removed from the (presumably) non-autistic audience's own world to possibly be a part of a fictional one" (149). Mullis taps into the fact that autism is frequently viewed as radically opposed to common understandings of personhood to the degree that our stories are not seen as narratable. In the minds of these creators, autism is so divorced from subjecthood that even characters with a host of autistic traits cannot be autistic as this would radically challenge modern conceptions of human subjectivity. In this framework, autistic characters cannot exist unless their personhood is decentered.

Importantly Mullis points out that autistic-coded characters have and always will exist, that "we have long associated traits like lack of eye contact, and difficulty with sarcasm and picking up subtle cues, and love of routine, and restless fidgeting or awkward gait, with *that type* of character" (152). Yet, she notes, it is only when they fit the DSM checklist of traits that it is acceptable to recognize them as such. Much of what deters creators from labeling their characters as autistic comes down to a fear of how a medical label often divorces the character from multi-dimensional personhood. Rather than taking up the label and working to deconstruct the reductive nature of the DSM checklist, or to question why autism is often equated with the unhuman, these writers shy away from the burden of creating quality representation. In this light, labels are seen as limitations. In this vein, both explicit and implicit representation of autism in mainstream media is constrained by pathologized models of neurodivergence that deny autistic personhood.

A further problem arises among characters that are autistic-coded, in that they often fall into the Geek Syndrome stereotype discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Characters such as Sheldon Cooper or Sherlock Holmes have popularized the quirky,

intelligent, autistic-coded character. However, while connections between autism and geek culture are far from unfounded (some autistics are drawn to math, science, and geek culture), the Geek Syndrome has proven in many ways to be a damaging stereotype. The popular depiction of the nerdy autistic often obscures the vast diversity of individuals on the autism spectrum, who represent a wide range of interests, skills, and life experiences. It should be noted that the Geek Syndrome is typically only attached to individuals with less support needs, or occasionally to those who also present with savant syndrome. This means that those who are perceived to be “low functioning,” are excluded and often pitted against the figure of the “Asperger’s Geek,” as Gwen Greenwood terms it. Temple Grandin, for example, has stated that, “In an ideal world the scientist should find a method to prevent the most severe forms of autism but allow the milder forms to survive” (*Thinking in Pictures*, 122). In this way, there is little room for rich representations of autistic people in the stories we tell, especially not stories of the future.

Such perspectives often frame autistics as the next step in evolution, while those who fall further outside of capitalistic norms of success and productivity are seen as expendable and pathological. Built into this, is a model minority myth that frames the Asperger’s Geek as valuable due to an ability to contribute to the workplace in a technologically driven society. This is in opposition to those that fall outside of the narrow acceptable norm of what a successful cognitively disabled person should look like. Namely, the Asperger’s Geek is envisioned as white, male, intelligent, talented, straight, cisgender, and otherwise able in body and mind.¹⁰¹ In her examination of Aspie Supremacy, Anna N. de Hooze notes how

¹⁰¹ It should be noted that oftentimes this figure is coded as asexual, though I would argue that this is asexual or queer representation. Often, disabled characters, and especially autistic characters are desexualized, as are real disabled people. This is different from

depictions of autism in media are typically less concerned with accurately portraying an autistic character than using the stereotypes associated with Asperger's to freely express extreme forms of white, male privilege.¹⁰² Using BBC's *Sherlock* as an example, de Hooge notes that, "Sherlock, of course, does not stim. Like other Aspie-coded characters, he is not portrayed as someone with a divergent neurotype, but as the extreme version of an entitled, allistic, white man...In this manner, Asperger's is produced as something entirely different from autism." Thus, while the Asperger's Geek might draw on autistic quirkiness, the figure is far from being autistic representation. In this vein, de Hooge notes how typical autistic directness becomes twisted into ego-centric rudeness in characters such as Sheldon Cooper or BBC's Sherlock Holmes. This means that while we might see representation that co-opts specific autistic traits that can be used to support current norms, it is rare to see actual autistic representation that envisions us as fully realized people without trying to excise aspects of our identity that challenge norms.

The amount of space the Asperger's Geek takes up in popular media and public consciousness and the exclusions it engenders results in material consequences for autistic people. This can be reflected in micro-aggressions. For example, in a graduate seminar I

asexuality. While the aesthetics of desexualization and asexuality might appear similar on the surface, they function very differently. Desexualization is a form of hegemonic power, wherein who is viewed as sexual, non-sexual, or hypersexual is determined through interactions with other power structures. Desexualization is imposed upon types of people and is used to uphold power structures. Asexuality, rather, is a claim, a queer identity and mode of expression that defies the very power structures that impose desexualization. This is to say that while the Asperger's Geek figure is often desexualized, and thus might not fall explicitly into the category of straight, the figure is certainly not envisioned to be queer either.

¹⁰² It is probably no surprise that geek and STEM fields are still thought of as spaces for white men. This means that the connection to autism becomes much easier to maintain as this promotes entrenched beliefs that autistics are primarily white and male.

attended some years back, the professor, a neuroscientist, claimed that it was impossible for autistic people to write poetry. This, despite being an occasional autistic poet myself, and despite the numerous talented autistic writers that exist.¹⁰³ Other consequences are reflected in high unemployment rates, and in the underdiagnosis of women, queer folk, and people of color who often present differently. Autistic self-advocate Gwen Greenwood has further noted how the Asperger's Geek is frequently portrayed as having high levels of self-confidence, often in contrast to many of those on the spectrum who, after a lifetime of social stigma and/or masking, develop mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, Greenwood notes that the high confidence of the Asperger's Geek is often used in shows like *The Big Bang Theory* as a justification to make fun of autistic traits while ignoring the way in which many autistic people are subjected to bullying.¹⁰⁵ This is to say that articulations and narrations of autism from autistic perspectives are crucial to our

¹⁰³ As just one example, in early 2026, the Neurodivergent Student Group at University of California, Santa Barbara, of which I am a part, published a neurodivergent poets chapbook titled *Disparate Kind* which included sixteen poets.

¹⁰⁴ Masking is something that many autistic people, and other neurodivergent people, do in order to pass as neurotypical. This may be a conscious decision but is often a subconsciously learned coping mechanism. This might include forcing eye contact or hiding one's stims, among other things. Autistic women, for example, are more likely to go undiagnosed because they have learned to mask their symptoms. Masking takes a high toll on our mental health and can lead to autistic burnout (Russo; Rosa; Hull et al.).

¹⁰⁵ It is interesting to note that, in *The Big Bang Theory*, racism and misogyny are often played for laughs. The show allows the characters to make racist or sexist comments that are seen as funny because the show implies that it is aware that these are wrong. However, in doing so, it also condones these comments and behavior. Ultimately, the goal is to make the viewer laugh. YouTube user Pop Culture Detective explores this form of lampshading in their video essay "The Complicity of Geek Masculinity on the Big Bang Theory." In contrast, Sheldon's autistic traits are intended to be seen as annoying, to be laughed at; while this bullying and ableism is never addressed or even lampshaded.

survival, but we rarely see them in dominant discourse because autistic folks are often systematically excluded from the processes of mainstream knowledge creation.

Autistic Headcanons: Neuroplay, Epistemic Authority, and Neurohacking

Despite the trouble with autistic representation in mainstream media, many autistic people have characters who they interpret as autistic despite, or even in spite of, what the source material might say on the matter. It is common to find conversations on online forums, autistic Facebook groups, X, Tumblr, and other digital spaces where autistic people discuss what characters they relate to. Such interpretations/discussions are often overlooked but become a powerful tool of self-definition and identification that resists dominant, medicalized definitions of autism. Particularly important is the way in which these conversations create a shared community in which expressions of autistic selfhood become negotiated in fluid ways.¹⁰⁶

Autistic headcanons, in particular, serve as a “neuroqueer threat to normalcy,” as I will discuss (Yergeau, “Authoring Autism” 27). Here I will use discourse analysis to examine a number of autistic headcanons that have been posted by autistic fans on Tumblr. The examples that I analyze more closely here come from an original corpus of around sixty posts that I archived from 2018 to 2020. These headcanons come in a great variety of forms,

¹⁰⁶ On the literary side, scholars such as Julia Miele Rodas have critiqued a tendency in literary studies to focus on diagnosing characters as being on the spectrum. Rodas argues that this only re-enforces medicalized models. As a literary scholar I agree with Rodas yet want to note the complex but often subversive value of such identifications when they come from autistic people. This does not mean that medicalized perspectives and frameworks do not work their way into these practices, but that they build identification around autistic self-understanding rather than a pathologizing impulse. Rather than simply re-enforcing medicalized frameworks for understanding autism, such identifications often challenge and disrupt these definitions, expanding them, twisting them, queering them to fit the autistic bodymind.

but I will briefly outline the main types of posts you would see on Tumblr. First, posts may simply make the claim, whether directly or indirectly, that a character is autistic. For example, blogger accio-shitpost writes in one post, “Luna Lovegood is an autistic lesbian and there’s nothing you can do about it,” while another blogger writes, “Your fave is autistic: Hilda from Hilda” (urfaveisautistic). This is typically done in a declarative fashion, as these posts show; either the character is directly claimed as autistic using the verb “to be” or the claim is less direct and is used as an adjective.

Beyond these declarative headcanons, there are also posts that have a more expansive element. These posts may go on to explain why a character can be read as autistic using textual evidence. For example, after declaring that the character Star Butterfly from the show *Star vs. The Forces of Evil* is autistic, blogger myfandomrambles explains why they see the character this way. They begin by pointing to details in the show, writing, “she struggles with social expectations in both Mewnie and Earth / she stims with her hair and wand / her special interest is magic.”¹⁰⁷ All of these are details that can be supported by watching the show itself, even if one’s interpretation of the details may differ.

Additionally, a post may include a series of details about a character’s experience that the blogger constructs by taking on the character’s perspective. These details often do not rely on direct evidence from the main media source, but they expand on the existing material in creative ways. Take for example Tumblr user autisticheadcanons’s post about Lilo, from *Lilo and Stitch*,

Lilo Pelekai from *Lilo & Stitch* is autistic. She has a lot of special interests (including Elvis Presley), but she tries not to infodump because the girls her age think she’s

¹⁰⁷ Mewnie is the home world of the character Star Butterfly.

“weird” whenever she does anything typically autistic like infodumping and Nani is always too busy.

She loves living on an island with no large cities. Cities are loud and smelly and crowded, while Hawaii is peaceful and beautiful and filled with even more wildlife than people. (autisticheadcanons)

We can see how the blogger moves from a declarative claim of the character being autistic, “Lilo Pelekai from *Lilo and Stitch* is autistic” to textual evidence “she has a lot of special interests (including Elvis Presley),” a detail which is evident in the film (autisticheadcanons). We then see how the blogger begins to interpret the internal reality of Lilo as a character, writing “she tries not to infodump because the girls her age think she’s ‘weird’ whenever she does anything typically autistic...” or “She loves living on an island with no large cities, cities are loud and smelly and crowded.” These are internal states, experiences, and opinions that cannot be directly perceived in the film itself. In these cases, autism is not just read from the character or the canon of the text but written onto or into the character by the autistic blogger. In such moments, the blogger affectively aligns themselves with the character they are discussing, expressing their ability to relate to characters in intersubjective ways.

In examining these headcanons, I argue that these fans are doing important rhetorical work. Thinking through how the bloggers discursively position themselves, I argue that they do work to position autistic bloggers and fans as experts on autism. These autistic bloggers are taking up positions of authority and using headcanon posts to epistemically situate themselves as embodied experts on autism. This can be seen as a discursive response to the ways in which neurodivergent people and their knowledge are systemically marginalized as

a form of epistemic injustice. Take for example the declarative nature of most of these posts. When myfandomrambles writes “Star Butterfly is Autistic,” they take up an epistemic stance of fact and authority. Take into consideration the textual evidence that the blogger provides. This could be easily taken as myfandomrambles’ attempting to assert their status as a “true fan.” However, this evidence is not provided to prove expertise on *Star vs. the Forces of Evil* but on autism. If we examine the post, it uses intercommunity terminology, such as “stim,” or “special interest.” These are terms that are used in the autistic community often in opposition to more medicalized terms.¹⁰⁸ The use of this terminology serves to reveal how the evidence the blogger provides is being used in part to situate themselves as an expert on autism and on autistic embodied experience.

I would argue that the epistemic authority found in these posts is employed in part as a means of resignification. In this I build off of Judith Butler’s idea of “resignification,” particularly as it has been taken up by sociocultural linguists. Resignification is the process through which words, symbols, and ideas take on new meanings and associations. In her work on linguistic style, Mary Bucholtz argues that “resignification enables those who have been subject to others’ meaning-making processes to style their own identities by reworking the tools of hegemony using their own semiotic resources” (54). One example of resignification in this context is the reclamation of slurs, whereby the negative meaning

¹⁰⁸ “Stim,” or “stimming,” is a term used in the autistic community to talk about how we engage our bodies in and with the world. In the autistic community it is understood that repetitive body motions or sensory seeking behaviors are a way to regulate our sensory systems and engage in the world around us, in addition to being a form of communication. In contrast, the medical community often uses terms like “perseverative behavior” or “stereotyped or repetitive motor movements” (CDC). In the autistic community we also talk about special interests; that is, a favorite subject, area, object, or item of interest that we choose to engage with deeply and intensely. In the ADHD community these are often also called “hyperfixations.”

attached to the word is challenged by new, more positive semiotic meanings that the term comes to index. In the case of these autistic headcanons, arguing that a character is autistic, when this is in tension with ableist ideology, attempts to shift indexical relationships and in turn how we view autism. By arguing that Luna Lovegood is autistic, and taking an authoritative stance, Luna Lovegood becomes indexical of autism, thus expanding the archive of characters, personalities, and behaviors that come to be considered valid conceptions of autism. In turn, autism comes to index (at least in these online spaces), a wider range of possible expressions and experiences besides narrow stereotypes. Such stereotypes, after all, exclude many autistic individuals from seeing themselves in media and from seeing themselves in autism itself.

This resignification is also seen in a post by Tumblr user constellationgrayson, who writes of the character Keith from *Voltron: Legendary Defenders*, “you know that wide-eyed look Keith gets on his face when he is processing information or he’s lost??? yeah that’s autistic culture.” Here Keith’s embodied behavior, and in turn the character himself, is framed as indexical of autistic culture, widening our understanding of what autism looks and feels like when embodied. That is, by arguing that a character is autistic when this is in tension with ableist ideology, bloggers attempt to shift indexical relationships and in turn how we view autism. Moreover, when textual evidence is provided, it helps to form an extended lexical and visual/embodied vocabulary for understanding autism and for reading autism in characters (or perhaps in oneself).

The way in which many fans use headcanons as a means of writing into a character might also be termed as a form of neurohacking, whereby an autistic fan enters into a preexisting narrative, and neurologically transforms the text and others’ engagement with it.

Here, I hope to reclaim and crip (or hack, perhaps) the term neurohacking, dislodging it from its more ableist connotation, where it often is seen as a means to “cure” or “improve” the brain. I am also building on Remi Yergeau’s reclaimed understanding of hacking. In their work on hacktivism, Yergeau notes how “in popular discourse on disability, hacking often resembles” normalizing tropes of “passing”, “fixing”, and “retrofitting.” In particular, they note the common belief that “Autistic people need to be hacked. They are puzzles to solve, bodies to cure” (“Disability Hacktivism”). In contrast, Yergeau proposes a “criptastic reclamation of hacking,” wherein we turn hacking “into a disability-positive practice” aimed at hacking oppressive systems and spaces that do not accommodate us. I would argue that much of fan interaction, whether it be fan art, headcanons, or fanfiction, serves as a way to hack narratives more broadly; or at least narratives as they exist in our current capitalist framework, with its particular entanglement in systems of power such as racism, ableism, sexism, queerphobia, etc.¹⁰⁹ Often, fandom becomes a space to rewrite narratives that rarely include marginalized individuals.

In looking at disability in particular, fan hacking also allows for the reshaping of narratives away from ableist tropes and conventions. In their work on disability, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder note, for example, how disability is actually rather pervasive in

¹⁰⁹ Fan works often directly conflict with capitalist models. While today fan works are largely tolerated in the US, they have historically been contentious, with rights holders, including authors like Anne Rice, threatening to sue fans for their work. For more on this history, see Jackson 2018. Today many fanfictions (over seventeen million works) are hosted on a site called Archive of Our Own (AO3), a non-profit site for posting fan works created in 2007 by fans after sites like LiveJournal and fanfiction.net began censoring content. AO3 also provides legal advocacy to protect fan works from exploitation or legal challenges (AO3). Importantly AO3 allows for avenues of fan interaction, such as fanfiction, that do not directly profit the rights holders of the original work (as opposed to, for example, buying toys), and thus it is a significant avenue for hacking capitalist driven engagement with narratives and texts.

literary narratives, but that it is often used as a narrative prosthesis, whereby it serves as a “stock feature of characterization” to demarcate a character as existing outside the norm, or “as an opportunistic metaphorical device,” whereby disability is framed as either a sign of poetic justice or as something to overcome (222). Through narrative hacking, however, fans can disrupt this dynamic, bringing disabled voices and perspectives to the forefront in ways that reshape disability’s relationship to narrative.

Neurohacking in particular is a neuroqueer means of entering a text and rewriting narrative relationships in regard to neurology. I argue that the interpretation of characters as autistic, particularly when these characters would otherwise be assumed to be neurotypical, serves as a rhetorical and neuroqueer form of neurohacking, whereby we are asked to reconceptualize our understanding of the character and autism from an embodied, neurodivergent perspective. Such an act reverses the typical power relations of neurohacking (which is often framed as a means of “normalizing” the brain) by claiming space for neurodivergence where this possibility is typically narratively foreclosed. It is often the case that characters are assumed to be neurotypical, while autistic embodiment is viewed as unstoriable. In this light, the decision to claim these characters becomes a radically humanizing act. Precisely for this reason, autistic headcanons serve a role in restructuring our conceptions about autistic agency, humanity, and embodiment.

Conclusion

Autistic headcanons for their part do transformational work. Headcanons of all kinds serve to radically center fan perspectives, and among these fans are a multitude of individuals who rarely see all parts of themselves represented in mainstream stories. Headcanons flip this relationship between fan and narrative on its head. Fans mark out a

place for themselves in the stories they consume. Fandom spaces, particularly the spaces that neuroqueer folks have carved out, are marginal spaces. They are spheres in which communication is often lateral, such that autistic folks interact with each other in a less mediated fashion. However, neuroqueer spaces are also full of fluidity; they cross into dominant spaces and leave traces. Here, through headcanons in particular, neuroqueer folks enter dominant narratives, take up characters, and transgress the boundaries that demarcate neuroqueerness from the human. In this sense, to claim a character as autistic is also a rather queer claim of subjecthood.

While some of these characters may be eccentric, or at times autistic-coded, many are characters that were usually not intended to be read as neuroqueer or otherwise abject and marginal. But we claim them despite this, we read traces in them and mark out space within them to identify neuroqueer selves and futures. I think Tumblr blogger painfog puts it best, writing “bitch! watch me! my faves? autistic. your faves? super autistic. any character to ever exist? autistic.” Taken this way, headcanons become a radical claim to subjecthood that redefines the bounds of what autism can and should look like. We write neurodiversity into characters, claim them, circulate them, allowing others to see into our experience, to relate to this, to redefine what autism can look like and feel like when actually embodied. Fandom thus serves as a canvas for neuroqueer individuals to open up new epistemic and narrative opportunities, creating new frameworks for understanding ourselves and relating to the world.

I am not the only neuroqueer individual to realize they are autistic through online spaces, to see themselves in headcanons and fan interpretations of characters I resonated with. The internet as a medium has allowed us to carve out spaces where we can redefine

what it means to be autistic, and fandom provides the playground, as it were, for neuroplay and narrative neurohacking to flourish, to fill many of the epistemic gaps that deny us an understanding and realization of self and subjecthood. While our voices are not yet the voices that dictate the wider definitions and understandings of autism, we are finding spaces in which to resist hegemonic narratives, to define ourselves, and transgress into spheres of queer subjecthood. We expand our community, allowing more people to see themselves in autism—we move forward, and, one post at a time, we tell our stories neuroqueerly.

Chapter 4

Painful Play: Neuroqueer Narratives and Self-Awareness in Qiu Miaojin's *Notes of a Crocodile* and Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*

In recent years, with the cognitive turn in disability studies, it is common to consider how we might theorize disability with attention paid to those with cognitive disabilities who cannot represent themselves (democratically or narratively) in traditional manners.¹¹⁰ The aim is to find ways to represent those who cannot represent themselves and to acknowledge that there is value in such positionalities. This work certainly raises valuable ethical and theoretical questions. At the same time, however, one unfortunate result of the cognitive turn's focus has been an overall slow inclusion of the perspectives, voices, and theories of cognitively disabled individuals in favor of a more overdetermined focus on neurotypical writers and theorists and their assumptions about what constitutes neurodivergent experience.¹¹¹ This is noticeable within the realm of disability aesthetics, where critics such as Michael Bérubé have argued that we should move away from the assumption that disability aesthetics must always be attached to disabled individuals, authors, or characters. Such assumptions often rely on a narrow formalist approach that primarily focuses on traditional literary texts rather than considering how cognitive disability gets caught up in and defined by wider social and political discourses—discourses that have historically

¹¹⁰ For works that explore this see Simpican 2015 or Bérubé 2016.

¹¹¹ This overrepresentation is not exclusive to disability studies or work on disability aesthetics. It is also rampant in the field of cognitive literary studies, for example, particularly in works that theorize narrative. One is likely to only see cognitive disability (and, in particular, autism) addressed when it is used to prove a larger point about universal human cognition through its exclusion. There are of course wonderful exceptions to this rule such as Savarese 2018.

excluded neurodivergent epistemologies. I do not wish to suggest that such work is not useful, nor do I want to entrench identity-based understandings of cognitive disability; however, I want to challenge scholars to consider what is lost when we do not also consistently and consciously invest in questions of voice—who has historically been able to shape our understanding of cognitive difference and how does that inform our assumptions of what cognitive disability aesthetics can look like?¹¹²

Following in the footsteps of critics such as Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer, I argue that acknowledging and studying the aesthetic voices of cognitively disabled or neurodivergent creators and writers allows our work to be informed by cripistemologies, or crip ways of knowing and being in the world. In this chapter, I will look at the 1994 Taiwanese novel *Notes of a Crocodile* and Hannah Gadsby's 2018 stand-up special *Nanette*. I will read both works as neuroqueer narratives paradigmatic of a particular cognitive disability aesthetic. Through my reading of these two texts, I demonstrate how self-awareness and narrative awareness (both textual and social) constitute an essential cognitive disability aesthetic despite assumptions that often frame neurodivergence as solely equated with mindlessness. Building upon Michael Bérubé's claim that cognitive disability disrupts our assumptions about narrative, I argue that self-awareness and metatextuality are essential tools employed by neurodivergent creators to queer narrative. Moreover, I examine how such awareness is constructed and rhetorically employed through the aesthetic use of both

¹¹² Moreover, while many critics are careful to avoid such reductionism, we might also consider the way overemphasis on a lack of self-representation often frames neurodivergent people as lacking in agency in a manner these theories ideally seek to critique. Instead, we might explore more fully how cognitive disability might yield more various ways of being self-aware or practicing agency. This is taken up by Stacy Clifford Simplican in her discussion of intellectual disability and dance as a form of self-advocacy.

play and pain. Thus, through an exploration of *Notes of a Crocodile* and *Nanette*, we come to see how neurodivergent writers might employ self-awareness and narrative awareness in deliberate, rhetorical ways to disrupt and queer social and literary narratives.

Cognitive Disability Aesthetics, Self-Awareness, and Neuroqueerness

In his book *The Secret Life of Stories*, Michael Bérubé explores the role cognitive disability plays in constructing our assumptions about literary narrative. He usefully puts forth the argument that the inclusion of cognitive disability in literature can expand our understanding of the possible ways in which narrative might function. He goes further to propose that narrative and narration are constructions which are actively disrupted and reshaped by cognitive disability, and, as a result, the depiction of cognitive disability can become a means of exploring, and perhaps even challenging, how we define and conceive of narrative itself. Bérubé notes that we have much to learn and unlearn about narrative structure, pointing to the disturbances caused by the presence of cognitive disability in texts as an important means of furthering our understanding of narrative possibilities. As an example, Bérubé focuses on texts, such as *The Sound and the Fury*, to examine how the presence of cognitively disabled characters and narrators disrupts and constructs textual norms such as temporality and narration. In other words, for Bérubé, cognitive disability draws our attention to the very structures that inform narrative itself. In this vein, Bérubé is framing cognitive disability as productive and generative.

Similar to Bérubé, I choose to focus on the ways in which cognitive disability or neurodivergence might be productive. However, I diverge from Bérubé's framing in a few key respects. First, I chose to move beyond a strict literary approach, which I believe limits our understanding of what constitutes neurodivergent aesthetics. In his work Bérubé chooses

to de-emphasize the importance of self-representation as a means of exploring the aesthetic dimensions of literary texts rather than solely focusing on concerns of character representation. He argues that disability studies scholars should move away from the assumption that disability aesthetics must always be attached to disabled individuals, authors, or characters. Interestingly, in earlier work, Bérubé brings up the notion of authors passing as disabled, noting that in *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner “is himself passing as disabled...” (“Disability and Narrative” 575). However, Bérubé dismisses concerns about such passing, stating that he is not “that skeptical of Faulkner’s creation” (“Disability and Narrative” 575). In his more recent work, Bérubé continues to stress the importance of reading literary texts for what cognitive disability does aesthetically rather than representationally. My work acknowledges the importance of such thinking, and the value of moving beyond character diagnosis.¹¹³ At the same time, I hope to also gesture towards the limitations of this framework for understanding neurodivergent agency. Ultimately, literary representations of cognitive disability are informed (intentionally or unintentionally) by wider cultural frameworks around neurological difference.

To study cognitive aesthetics in a primarily formalist, literary frame risks eliding the ways any work is informed by wider political, social, and affective contexts. This is particularly so with aesthetic deployments of cognitive difference. I view cognitive

¹¹³ In her own work on autistic literary aesthetics, Julia Miele Rodas likewise calls for us to move away from diagnosis-based interpretations of characters or texts. Her work looks instead at autistic communication practices, identifying autistic aesthetics by turning to where psychiatric descriptions and autistic communal descriptions align. Rodas then examines how these aesthetic practices emerge in popular literature. She usefully argues that these traits are often praised in literary contexts, while they are dismissed or pathologized in autistic people themselves. Rodas’ approach more closely approximates my own, where literary texts and their aesthetic formulations are in dialogue with broader epistemological concerns.

disability and the potential aesthetic possibilities it presents as heterogenous and varied. This is not to dismiss the value of Bérubé's observations or the ways in which cognitive disability aesthetics emerge in the literary form. This is to say that cognitive disability aesthetics show themselves to be much more diverse if we consider the political dimensions of voice—Who gets to speak? Who gets to be heard? And how does that inform the aesthetic norms at play in both literary and social narratives alike?

By suggesting that we invest in neurodivergent epistemologies, I am not arguing for an entrenched identity-based understanding of neurodivergence or neurodivergent aesthetics. I also do not wish to reify liberal determinants of the human, this time formulated around biological/neurological identity.¹¹⁴ Rather, I hope to use this as a starting point to understand where such aesthetics move beyond purely literary concerns to push back on and offer alternative visions to existing frameworks and epistemologies. In this respect, I choose to supplement Bérubé's work on cognitive disability by examining one form such aesthetics might take when we a. place neurodivergent creators and their agency at the center of our analysis and b. expand our definition of text beyond the literary to include wider discourses. As I will argue, in doing so, a decisively neuroqueer aesthetic emerges, revealing more possibilities for how cognitive difference might reshape narrative.

With this in mind, I take a second, more specific, point of departure. I take up Bérubé's argument that cognitive disability is aesthetically linked to self-awareness and narrative deconstruction; however, where he highlights characters with limited textual awareness, my work draws on a number of neurodivergent writers and characters who take

¹¹⁴ For a discussion of how neurodiversity has been more recently co-opted by neoliberal institutions reifying the bounds of normalcy through neurology see Acevedo and Stolz 2024.

up metatextuality as a conscious rhetorical tool. In his work, Bérubé highlights the relationship between disability and metafiction. In his figuration, cognitively disabled narrators and characters are frequently depicted as narratively disabled, meaning they lack metarepresentational capacity. Their inability to tell fact from fiction, and the resultant narrative irony, becomes a foundation on which a text's metafictional capacity is built. This is an important observation. However, I will challenge the notion that cognitive disability is primarily expressed through mindlessness, lack of self-awareness, or failure in metarepresentational capacity. Instead, I will demonstrate that awareness—of self, text, and narrative—is emblematic of a decidedly neuroqueer disability aesthetic that emerges in works by neurodivergent creators.

In this vein, I hope to demonstrate how a neuroqueer aesthetic often takes on a decisively metafictional and postmodern approach that purposefully articulates, deconstructs, and plays with literary narratives. In doing so, I argue that such narratives employ a form of neuroplay, whereby they tinker with narrative structure and textual self-awareness as a means to construct an oppositional gaze that reveals and challenges normative social narratives and power structures. I argue that works such as *Notes of a Crocodile* and *Nanette* present a disruption at a narrative level, utilizing self-awareness to deliberately situate an encounter between narrator and audience. By queering and crippling the narrative itself, such works aesthetically and rhetorically challenge narrative norms and expectations. As I will show, such disruption is a deliberate rhetorical act that disrupts literary narrative and in turn questions normative social narratives in a way that is decidedly neuroqueer.

Self-Consciousness and Textual Awareness in Qiu Miaojin's *Notes of a Crocodile*

In exploring how self-awareness is employed as a neuroqueer and neurodivergent aesthetic, I turn to Taiwanese author Qiu Miaojin's 1994 novel *Notes of a Crocodile*. Published a year before Qiu Miaojin's suicide in 1995, the novel follows two interrelated storylines. The first, presented as a memoir, follows the story of an unnamed lesbian narrator, nicknamed Lazi, as she recounts her college experiences dealing with depression, love, heartache, and friendship. Often described as a coming-of-age story, or *bildungsroman*, the novel explores Lazi's developing sense of self and subjectivity in a society where lesbians are both hypo- and hyper- visible, and where damaging social narratives about queerness shape her experience (Liou 235). The novel, written in the 1990s, is rooted in the context of the time, in a post-martial law Taiwan as queer subcultures, particularly the rising *tongzhi* movement, began to grow and transform alongside a mainstream culture invested in simultaneously stigmatizing queerness and consuming it in a voyeuristic fashion. As scholar Fran Martin notes, the novel takes place "in late twentieth-century Taiwan, where popular, academic, and subcultural discourses and gender and sexual practices were undergoing rapid transformation" making this "a time of immense turbulence vis-a-vis the meaning of gendered bodies in Taiwan's public cultures" (178). Given this turbulence, Lazi might be framed as both a queer and neurodivergent (or a neuroqueer) narrator given the way that such social currents and shame come to impact her as a depressed narrator, as well as the way in which this effect in turn impacts the structure of the novel.

In her analysis of the novel, Martin notes that "...Qiu's *Crocodile's Journal* is exemplary of a particular mode of representing homosexuality (*tongxinglian*) in 1990s

Taiwan that lavishly exhibits a subjective injury” (178). Martin argues that the tongxinglian identity is one both based on and fractured by “a foundational injury” of shame (178). Martin roots this shame in two key trends: the adoption of European sexology in the 1920s that resulted in the stigmatization of nütongxinglian (female homosexuality) as “phobically masculinized” and changes in the nütongxinglian subculture influenced by lesbian feminism that began to critique a T/po binary and the type of gender identification T subjects, such as Lazi, occupied (180).¹¹⁵ As a result, Martin suggests that such discourse creates a “double-abjection of T subjects, *both* by a heterosexist broader culture *and* by the emergent discourse of lesbian feminism” (183). The story reveals Lazi’s inner psychology and pain as she struggles to accept and navigate her sexuality and her gender amidst larger discourses and expectations within a culture that stigmatizes and abjects her while producing shame.

Throughout the novel, Lazi’s memoirs are juxtaposed with a third person account of the titular crocodile. These sections depict the public and media’s response to the discovery of crocodiles, or “humans with reptile characteristics” (52). These sections provide a satirical depiction of the public media narrative at the time, which framed lesbians as simultaneously revolting and fascinating figures for the public’s voyeuristic appetite. The focus on the crocodile serves as an allegory for the treatment of lesbians by the public and media, wherein they are both hyper- and hypo- visible. As scholar Liang-ya Liou notes, the crocodile serves to “[satirize] the public’s hypocritical attitudes toward the lesbian,” wherein the public “pretends to be contemptuously indifferent to lesbians while at the same time avidly reading vicious, scandalous reports on lesbians in tabloids” (250). These chapters

¹¹⁵ While it is reductive, one might conceptualize the T/po binary as similar to the butch/femme binary in western lesbian culture.

serve as a satirical critique of public discourse and normative narratives surrounding gender and sexuality. The juxtaposition of these chapters with Lazi's memoirs serves to link Lazi's personal struggles with larger social trends, narratives, and power dynamics at play in Taiwan at the time, producing a postmodern text that is centered on themes of narrative awareness.

The work is particularly informative in the way that the characters' neuroqueerness centers the work around intertwined themes of self-awareness and narrative awareness. Much of Lazi's memoir documents her changing sense of self, and through her self-reflective testimony, she proves herself a highly self-aware narrator. As noted, the novel is framed as a coming-of-age story and centers in part on Lazi's struggles to establish a stable sense of self. While Lazi's journey is far from linear, her growth throughout the text can be marked by a movement from self-negation to moments of self-clarity that come with a growing awareness of social narratives and the traumatic power of the discourse that frames her as abject. She notes early on in the novel, "I don't know who I am at all," establishing from the start how Lazi is aware of herself through a sense of self-estrangement and an understanding of herself as an unstable subject (22).¹¹⁶ As is noted by Liou in her discussion of the novel, "the culturally incurred self-loathing remains an important aspect of [Lazi's] subject constitution" (244). This self-loathing is displayed, for example, when Lazi discusses her failing relationship with her first girlfriend Shui Ling, who Lazi repeatedly pushes away over the course of their on-and-off-again relationship. Lazi notes how "She accepted me, which amounted to negating my negation of myself. Those sincere eyes, like a

¹¹⁶ All quotes are from the 2017 English translation of *Notes of a Crocodile*, translated by Bonnie Hui.

mirror, hurt me” (20). Such negation is based in part on an acute awareness of the homophobic and normative social narratives that Lazi has internalized. Here Lazi addresses how her own sense of self is based on an abject subjectivity, whereby Lazi must negate herself if she is to attempt to become a normative subject. Instead of rejecting these traumatic narratives, Lazi internalizes them in an attempt to establish a stable sense of self, noting “I couldn’t help but seek the mainstream of society as a mirror” (12). This self-awareness is painful and based in negation, but it is still a form of self-awareness produced by Lazi’s contact with stigmatizing social narratives.

As Lazi’s narrative progresses, she has multiple moments of clarity and growth. For example, coming to terms with the way in which she forces others away to protect herself, she writes:

I’d taken everyone I loved and killed them off in my heart, one by one. I’d long been tending their graves—secretly visiting and mourning during the day, going out and erecting a cross on starry nights, lying inside and awaiting my own death on starless nights. That was my Atlantis, the kingdom I’d built in the name of separation. I’d never before unearthed so much of myself, and so suddenly at that. Inside the world of my tomb, everyone else was dead, I alone survived, and that was the reason for my sorrow. (125)

Here Lazi, in a self-aware manner, articulates her own toxic behavior, addressing metaphorically how she has internalized narratives and self-hate leading her to push others away. In this regard, her depression is intimately linked to the social narratives that traumatically and painfully position her as abject.

Not only is Lazi aware of herself in the traditional manner we might see of a narrator reflecting on their life through memoir, but, as I have noted, she is also highly aware, and at times painfully aware, of the ways in which her sense of self is intimately relational to social narratives and stigma. As a stigmatized subject she is already made acutely aware of herself in often painful ways. I will discuss the aesthetic and rhetorical use of pain in further depth later in this chapter. However, it is important to point out how pain and trauma are linked to self-awareness. A lack of awareness of self and/or social narratives is, in certain circumstances, the result of a privileged positionality. In her work on affect, Sarah Ahmed notes that pain is essential in constructing the boundaries and surfaces of our bodies and that the more intensely we encounter pain, the more aware we are of our own bodies. She further argues that “The ordinary is linked in this way to the absence of perception” (27). In other words, we might argue that awareness or perception is a cognitive mode rendered more acute through a history of pain, trauma, and stigma that comes to be attached to abject bodyminds. As such, self-awareness, as we see in *Notes of a Crocodile*, is often a painful process rendered by an implicit or explicit understanding of stigmatic social narratives and the effects they have on neuroqueer bodyminds.

Lazi’s sense of self-awareness is coupled with her analytical understanding of social norms and the constructed nature of these narratives. For example, she openly critiques gender multiple times in the novel. Reflecting on the way her and Shui Ling are polar opposites, both in gender expression and personality, Lazi theorizes on gender:

Two very different types of people, mutual attraction. And for what reason? It’s hard to believe, this something that exists beyond the imagination of the chess game known as the human condition. It’s based on the gender binary, which stems from

the duality of yin and yang, or some unspeakable evil. But humanity says it's a biological construct: penis vs. vagina, chest + breasts +long hair= feminine. Male plugs into female like key into lock, and as a product of that coupling, babies get punched out. This product is the only object that can fill a square on the chessboard. All that is neither masculine nor feminine becomes sexless and is cast into the freezing-cold waters outside the line of demarcation, into an even wider demarcated zone. (47-48)

This critique, this awareness of gender, is based in Lazi's positionality. Once again, we see the way in which Lazi's marginal positionality shapes her awareness of self and of normative structuring narratives. In this case, through theoretical and satirical deconstruction of gender discourse, we can see Lazi as a highly self-aware narrator, wherein her sense of self-awareness is intimately tied to her awareness of discourse and the constructed nature of social norms. At times this takes hold in a form of self-negation, where the trauma of such narratives is internalized. However, at other times, this perception also allows for a critique of the very norms that painfully prompt such awareness in the first place.

Textual Awareness: Queering Form and Neuroplay in *Notes of a Crocodile*

If we move beyond an examination of Lazi's narration, we can also see how the text itself presents us with a metafictional, postmodern aesthetic that structures the narrative thematically and rhetorically. The novel presents us with a purposeful textual awareness. Such an aesthetic allows for a critique of normative narratives at the textual level through a queering of form. As I have noted, by juxtaposing Lazi's sections with those of the crocodile, the novel presents a satirical aesthetic, connecting public discourse to Lazi's personal experiences and thus critiquing the public treatment of lesbians in 1990s Taiwan.

Playing with the structure of narrative in metafictional ways, the work critiques the hyper-visibility of the queer community.

Throughout the novel both Lazi and the crocodile are framed as being the objects of others' gazes, the viewed rather than the viewer. In her memoirs, Lazi expresses concerns over being viewed. On a number of occasions, she compares herself to a blind person. For example, in one moment of growth, when Lazi comes to understand that she has to build relationships on trust, she notes how this process has been made more difficult due to her abject positionality. She notes, "...but I had to learn how to get around in the world without the same sense of sight, and my white cane had just found that first raised dome on the pavement" (156). Here, Lazi invokes a cross-disability metaphor to depict unequal power dynamics and convey the way in which she is frequently rendered the viewed and not the viewer. This serves as a critique of the damaging way in which public discourse at the time placed lesbians in a hyper-visible but disempowered position.

This concern with visibility is juxtaposed in the crocodile's sections which intercut Lazi's narrative. Throughout the crocodile's sections, the public media becomes obsessed with discovering, understanding, viewing, and ultimately filming the crocodile, thus centering the crocodile as the viewed object for the public's scrutiny and voyeuristic pleasure. The story culminates when the crocodile is trapped by a documentary film maker and forced to show themselves and give their testimony. The film cuts between two scenes. First, is a scene in which the crocodile, now in captivity, delivers their testimony, satirically playing into the public's demand for a good show, saying, "Ho! How is everyone? I'm a crocodile. Probably the only real crocodile out there. I've waited for this day to come. You've all been looking for me, and I can't believe your warmth and enthusiasm, I really,

really like you guys” (241). In this moment, the crocodile is placed in the position of the viewed, and we see the voyeuristic demand of the public at perhaps its most ridiculous. Yet, at the same time, as the crocodile speaks to the camera, the film provides a moment of looking back and speaking back in which the crocodile plays into the ridiculous nature of the situation by taking up a satiric performance. Liou argues that this exemplifies a form of “queer performativity, through which La-tze/the Crocodile turns identity-related shame and melancholia into self-empowering parody and satire” (250). In this way, the playful, satirical aesthetic, along with the way Lazi and the crocodile’s narratives intercut and juxtapose one another, allows for a critique of normative discourse, of the narratives shaping lesbian experience at the time. Thus, the crocodile’s performance serves to turn the viewer’s and, thus, the reader’s gaze back on themselves.

The way in which the crocodile returns the viewer’s gaze is made more potent through the manner in which these filmic scenes of campy testimony are intercut with scenes of the ocean, where the crocodile sits in a wooden bathtub with a torch. The novel ends when the bathtub is set on fire in a moment that might be read simultaneously as the crocodile’s suicide and as their self-liberation. Liou notes the way in which the novel oscillates between “hilarious and abject moods”, with the Crocodile offering a “campy [portrayal] of the hostile conditions under which the lesbian is placed in the early 1990s” (243, 250). This documentary of the crocodile ends the book, and the textual film allows the crocodile to gaze back at the viewer, critiquing the public’s gaze, first by drawing the audience in with camp and satire before using the spectacle of their own death to articulate the impact of these hostile social conditions. In this way, the crocodile takes up an oppositional gaze, forcing their viewers, and in turn the novel’s readers to be hyper-aware of

these damaging social power structures and the narratives that uphold and circulate them. The novel thus takes up a metafictional aesthetic to make such narratives apparent, to critique them, and to rhetorically demand the reader themselves also be both self-aware and textually aware.

This rhetorical move is aided, as I have demonstrated, through a playing with structure. We might identify this rhetorical move as neuroplayful. In *Notes of a Crocodile*, we can see the way in which the novel engages in a playful deconstruction of form and campy aesthetics. Even the crocodile is made cute in a way that undercuts its social figuration as a monstrous figure. As Liou notes, “allusions to the cartoon crocodile in the logo of Lacoste and a plastic toy crocodile destabilize the cultural signification of the crocodile by associating it with something as cute and adorable as the Pocket Monster” (249). This is in addition to the playfully cartoonish cover art of the original Taiwanese printing of the novel. In the spirit of neuroplay and queer failure, I argue that the textual playfulness of the novel serves a role of critique, working to restructure our relationship to narrative itself. In this way, we might see the work’s demands for textual awareness as rooted in a particularly neuroqueer aesthetic. As Remi Yergeau notes in their own figuration of the neuroqueer subject, “neuroqueer subjects fuck with rhetoric” (60). In this vein, the novel’s neuroqueer aesthetic rhetorically challenges social narratives by making them visible and fucking with them.

Willful Subjects and Pain as Neuroqueer Aesthetic

Given the manner in which *Notes of a Crocodile* takes up neuroplay as a means of pointing out social wrongs, the novel might be framed as trafficking in negativity and critique, as is common with works that both play and fail queerly. Despite its playful nature,

in establishing an oppositional gaze, the work might be interpreted as a bit of a killjoy, to put it in Sarah Ahmed's terms. In this vein, we might see those who traffic in neuroqueerness and neuroplay as willful subjects aligned with the figure of the crip killjoy. As Merri Lisa Johnson describes in the context of physical disability:

crip willfulness, which sounds like a mean place of stubborn resistance, but feels like a calm relinquishing of fantasies that I can force things (situations, bodies, emotions, sensations) to be other than they are. It is a refusal to insist—a refusal to act in accordance with the system of compulsory able-bodiedness—that requires individuals to mask, suppress, and disregard discomfort in the process of determining what is possible, of what we are capable. “You cannot always close the gap between how you do feel and how you should feel,” willfulness theorist Sara Ahmed writes. “Behind the sharpness of this ‘cannot’ is a world of possibility.” Ahmed reclaims “killjoy” as a site of productive misalignment with cultural instructions to be (or act) happy in oppressive circumstances. If a cruelly optimistic culture insists that we fake it till we make it, the crip killjoy refuses to play along.” (Johnson and McRuer 136)

Here Johnson builds on Sara Ahmed's notion of the killjoy. In this vein, I would like to take up the killjoy myself as a way to further conceptualize how neuroqueerness and neuroplay employ textual self-awareness as a means of producing an oppositional gaze. In particular, I will explore the role that the expression of pain and trauma has in this process, thus focusing on a more tender form of neuroplay.

While there have been recent shifts in theory on pain, historically pain has been framed as solely a negative experience and, as a result, a negative positionality. Frequently the just aim is to divorce disability from narratives that assume a disabled life is only painful

and pitiful. However, in more recent years, scholars have begun to acknowledge that we cannot ignore experiences of pain, including chronic pain or forms of trauma in conversations on disability. Outside of disability studies, it is not uncommon for critics to use pain as a metaphor and reason to reject modes of knowledge rooted in pain. Tobin Siebers, for example, notes how leftist arguments against identity politics are often based on the idea that such identifications are rooted in pain and trauma and thus should be abandoned. I agree with Siebers' claim that such critiques at times fall back on an ableist understanding of disability that does not value the knowledge found in pain. While we cannot negate the ways in which pain might cause suffering, experiences of pain should also be framed as spaces of epistemological value, what some scholars call *cripistemologies*. As Siebers further notes in his discussion of pain, when we examine disabled accounts of pain, "we discover accounts of another experience of pain, one that can be called with justice not organic but political and epistemological pain that is a feeling of suffering derived from the collision between two different world views...These accounts of pain stress a vision of disability experience where individuals derive new knowledge and self-understanding from the limitations placed on them by nondisabled society" (115). Siebers points to the way in which a disabled positionality allows one to understand the limits of a normative society in specific ways. Similarly, I bring back Sarah Ahmed's point that, "The ordinary is linked in this way to the absence of perception" (27). Pain shapes minoritarian subjectivity in specific ways, in ways that make some abject individuals more acutely aware of themselves as well as the way in which power and narrative operate. Given the possibilities such *cripistemologies* open for us, I am choosing here to look at the possibilities found when writers and their characters choose to express their pain.

As I have articulated, *Notes of a Crocodile* demonstrates an awareness of narrative, power, and audience, while rhetorically demanding the reader pay attention to normative discourses. The novel, while at times campy and satirical, is also full of painful moments. This can be seen in the crocodile's documentary, where their campy testimony is contrasted with the crocodile's potential death and burning. It is also seen throughout Lazi's memoir as she recounts the painful parts of her own life and those of her friends, narrating her depression, her self-hate, her self-harm, and her painful heartbreak over Shui Ling, as well as the struggles of her friends with mental health, insomnia, and addiction. Describing her lifestyle in the year of 1987, Lazi narrates her struggle, noting, "I didn't eat a single thing all night. Didn't shower. Couldn't get out of bed. Didn't want to write in my journal or talk. Didn't read a single page or register the sound of another human being. All day long, I'd cry myself sick into my pillow" (11). In addition to her depiction of depression, Lazi portrays her painful on-and-off relationship with Shui Ling. In one instance she describes her "post-heartbreak purgatory" in painful terms, once again using blindness as a metaphor. She writes, "...I was a blind man fallen into the ocean. I spiraled downward, deeper and deeper inside myself, until I sank to the seabed and slipped into a sinister cave in which Shui Ling's beckoning was the only sound...I followed her echo as it led me toward death" (121). While it might be intuitive to argue that such depictions of pain serve to garner a sympathetic response, and to change minds as a result, here they serve rather to create an unresolved tension in the audience. As Sarah Ahmed notes, pain precludes empathy, as it is "that which even our most intimate others cannot feel" (39). Instead, pain and trauma in this testimonial mode demands a more ethical response: "It is a call for action, and a demand for collective politics, as a politics based not on the possibility that we might be reconciled, but on

learning to live with the impossibility of reconciliation or learning that we live with and beside each other, and yet we are not as one” (Ahmed 39). Such an ethical response demands action amidst unresolved and unreconciled tension.

In this vein, the novel forces a confrontation, whereby the audience is presented with another’s pain and trauma but is not allowed to resolve this into pity or sympathy. The ending of the novel, in which neither Lazi nor the crocodile’s fate is resolved, does not permit such easy resolution. We are left only with the image of a “sea of fire” and a final comment: “I have nothing more to say...I wish you all the best!” (242). These final moments leave the reader with the violent destruction of the fire, along with the death of the crocodile, ambiguous in its depiction of suicide or self-liberation. Meanwhile, the satirical final comment serves as an address to the audience in which responsibility for the narrative is passed on to the reader, who is asked to hold this tension themselves. Rather than resolve pain into pity, this tension demands that readers bear an understanding of social narratives at the same time the textual narrative refuses to resolve its own narrative tension into easy meaning. Here pain is used as a way of challenging the normative gaze, challenging the audience to see the cause-and-effect relationship of power structures and trauma. As part of a neuroqueer killjoy aesthetic, the oppositional gaze that the novel presents relies on a deliberate expression of pain and trauma to challenge the audience to be hyper-aware. Instead of serving as a way of centering victimhood, I read these as moments where pain is redeployed as a powerful rhetorical tactic. In this vein we might reframe pain as not only an embodied experience, but as something one actively does, blurring the lines between pain and play.

This Tension is Yours: Painful Play in Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*

The neuroqueer aesthetic that I have outlined here is also embodied in Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby's 2018 stand-up special *Nanette*. The special, which launched the comic to international fame, is structured around Gadsby's claim that they need to quit comedy. The show builds from a more standard comedic framework to a painful and at times angry treatise on the effects of trauma and oppression.¹¹⁷ The show is structured around Gadsby's meta-aware critique of the way that comedy as a form often requires a silencing and repressing of trauma and the traumatized. As Sophie Gilbert, reviewer for the *Atlantic*, notes, "[Gadsby] doesn't just put her jokes on hold, she excavates them, showing the audience the rotten holes in her humor."¹¹⁸ Throughout the show Gadsby plays with comedy, strips its processes bare, and uses it as a way to critique the power of stories and the constraints on who can tell what stories and how. Both queer and autistic, Gadsby's work once again presents us with a neuroqueer aesthetic as their work thrives on narrative awareness and on the deployment of an oppositional gaze.

Early on in their comedy show, Gadsby tells a story about how they encountered a belligerent man at the bus stop who got aggressive when he believed Gadsby was a man flirting with his girlfriend. In the first telling of the story, the man realizes Gadsby is a woman. Gadsby narrates this with their usual sarcasm and dry humor:

He said, 'Oh, I'm so sorry. I don't hit women,' he said. What a guy! 'I don't hit women. How about you don't hit anyone? Good rule of thumb. And he goes, "Sorry,

¹¹⁷ As Gadsby notes, anger in comedy is reserved for men, whereas queer and female comics are supposed to do self-deprecating humor.

¹¹⁸ This review comes a few years before Gadsby would change their pronouns to they/them.

I got confused. I thought you were a fucking faggot... trying to crack on to my girlfriend. (00:10:45-00:11:04)

Here the audience laughs at the gender confusion and the man's ignorant and illogical response. Gadsby, however, returns to this story in the second half of the show, revealing that the man came back once he realized his confusion and beat them up. If Gadsby had told the full story, the first telling would not have been funny. In telling the full story, then, Gadsby is acknowledging how certain narratives and stories get silenced to make other people more comfortable. Gadsby notes how at the time they did not report the incident or go to the hospital commenting, "It's because I thought that was all I was worth. And that is what happens when you soak one child in shame and give permission to another to hate" (00:59:43-01:00:04). Here Gadsby highlights the limitations of comedy as a form while also taking on a self-aware perspective of how shame has shaped their subjectivity. Gadsby addresses the way in which they feel internalized shame, shame for who they are as a queer person. Much like Lazi, Gadsby has internalized their abject positionality. However, similar to *Notes of a Crocodile*, Gadsby uses this self-awareness and their awareness of social discourse to present an oppositional gaze, a neuroqueer killjoy aesthetic.

As Gadsby begins to share their pain and tell their story, they also take the opportunity to directly analyze the form of comedy itself, taking up a meta-aware critique of standup as a means of understanding how trauma and tension circulate in our culture. Comedy, Gadsby notes, is all about controlling tension. To make a joke effective one must build tension and then disperse it through laughter. In doing so, however, you never actually resolve that tension, no ending or resolution is provided. Gadsby notes that to tell traumatic stories through jokes means "[freezing] an incredibly formative experience at its trauma

point” and “sealing it off into jokes” (00:40:17-00:40:23). For Gadsby, jokes are not a productive way of dealing with trauma, because “Punch lines need trauma, because punch lines... need tension, and tension feeds trauma” (00:40:43-00:40:53). Here, Gadsby conveys awareness of the power of narratives to frame our experience. They note how they have sealed off their trauma into jokes and failed to process it or heal, and like Lazi, Gadsby demonstrates an awareness of their problematic coping mechanisms as well as the way in which they have been affected by larger power structures and harmful social narratives about difference.

Gadsby uses the playful platform of stand-up as a space to engage in explorations of pain and trauma. While they critique jokes as a form of storytelling, they delve into painful and traumatic experiences. In a neuroplayful move, Gadsby tinkers with and lays bare the mechanisms of stand-up in order to make room for more personal discussions of pain and trauma: discussing sexual abuse and rape, mental illness, queerphobia, and internalized shame. The stage becomes a space for Gadsby to share their story, to process their own trauma, and to ask that this trauma find a proper resolution. They note that they do not tell their story so that they are seen as a victim, but because there is value in their story, commenting, “My story has value. I tell you this ’cause I want you to know, I need you to know, what I know. To be rendered powerless does not destroy your humanity. Your resilience is your humanity” (01:02:58-01:03:10). Here, Gadsby conveys the epistemic value of their stories, even if they are built on trauma and tension. In fact, it is this pain that ultimately leads to the wisdom they convey.

Importantly, Gadsby connects their personal trauma to larger social narratives, noting how “tension is what not-normals carry inside of them all of the time because it is

dangerous to be different” (01:00:26-01:00:33) By taking up an awareness of social narratives, Gadsby lays bare how the burdens of trauma and tension are given to those in abject positions to hold and live with, and how, in contrast, more privileged subjects are absolved from acknowledging this trauma through discursive forms that seal this trauma out of sight or dissolve it into jokes. As I noted before, those with more privilege often have the luxury of not being responsible for understanding how power circulates, particularly in terms of self or narrative awareness. Thus, given their own trauma, “quitting comedy” becomes a form of potential self-care and healing for Gadsby as well as a rejection of unequal power structures and the unequal responsibility to carry society’s tensions. Gadsby’s show, thus, demonstrates not only an awareness of self but an awareness of narrative, power, and audience.

Like *Notes of a Crocodile*, *Nanette* uses pain and trauma not to gain pity but to present an oppositional gaze, to demand change. In doing so, Gadsby provides an insightful meta-analysis of comedy itself as well as the social narratives that inform its practices. In contrast to jokes, Gadsby turns to stories, noting that instead of “sealing” themselves away into jokes, that they will tell their story properly. While jokes seal away trauma, stories allow for a sustained engagement with tension that comes from witnessing testimonies from the margins. As Gadsby tells their stories, they resist the urge to dissolve this tension with jokes, forcing the audience to become aware of and sit with the tension they carry, of the tension that all marginal people carry with them in their lives. Importantly, Gadsby tinkers with the structure of comedy in a playful and painful way in order to redirect tension and demand the audience’s awareness. Gadsby then takes this a step further, not just demanding awareness but also responsibility as they pass off the tension and their story to others. They

say, “And this tension; it is yours. I am not helping you anymore. You need to learn what this feels like...” (01:00:18-01:00:25). Here through an explicit discussion of narrative, Gadsby demands not just awareness but shared responsibility for social wrongs. Gadsby’s neuroplayful performance serves as a powerful, neuroqueer call to action.

Through reading *Notes of a Crocodile* and *Nanette* as paradigmatic examples of a neuroqueer aesthetic, we come to see the way in which awareness (of self, text, and social narrative) is employed as a purposeful rhetorical tactic. These works’ themes of both self-awareness and textual awareness mix with metafictional aesthetics that demand the audience engage in their own practice of hyper-awareness built on tension. In doing so, the two works traffic in aesthetics of play and pain that present a willful, oppositional gaze. In this way the neuroqueer killjoy with their playful and painful aesthetics demands an ethical response. Through an ethics of awareness, the neuroqueer subject fucks with narrative.

Conclusion

A Queer Sort of Queerness: Queer Personalities and the Humanist Subject

In 1930, American psychiatrist Karl Menninger released his best-selling book *The Human Mind*. In it he outlined seven kinds of broken personalities, including what he termed “the schizoid type” or “queer personalities.” Those in this group, he contended, were “characterized by queerness, a queer sort of queerness” (73). Tautological language aside, his description not incidentally utilizes queer as a means to equate humanist subjectivity with notions of sociability. Queer personalities after all referred to those who lacked the ability “to get along well with other people” often despite a desire to do so. Menninger included in this category those with the diagnosis of dementia praecox. Now referred to as schizophrenia, this diagnosis would also include what we classify as autism today. To be neurodivergent has long been queer.

Menninger’s work is perhaps a bit queer in its own right. He spent parts of his career at odds with mainstream psychiatry, even going so far in his 1968 work on prison reform to refer to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as a “Witches Hammer Manual” (*The Crime of Punishment* 118). Instead of a heavily clinical model of psychiatry, he argued for a framework that addressed the lived experiences, environment, and holistic well-being of patients. In *The Human Mind*, he writes against eugenic models that easily equated genetics to feeble-mindedness, framing such rhetoric as simply part of an evolving attempt to conceptualize difference, beginning with devils some two thousand years ago. As he notes, “calling people witches or devils or sons of guns or psychopathic personalities doesn’t help” (8). Here, Menninger begins to articulate how perceptions of difference are mediated by narrative frameworks. He goes further to interrogate the concept of “normal”

which had been popularized through the eugenics era, calling it “ignorance” for people to “think of abnormality only with horror” (ix). His work was progressive for the time, framing the mind “as a collection of enormously complex possibilities for variation” in contrast to a heavy eugenicist focus on the average (ix). Instead, Menninger argued that we all possess abnormal traits, though some possess them to an abnormal degree and this leads to either greatness or deep difficulties.¹¹⁹

In some ways, Menninger’s thinking parallels contemporary neurodiversity models, pushing back on conceptions of normal while embracing variation. At the same time, however, Menninger could not resist the impulse to classify—from isolation and schizoid types to neurotic and antisocial types. His own work unquestioningly reified normalcy in a less apparent form, through notions of excess. Take for example how Menninger further described the queer nature of the schizoid type:

One word (other than “unsociable”) describes them—but it’s a shifty word, variously understood by various people. The word is “queer.” No, we are *not* all queer—that is, not very. We all have queernesses, we are all a little unsocial, a little inclined to prefer our own company, a little seclusive and envious and eccentric and all the rest of it. But most of us are much more largely dominated by our social instincts. These queer people who decline to associate with us are not just queer, not just afflicted with a *little* queerness such as ours; they are really *queer*. They are queer in that they are not like the rest of us and don’t seem to care to be. They may achieve great things

¹¹⁹ In terms of greatness, he gave the examples of Woodrow Wilson and Napoleon Bonaparte as figures who might be categorized as schizoid types.

and they may not—we may acclaim them and pay them due respect—but we never love them very much. We can't. They won't let us.” (Menninger 77)

Even while critiquing the notion of normalcy, Menninger still singled out a type of personality that goes too far. “Queer” might mean weird or odd, but Menninger extended it to a form of narrative abjection. Through the rhetoric he constructed, the schizoid type became something else, not a person with a little queerness, but truly queer. We may all have abnormal traits, our queernesses, but there is a point where it becomes too much or too little—and if we step too close to this invisible threshold we move from subject to abject.

Central to this conceptualization of queerness is an unquestioned focus on sociability as a metric of the human. As I articulated in the first chapter of this dissertation, there is an anxiety produced through encounters with neurodivergence as interlocutors are made aware of their own limited ability to interrelate with others. Here, even in a more progressive work by 1930 standards, we see this same anxiety emerge. Menninger associated asociality with extreme queerness, going further to argue that schizoid types cannot elicit love. This is not seen as a failure on the part of the more purportedly well-balanced “we,” but a refusal of sorts from those with queer personalities. Interrelationality, one’s ability to connect with others, to feel with them, to manage smooth social encounters with no missteps—all of these mark unspoken boundaries of human subjectivity.

In further developing this project I hope to trace this figuration of the human subject more thoroughly, examining its development through twentieth-century American history as well as its expansion across the PanPacific via flows of American (neo)liberalism and empire. At this juncture, I propose to call this figuration “The Empathetic Subject.” Empathy would more fully develop as a concept in post-WWII America, becoming a highly

valued quality that helped to mark people as proper consumers, citizens, and humans (Lanzoni). In 1945, neuroendocrinologist Roy G. Hoskins would go as far as to argue that “the primary defect in schizophrenia...is inadequate empathy” (Hoskins 102). This marks part of a continued trend wherein the human subject is defined by specific structures of feeling that align with socially acceptable forms of interrelationality. Earlier discourses did not use the term empathy—as seen in Menninger or even the Mendocino State Asylum case files with which I began this dissertation. However, in using the term I hope to capture a model of the human subject based around shared expectations of social fluency—one’s ability to relate to others on multiple levels, including affectively. I would argue that today this is most frequently figured and discussed, both in psychiatry and in popular culture, through the lens of empathy.

In lieu of this more extended history, at this juncture I hope to have sufficiently explored the means through which psychiatry helps to create, manage, and narrate the bounds of the human subject alongside popular culture. In chapter one, I examined this relationship most closely, discussing how psychiatric discourses around masking resulted in the figure of the psychokiller popularized in slasher horror. In chapter two, I considered the ways that Latinx bodyminds have been implicated in state-sanctioned forms of *locamaking*, wherein they are rendered *loca* materially, rhetorically, and affectively. In chapter three, I discussed US media (mis)representations of autism. And in my final chapter, I examined how cognitive literary studies has so far overlooked the broader social and political discourses in which neurodivergent aesthetics emerge.

While it is important to identify these discursive histories and their material consequences, I believe it is equally, if perhaps not more, crucial to examine how

neurodivergent people are recuperating agency within these contexts. The literary and cultural analysis I perform in this dissertation is fundamentally a response to the forms of epistemic injustice and dehumanization neurodivergent people face. By turning to creative works, to aesthetic production, my aim has been to unpack various forms of neurodivergent agency and epistemologies that move beyond the conceptual bounds of the humanist subject. In doing so, I have attempted to articulate some potentialities of crip, neuroqueer aesthetics. Such pieces seek to unsettle, to disrupt norms and to highlight abject discourses. In chapter one, for example, I turned to a Thai series that directly intervenes in narrative legacies around masking and psychopathy, offering rhetorical critique and putting forth a call for collective *unmasking*. In chapter two, I demonstrated how Latinx creatives are reclaiming *locura*, embracing a call to “go mad” as a means to unveil state processes of bio- and necropolitics. The works in both chapters embrace madness and neurodivergence, finding new forms of interrelationality in the epistemological space this opens up. If chapters one and two are united by a focus on “going mad,” then chapters three and four explore a second neuroqueer aesthetic tool: neuroplay. In chapter three, I examined how neurodivergent participants in transformative fandom are theorizing and imagining characters as autistic, redefining how we conceptualize autistic embodiment and voice. The final chapter expanded neuroplay to consider how neurodivergent creatives employ narrative awareness as a form of critique and play. The texts in this chapter, rooted in the context of anti-queer discourse in Taiwan and Australia respectively, stare back at their audiences demanding collective responsibility and awareness of social violence. All of these works seek to reclaim and push back, offering visions of new aesthetic, rhetorical, and affective possibilities.

The scope of this dissertation has been in some ways quite utopian in its vision of these neuroqueer possibilities. What I hope to further interrogate as my work progresses is the limits of such visions. In what ways might neurodivergent positions, rooted in time and place, be limited in their scope, in their liberatory potentials? Earlier in this conclusion, I argued that we might view Menninger as a bit queer for the ways he pushed back on and critiqued norms of his time. Yet, as I have shown, his work also reified the boundaries of the humanist subject regardless. I believe it is important to reflect on the ways new epistemic interventions may move us forward on one axis while still reifying other axes of oppression. While this concerns me, I am still haunted by a question: In what ways is it important to imagine otherwise regardless? For now, then, I hope you can forgive me some utopian impulses.

At its heart, this work has been about epistemic injustice, about the various ways neurodivergent people are denied knowledge of ourselves and the authority to create that knowledge. I hope my work makes apparent the various ways in which neurodivergence is often narrated and storied against us, as well as the importance of neurodivergent knowledge-making. Addressing epistemic injustice, filling epistemic gaps, is important for any conceivable future that values neurodiversity. It is about embracing neurodivergent agency and expression, whether this be playful and quirky or mad and painful. It is also about community, about the ways in which stories have the capacity to render us abject, but also the ability to bring us together as we envision new forms of interrelationality.

I hope that my work has done its own neuroqueering, disrupting discourse that places neurodivergence in opposition to community, communication, affect, and agency. Neuroqueer is both “to be” and “to do;” it is transformative and resilient, discursive and

embodied. Neuroqueer stories are worth telling, our language is worth speaking, and our lives are worth living. Ultimately, this work has been a playful and painful love letter to my own queer neurodivergent bodymind. To reclaim Menninger's words, I hope this work has offered a queer sort of queerness.

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