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Mad Girls: Charting Cultural Representations of Psychosocial Disability and
Contemporary Hysteria(s)

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

in

Drama and Theatre

by

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2019

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Mad Girls: Charting Cultural Representations of Psychosocial Disability and
Contemporary Hysteria(s)

by

Laura Margaret Dorwart

Doctor of Philosophy in Drama and Theatre

University of California San Diego, 2019

Professor Bryan Reynolds, Chair

Mad Girls examines what I term a *cast-off girl* and posits what her relationship to the abject is. My conception is that the cast-off girl exceeds the boundaries of girlhood, embodying the perceived aspects of girlhood that are deemed inappropriate for public display. She points to that which is unable to be contained. I look at artifacts of pop-culture and performance made for and by girls. The girlhood depicted in these works comprises images of the eroticized, infantile, and still totally deadly. Within girl-oriented pop-culture, I have identified and named two phenomena around which

the performance of the mad girl is centered: *girlsonas* and *skin speaking*. The girlsona is a girled archetype and by skin speaking I am referring to how girls' bodies are often foregrounded as proof of some internal complication.

To explore the performance of the Mad Girl, I analyze narratives of self-harm that are disseminated by girls through social media and other online platforms as a form of group identification; representations of borderline personality disorder in the films *Girl, Interrupted* and *Prozac Nation*, Merri Lisa Johnson's performative writing in her memoir *Girl In Need of a Tourniquet: Memoir of a Borderline Personality*, and ultimately the musical *Borderline*, as an example of what can go awry when psychiatrically disabled individuals are not foregrounded in attempts to represent their narratives in performance; and the performative personas of musicians Emilie Autumn and Melanie Martinez which are both founded in representations of girlhood-after-trauma exposed through neo-Victorian themes and adolescent drag. Ultimately this dissertation is a call to reexamine the cultural products of the cast-off girl in a our age of quickly changing performance venues.

Chapter One

The Possibility of Mad Girl Theory:

Navigating the Literature of Hysteria, Disability, and Girlhood

In a 2016 Instagram post, self-proclaimed 20-something “tragic queen” visual artist Audrey Wollen stands forlornly next to a painting captioned “me in front of Asger Jorn’s *L'avant-garde se rend pas*” (“The avant-garde never gives up,’ 1962) in the process of actually giving up rn [right now]” (Wollen). In another, she captions a still-wet negative pregnancy test “praise be.” In one series, Wollen drapes herself—while wearing schoolgirl outfits that feature pink cardigans and increasingly tiny skirts—over patients’ tables in an assortment of doctors’ offices (and one MRI room), with no explanation for her being there, but always inspiring concern (“y r u always at the doctor?? R u ok??” someone invariably posts). In several more posts, she superimposes her naked body or her crying face (never “pretty-crying” but always emphasizing the accompanying snot) onto Renaissance paintings of idealized, youthful female figures. And she is nearly always horizontal, often eating or staring at a phone.

“I’ve always wanted to be the girl in the painting,” Wollen tells one interviewer who asks about the impetus behind Wollen’s performative practices and her online flaunting of sadness, chronic pain, and clinical depression. She describes these practices as part of what she calls “Sad Girl Theory.” Wollen is not alone in her endeavor; she uses her own body within her art, centering herself within famous paintings of justifying her body, and stages the history of girls’ sadness as a political

act. At once building off of and critiquing conventional feminist readings of female objectification within art history, Wollen asks her virtual audience:

So let's flip it around: what if the naked horizontal girl wasn't a symbol of subordination, but a symbol of rebellion? What about the nature of objects can be used to our advantage? In anime, there are a lot of characters who are half robot, half girl, who are totally infantile and eroticised and still totally deadly. What can we learn from her and her use of object-ness? (Wollen)

Wollen's Sad Girl Theory can be considered a response to the liberal feminist ideal that views women as the makers of their own success. Wollen counters that it is necessary to view the sadness of girls and women as an appropriate and informed reaction to patriarchal structures. Sad Girl Theory is a criticism of liberal ideals of womanhood that depict "the successful feminist" as famous, rich, and happy and the notion that sadness resides within the individual woman, who is responsible for her own emancipation. Wollen's questions closely tracked my own as I embarked on this project: How and why do girls perform sadness online and form communities around it? How can invisible disabilities read as feminine be made visible and legible? Who is the "sad girl" to begin with, who are her predecessors, and why does she matter? How can the girl, and particularly the stigmatized girl, be reimagined and restaged? I, however, will turn my attention to the Mad Girl; the girl whose sadness is written on and for her in what are often extreme or violent ways.

This dissertation will examine what I term a *cast-off girl* and posits what her relationship to the abject is. Tate defines abject art as "artworks which explore themes that transgress and threaten our sense of cleanliness and propriety particularly referencing the body and bodily functions" (tate.org.uk), and asserts that, "The term

abjection literally means ‘the state of being cast off’.” My conception of the cast-off girl, then, exceeds the boundaries of girlhood, embodying the perceived aspects of girlhood that are deemed inappropriate for public display. She points to that which is unable to be contained. She is a girl who refuses linear progression to the Freudian stages and rejects her own ascension into the symbolic law of the Father, through deliberate delays, sideways growth, and overzealous embrace of the trappings of childhood (e.g., through adolescent drag, the ruffles of a dollified Lolita, or their shadowy cousins, the beating hearts and damaged flesh behind sensationalistic headlines about sex being in self-harm). I posit the cast-off girl as both innately harmless yet simultaneously disturbing. Why, then, do we proliferate so many copies of her, mass-producing them as if to stick them on the ominous side milk cartons?

To answer these questions I look at artifacts of pop-culture and performance made for and by girls. The girlhood depicted in these works comprises images of the eroticized, infantile, and still totally deadly. Within girl-oriented pop-culture, I have identified and named two phenomena around which the performance of the mad girl is centered: *girlsonas* and *skin speaking*.

The girlsona is a girled archetype. With many archetypes being maternal or paternal, girl is not divided into its own archetypes. So girlsonas are cultural archetypes of the girl in popular mythology, such as mass media, television tropes, and breathless sensationalistic headlines. Girlsonas manifest is woman-to-girl drag that sees adult women don the cultural artifacts of girlhood for the purposes of hyperrealism and gendered critique. Girlsonas consist in taking the sensationalistic

excess of how girls are perceived (whether as materialistic, appearance-obsessed, withdrawn and depressed, flowing over with negative affect, etc.) and wearing it as a form of temporal drag. I contend that girls are rarely seen as agential cultural actors and that girlhood is not seen as something someone does, it is seen as something you are a victim of, so like conventional drag, it turns a mirror to the gendered stereotypes that men adopt for the purposes of reflecting on their own imagined womanhoods or feminine sides with the added complication of women looking back retrofuturistically into the girlhoods they had, wished they had, are reclaiming, or suffered from.

By skin speaking I am referring to how girls' bodies are often foregrounded as proof of some internal complication. The starving body of the anorexic, for example, is seen as a blank canvas on which cultural expectations have overwritten themselves. Self-harm is often read similarly, with girls' scars perceived as proof or aftermath of their internal damage. I propose instead that self-harm scars and the like should be read as public health issues, the proof of collective cultural expectations and the burden they impose on those who bear them, and secondly as the writings of skin that is expected not to speak, and attempts (if unhealthy) or silenced actors to communicate through the flesh that is foregrounded as the most important thing about them. Thirdly, they are often attempt to make invisible disabilities, illnesses, trauma or other suffering visible. For example, sexual assault is one of the primary predictive factors of self-harm in adolescent girls (Flemming); self-harm scars can thus be read as attempts to make legible what society would rather ignore.

I contend that girls' behaviors are often read as symptoms of hysteria (i.e., Freud's Dora) moving from inward to outward. Whereas they could be more effectively read from a public health/collective perspective; that is external, moving in- as, for example, Dora's physical symptoms of chronic illness and mental symptoms of ill health could be read as the result of the trauma of sexual assault. Thus, this project was informed further by Ann Cvetkovich's twin assertions in *Depression: A Public Feeling* that (1) "depression is ordinary" (i.e., that it is everyday and integrated into public life and societal reality, rather than an individual anomaly), and (2) like other mental illnesses, depression is neither purely biological nor cultural. According to Corey Hickner-Johnson in *The Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*,

Cvetkovich maintains that depression should be considered as a social and cultural experience and phenomenon, rather than a medical condition begging for curative measures. The trouble with medicalizations of depression are that they tend to pathologize and stigmatize textured, varied, and diverse experiences of the world. This does not mean that depression feels good or should be discussed only outside of medical discourses, but rather that it is an "interdisciplinary phenomenon." (91)

For Wollen and Cvetkovich, sadness, chronic pain, illness, and how they are linked to girlhood and femininity are *ordinary*, which means they are *shared*. Wollen's public persona and the performative ways in which she repackages and markets her physical and mental disabilities as part of a neoliberal individual "brand" mark her work as part of what Cvetkovich calls an "archive of trauma" (Cvetkovich 11), much like the sad-eyed cartoon-girls described by Cvetkovich and depicted by visual artist Allyson Mitchell. These sad girls, with their large, mournful eyes, ask

viewers to empathize with them on everything from self-harm to periods, bad hair days, general ennui, sexual trauma, and various other “girl troubles” that often induce cultural panic and which are marked by stigma and stereotype. While it may seem irreverent to lump ugly selfies in with the ongoing effects of childhood sexual trauma, artists like Wollen and Mitchell are responding ironically to the “selfies, sexting and self-harm” trope that dominates the popular imagination—including the self-help genre, commercial representations of girlhood, and occasionally sociological research and feminist theory—in which “girl troubles” are a dumping ground for behaviors read as attention-seeking that communicate psychic distress.

My project, then, is to exhume cultural representations from this dumping ground which is full of an assorted mass of girl troubles. Wollen and girls like her are producing works that dominant culture has rendered illegible/invisible as performance and I seek to resurrect and reframe these in order to assert their artistic and performative viability. Across a wide range of media, performances of and by the girl are dismissed as existing on a continuum of silly to harmless. The concerns of girlhood are dismissed as inconsequential, but when these girls express themselves they are often met with concern, censorship, and handwringing. And it seems this concern is not geared at the girls themselves, but at the audiences potentially exposed to their messages. The girls are cast off and cast aside. My research started by asking how it is that girls’ cultural productions, such as banned Instagram hashtags, can be simultaneously insignificant and dangerous. There seems to be a broader societal concern, while disregarding the individual. A significant portion of adult female artists

and performers retain aspects of girlhood through an overzealous embrace of its trappings. Girlhood contains an allure and power prompting these artists to hold onto it in spite of its perceived illegitimacy. And while girl studies itself has been an area of academic discourse, the discipline has frequently been relegated to the position of feminist studies' little sister or the underexplored territory adjacent to "youth studies" (aka, boyhood studies). If the home has traditionally been regarded as feminine territory, then the territory of the girl is a closed off, cloistered, small, and separate space within the home. I aim to account for the phenomenon of failing to attend to cultural productions made by, or for, girls (particularly multiply marginalized girls), even within works explicitly dedicated to girlhood studies.

From Sad to Mad

This chapter will establish the groundwork of Mad Girl Theory, leading up to the formulation of my research questions which will drive the analyses of girlhood pop culture artifacts and the "girl troubles" they have come to be associated with in my subsequent chapters. Mad Girl Theory is an attempt to account for invisible disabilities made manifest through artistic and performative practices. These "girl troubles," the psychosocial disabilities they have in many cases come to represent, and the ways they are both reified and resisted in performative contexts are center stage in this dissertation, which responds to calls by Cvetkovich in *Depression: A Public Feeling* and *An Archive of Feelings* to weave analyses of trauma and its aftermath more seamlessly into the fabric of queer and feminist studies; Alison Kafer in *Feminist, Queer, Crip* to turn a curious and critical eye towards the sites where compulsory able-

bodiedness and able-mindedness intersect with misogyny and compulsory heterosexuality; and Anna Mollow in “Cripistemologies: What Disability Theory Needs to Know About Hysteria” to examine the ways in which narratives of suffering can be used productively within the academic study of “invisible” (“undocumented”) disabilities. The connections between trauma, feminist theory, and disability are myriad, as Mollow details in her discussion of the cultural legacy of hysteria, yet often go dismissed or ignored altogether:

Here’s a funny thing about hysteria: although it’s a medical term with pervasive cultural life, it almost never makes an appearance in disability theory. Peruse the tables of contents, indexes, and titles of the most influential texts in the field: the word hysteria is seldom found. This is a crucial omission for people who have what I call “undocumented disabilities.

Yet a disproportionate number of disabled women experience sexual trauma and domestic violence, and the “invisibly disabled” population is overwhelmingly young and female. According to an NPR analysis of unpublished Justice Department data, the rate of rape and sexual assault against people with intellectual disabilities is more than seven times the rate against people without disabilities and the rate against people with other disabilities is more than three times the rate. Among women with intellectual disabilities, it is about 12 times the rate (NPR). Furthermore, invisible disabilities are often coded as female, whether as an emotional response to trauma or pain or an outright dismissal of women’s first-hand accounts of their own experiences. In “Gender and the Politics of Invisible Disability,” Nancy J. Hirschman writes, “Gender and sexuality are important aspects of this invisibility. Gender norms particularly conditioned responses to women with disabilities so as to heighten the

invisibility, as in the case of men's pain complaints being given greater credibility" (207). Moreover, a significant number of women's disabilities, both psychosocial and physical—particularly chronic illness and other examples of Mollow's "undocumented disabilities," but sometimes visible ones as well—can be traced to trauma perpetuated by another human being. Meanwhile, people who experience interpersonal trauma, such as rape or child abuse, are more likely to develop PTSD than people who experience non-assault-based trauma, such as accidents and natural disasters (Zoladz).

From Mollow's call to fold hysteria into the lexicon of disability studies, then, emerges a potential cultural heroine: the *girl*. The notion of the girl as both a material data point and an abstract concept is relevant in this context in several ways: in disability's reputation as a catalyst for infantilization and societal relegation to a juvenile role; in the growing, and disproportionate, number of girls and young women who experience symptoms of or are diagnosed with psychosocial disabilities; and in the stigmatization and pathologization of girls within media narratives about youth cultures, cultural trends, and mental illness. These connections make the-girl-as-archetype a particularly fruitful site for examining performances of, and media narratives about, mental illness and the Mad Girl.

The Hysterical Girl and Bedroom Culture

The most common scholarly responses to dominant narratives about girlhood and its attendant woes echo Elaine Showalter's explorations of hysteria in *The Female Malady*, in which she traces how debates about and medical and social understandings

of hysteria in the late 20th century used fears of stigmatized and marginalized femininities as a foundation and influenced subsequent “performances” of female madness from women themselves, and in *Hystories*, with the term referring to cultural manias and panics often constructed around cultural anxieties about femininity and feminization. Who are the girl-contemporaries of the hysterics described by Showalter, and how are they responding to new iterations of the cultural project of creating and perpetuating the notion of the female “hysteric”? The present dissertation answers these questions by examining (1) self-making projects associated with girlhood (particularly online) with an eye to integration of perspectives from disability studies and mad studies; (2) the ideological links between self-harm and cultural perceptions of female masochism and the pathologization that links both; and (3) images of the “girl grotesque” and how they are circulated in film, in subcultures, and in live performances.

Girls’ studies scholars such as Akane Kanai and Claudia Mitchell, like disability studies and mad studies scholars, have encountered a number of obstacles along the field’s path to legitimacy and critical attention within the academy. Girl studies itself has frequently been relegated to the position of feminist studies’ little sister or the underexplored territory adjacent to “youth studies” (aka, boyhood studies). Sociologists Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber canonically established in 1975 the notion of “bedroom culture” as integral to cultural studies of girlhood. Girls, they argue persuasively, are often shunted aside in explorations of youth culture and subcultural rebellion, or their participation in subcultures such as rock’n’roll, for

example, is read as boy-crazy hyperemotionality or an extended ploy to get a boyfriend. McRobbie and Garber claim that “bedroom culture”—including listening to records, reading magazines, and socializing in semi-private spaces—is in effect girl culture.

While the concept of bedroom culture needs updating, it is still useful when analyzing girls’ performances of, and media narratives about, mental illness, so this dissertation looks at how the advent of social media and newer forms of engagement relate to the inward and outward production of girl culture through its empowerment of the “mad girl.” A 2018 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 97% of teen girls have access to a smart phone, compared to 93% of teen boys. Also, 50% of teenage girls are near constant online users, compared with 39% of teenage boys. While boys dominate the internet in terms of gaming (97% of boys play video games versus 83% of girls), girls are more inclined to be on social platforms (42% of girls use Snapchat versus 29% of boys). There is a pronounced difference between teen boys’ usage of the Internet as a gaming platform and teen girls’ usage of the internet as a social network (Pew). No matter the breakdown of Internet usage by a gender or age, bedroom culture is no longer confined to an isolated house within the home. Teen girls and young women often use the internet as a means to socialize, develop support networks, participate in subcultures, share creative work, and start careers. In particular, the “confessional” style of staging and sharing one’s inner life and personal goings-on in art and writing that has become increasingly popular alongside the advent of reality television is frequently dominated by girls. Girls’ massive digital

footprint and their sprawling and often entrepreneurial presence on social media networks like Instagram and YouTube (where bedroom culture can make money and launch careers) have shifted the notion of bedroom culture considerably, opening it up to an interpretation that bends and breaks the rules of the private/public divide and the idea that girls are relegated to the domestic interior. Girls' studies theorists working in media and performance studies, such as Akane Kanai, Claudia Mitchell, and Sarah Projansky, have examined the many implications of this erosion of the divide between public and private in girls' lives, a divide which, I argue, has significant implications for readings of psychosocial disability, as mental illness has historically toed a similar line between private shame and public exposure.

The Discourse of “Girl”

The language of “girl” and “girlhood” is contested terrain. Central to questions of girlhood and subject formation are cultural notions of victimhood/victimization and empowerment, with dominant narratives positing these two poles as the only possibilities for girls at opposite ends of a binary, an ultimately false dichotomy that “tragic queens” like Wollen seek to disrupt. Girl studies scholar Rosalind Sibielski posits that there are two contemporary popular discourses surrounding the girl, both of which

construct girlhood as a site of subjectivity-in-progress, in which female adolescence is understood in terms of either becoming victim or becoming empowered, but in which girls themselves are understood as an endangered demographic in need of rescue—whether from society, their own adolescent female psyches, or each other.

Thus, girlhood is “positioned primarily as a site for adult intervention, with girls themselves accorded only a secondary role in the project of becoming girl” (Sibielski). Thus, to be “girl” within girl-problem and girl-power discourse, is to be woman-in-progress (a position that many girl/hood studies scholars refute and challenge) and less-than-woman, or to be on the precipice of womanhood and thus constantly under the weight of potential crisis or threat.¹

Monica Swindle introduces the question “What is a girl, and what is the affect that she produces?” and notes that Simone de Beauvoir “identified the masculine as both the positive and the neutral, leaving the feminine always in the place of the negative, the Other. Thus, girl is othered to boy; a girl is not a boy; a boundary exists between boy and girl.” Thus, the masculine-as-default perspective noted by de Beauvoir is reproduced, Swindle argues, in the boy/girl dichotomy. Perhaps even more significantly, however, Swindle reiterates that this othering of girls is just as pervasive, and perhaps even more problematic, in feminist discourse: “Woman is the other, and girl is the subject because she is a girl, but in society (as in much feminist discourse) the narrative of becoming a woman participates in the othering of girls” (Swindle). The woman is the Other to the man, and when the girl fails to grow up into woman she disrupts the order as predicated upon the male along the male/female continuum. The use of the term “girl” in this dissertation is influenced by Swindle’s broad interpretation as well as Heather Warren-Crow’s work on the plasticity and fluidity of

¹ “Girl” is a term on the rapid trajectory from the riot grrrl movement to defanged late 1990s and early 2000s messages within popular music and media of girls’ empowerment and self-esteem: Think Spice Girls, *Reviving Ophelia*, and Powerpuff Girls.

girlhood: women who perform girlhoods by choice are in fact “girls” themselves, and that girlish affect, pop cultural artifacts, and even images can also be “girls.” “Girl” comprises most pre-adulthood females but doesn't exclude adult women. Age isn't necessarily directly tied to girlhood in this construction, other than that as she ages, a female becomes less likely to be read as “girl,” and if she retains “girlhood” past a certain age the performance of this identity complicates social perceptions of her subjecthood and individuality and poses a possible threat to social orders. A grown woman who retains the affect of girlhood willfully embraces the negative positionality of the boy/girl dichotomy and refuses to perform “womanhood” as the Other to the male. By refusing to perform her role as the male’s Other in the culturally scripted manner, the “girl” disrupts the male-centric continuum.

Girls in Space

The heteronormative, able-bodied, and predominantly white nature of girlhood studies has recently been critiqued within the field. In “Where the Girls Are: Mapping Girls’ Studies,” Mary Celeste Kearney takes stock of the field of girlhood studies, noting its lack of attention to intersectionality and within performance studies thus far: “Unfortunately, to date, relatively little attention has been given to race, class, sexuality, and ability in girls’ media culture. . . . There is a notable dearth of girl-centered research in the fine arts [which] reinforc[es] the traditional adultist perspective in the arts at large” (16). Other girlhood studies scholars have more pointedly critiqued the lack of intersectionality within the field, arguing that the “girl” is too often presented inextricably bound to whiteness, able-bodiedness, and

heterosexuality as default identity categories. Particularly because much of girl studies scholarship is positioned in response to *Reviving Ophelia* and its counterparts, a call exists within girlhood studies to examine other intersectional identities. *Reviving Ophelia* written by Mary Pipher, Ph.D. and published in 1994 was well received by the public, evidenced by a three-year stretch on The New York Times Best Seller list, including a period in the top rank. The non-fiction book takes a look at the effects of societal pressures on American adolescent girls, using case studies from the author's experience as a therapist. The book was so commercially successful as to inspire a fictionalized Lifetime movie of the same name.

These critiques have inspired recent work such as the 2016 special issue of *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies*, *Girls from Outer Space*, which focuses on counter-narratives of girls who are deemed “different” or are positioned “outside” normative culture. Michelle Bae-Dimitradis, in the introduction to the issue, calls for scholars working in this field to “mov[e] away from both binary and canonical lenses of girlhood that center on White middle-class girl subjects” and to begin to “delineate a conceptual revision of the notion of outsideness by shifting from simply victimized, within a deficit model, to a complex dimension of girl agency that demonstrates both limiting and expanding experiences of the girls.”

Embedded within these concerns is the larger issue of who is granted access to personal growth and, more broadly, who is granted girlhood and representation. The stakes are increasingly high: in our capitalist society, girls have become representative of the self-inventing, constantly becoming, neoliberal citizen consumer. Marnina

Gonick historically situates the emergence and subsequent importance of the girl subject in “Between ‘Girl Power’ and ‘Reviving Ophelia,’” arguing that “girls have come to represent, for the first time, one of the stakes upon which the future depends” (5). Current discourse is an “expression of the uncertainties, tensions, fears, and anxieties elicited by the rapid social, economic, and political changes taking place due to neoliberal policies” (Gonick 5). These neoliberal ideals adhere to the principle that “anyone who works hard can get ahead” and that “women have made great gains towards equality;” thus, women “are led to understand their own experience of successes and failures as a product of their individual effort” (Gonick 6). However, not all girls satisfy the parameters of the idealized neoliberal girl subject fantasy in which the ideal neoliberal girl is white, able-minded and able-bodied, educated, middle class, and, through the Girl Power narratives available to her, believes she can become anyone or anything. It is critical to draw attention to the failings and possible dangers of an ideological subtext that ignores systemic barriers and encourages girls to believe that self-fulfillment and empowerment are only a product or service out of reach, even if the service in question is therapy or something other that promises self-betterment.

In a similar vein, the phenomenon of failing to attend to cultural productions made by, or for, girls (particularly multiply marginalized girls), even within explicit works dedicated to girlhood studies, has been noted since the field’s inception in the mid-1990s. The insight is just as relevant today, particularly when much of girls’ cultural production takes place online and is read as “postfeminist” or “juvenile,” due in part to familiar stereotypes about girl culture(s) being relegated to the private and

domestic spheres and in part to skepticism about online community-building as “real” activism, echoing common anxieties surrounding the girl about whether she is “genuine” or “real.” Responding to the claims of scholars such as Simon Frith who first theorized girls’ leisure activities and cultural productions as “starting and ending in the bedroom,” researchers such as McRobbie began to note the significance of girls’ literacy practices throughout history, including journal-writing, crafting, and zine-making. Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh in the introduction to *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia* write, “Girls’ literacy practices ... are often seen as not as serious or equal to the demanding business of reading nonfiction or engaging in boys’ play” (2008, xxviii-xxix). Jessalynn Keller argues in this vein in “Making Activism Accessible: Exploring Girls’ Blogs as Sites of Contemporary Feminist Activism” that “girls’ activism is too often made invisible to adult researchers looking for more traditional activist practices that feminists have used historically, such as public demonstrations, legal challenges, and commercial boycotts” (Keller 18).

Girls’ cultural productions today, and the ways in which they construct, perform, and “try on” selves primarily take place online, and do so by resisting or reifying the process that Judith Butler describes in *Bodies That Matter*, in which “the girl is ‘girded,’ brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender [which is] reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reinforce or contest this naturalized effect” (12). These self-making projects and online subcultures, especially those that are centered around stigmatized and pathologized practices such as self-harm—a practice that is nearly

ubiquitous in the “troubled girl” genre of crisis literature—constitute a particularly significant locus of the present dissertation. Responding to the growth of virtual girls’ communities, girl studies scholarship has, accordingly, begun, in recent years, to emphasize the significance of girls’ communities, and particularly their performed identities and self-making practices online. Work like Shayla Thiel-Stern’s “Femininity Out of Control on the Internet: A Critical Analysis of Media Representations of Gender, Youth, and MySpace.com in International News Discourses”² emphasize the murky waters that girls must navigate in order to perform and circulate the affect of “girl” and the objects of girlhood online. These cyberspace-based practices are, in a Butlerian sense, how one “becomes” girl and defines “what kind of girl” one becomes or is read as becoming. Both becomings are closely related to neoliberal subjectivities and their emphasis on branding and commodification, as well as postfeminist discourse that presents girlhood as a free market of available rational choices and which functions as girl power discourse’s social media-powered disseminator and third-wave feminism’s slightly embarrassing friend.

The Feminist Girl

Adding to the fraught history of “girl” and its tense relationship to the academy, second-wave feminists, as has been noted by scholars such as Anita Harris, Kearney, Claudia Mitchell, and Catherine Driscoll, were particularly uncomfortable

² Thiel-Stern posits that cultural narratives about online self-making and performative practices available to girls are “Girls are Victims, Too Naïve, Stupid, and Out-of-Control to Protect Themselves”; “Narrative Two: Sexy Girlishness Draws Predators”; and “Narrative Three: MySpace Girls Are Mean, MySpace Boys Are Murderers” (18).

with and distanced themselves from “girl” as a label, and from the concerns of girls, except in their presumed futures as women. This was understandable to an extent, due to the focus at that time on activism that required participation in political activities (public demonstrations, protests, fundraising, running for office, and lobbying, for example) that would have been relatively inaccessible to girls, and on issues such as equal pay and mobility in the workplace that would only be relevant to girls in their presumed futures. However, this emphasis also led to and reflected a rhetorical move away from the very notion of “girl”: If a woman was perceived as the lesser “other” of man, then the archetype of the girl, with her presumed hyperfemininity and edges that had not yet been smoothed out by full integration into a man’s world, was posited as the enemy of feminism, representing the immature pasts and stigmatization that women wanted to move away from. Kearney writes, “Feminists have a lengthy tradition of uneasy identification and, sometimes, disidentification with girls, which unfortunately has led many women activists to believe, albeit often unconsciously, that girls are irrelevant to feminist politics and scholarship” (6). The rhetoric of second-wave feminism, and the message that the female condition was in fact political, was in part contingent upon juxtaposing women with the frequently pathologized and too-easily-dismissed (female) youth. For example, as Kearney notes:

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan repeatedly called upon women to ‘grow up’ so as to reach their ‘full potential’...Friedan opposed the ‘adolescent’ housewife and [lauded] the fully actualized, ‘adult’ feminist...Although Simone de Beauvoir's most profound assertion ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ begins her exploration of how femininity is produced during childhood, an analysis of how one becomes a girl is not her objective. (6)

This fundamental distrust of and willingness to pathologize, dismiss, or otherwise distance oneself and the feminist movement from girls and girlhood has contributed to a reticence to examine girls' cultural productions within feminist theory, a gap which has been noted within girl studies scholarship and third-wave feminist scholarship as well. Jessica Taft argues in Jessalynn Keller's *Girls' Feminist Blogging in a Postfeminist Age*, "Girl activists' ideas, stories, and theoretical contributions thus remain largely hidden from view. They continue to appear in both the public and academic domain only as occasional images—as visual objects rather than as intelligent and intelligible political subjects" (Keller 47). Psychosocially, cognitively, and physically disabled girls are often rendered invisible or stigmatized within the broader fields of girls' and feminist studies, as theorists such as Deborah Stienstra, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Petra Koppers have noted in their work on the ways that disability is either elided within or overshadows larger discussions of girlhood.

Complicating the distancing of second-wave feminists and early feminist theorists from associations with, and the political possibilities of, girlhood and female adolescence were the reclamation of "girl" and girliness by both third-wave feminists and the "girl power" movement of the 1990s, as well as developments in new ways to look at childhood within queer theory. "Girl" as a loaded signifier exploded in the 1990s, with the twin movements of "girls in crisis" or "girl problem"

discourse³ and “girl power” discourse, initially sparked by the riot grrrl/DIY movement and later sanitized and scrubbed for the purpose of commodification,⁴ aligning uneasily with third-wave feminist reclamations of practices and perspectives previously deemed “girly” and therefore inferior. “Second wave feminism’s banishment of the word ‘girl’—‘girl was cloying, girl was weak, girl was giggly’—transforms in the 1990s into third wave feminism’s reclamation of girl culture,” according to Swindle in her exploration of the girl problem/girl power dichotomy. This development within young feminist circles, which began to result in more interest in the subject within feminist theory, sociology, and cultural and media studies, was “quickly co-opted, packaged, and sold back as a commodified version of empowered girlhood by marketers,” argues Swindle.

Responding to, unpacking, and sifting through these cultural narratives—that girls are constantly at risk of descending into hysteria and victimhood or that they already have everything they could possibly need—is one of the major projects of girl studies scholars. According to Claudia Mitchell and Carrie A. Rentschler in “The Re-Description of Girls in Crisis:”

Girlhood Studies scholars respond to an overwhelming portrayal of girls as either bad or needing rescue in, for example, mainstream films on mean girls, popular psychology texts on primarily light-skinned middle class girls’ plummeting self-esteem, and media panics about teen girl sexting...at the center of these problems is a media system that too often “loves to

³ As in the pop psychology, Mary Pipher/*Reviving Ophelia* philosophy: girl-is-threatened, girl-is-victim, girl-is-womanhood-reduced-and-under-siege.

⁴ This was a discourse that posited girls as self-determining neoliberal subjects in complete control of their own futures, which later developed into the much-maligned “postfeminist” position held by some younger girls.

sensationalize, victimize, and create panic about girls and young women” (Girls Action Foundation 2010) rather than provide accurate information on the barriers girls face and the opportunities that exist for achieving change. (8)

The need to provide such accurate information is especially significant for my present exploration of girls, madness, and self-presentation in terms of the ways that (1) girls respond to these sensationalistic tendencies in the media and even within psychiatric discourse and (2) women-as-girls (women who perform “girled” identities or participate in subcultures focused on girldom) are choosing to participate in a culture with a particularly charged relationship to threat and madness, presented in popular culture as perpetually at girlhood’s door, ready to knock. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards ask the question of what the latter category means for the development of new feminist and feminine identities, writing that:

women have begun to re-adopt and circulate the objects of girldom, girling themselves, citing girlhood and being discursively constituted as girls, but also because they are circulating girl...The boundary around girl has become somewhat more permeable lately as the affect girl has circulated to materialize other bodies, such as the bodies of women who are now becoming girls, prompting girl to signify things other than young female. (28)

The Queer Girl and the Female Grotesque

The question of how “girl” can circulate and be read as an affect or as a performative identity rather than only as an age- and gender-specific positionality has been addressed to some extent by queer theorists in work on how resistance to normative relationships to time and notions of “development” can function as forms of subversion. Hillary Malatino argues, for example, that “Girl culture can be thought of, then, as a definite and defiantly queer realm that establishes counter-norms and alternative, resistant community by way of rituals that evade majoritarian/hegemonic

logics.” The readings of performance artists and musicians who have adopted girlsonas in later chapters of this dissertation are heavily indebted to queer theorists’ investigations of fractured, disrupted, or otherwise non-normative chronology and relationships to time. The analyses of girls and women-as-girls also are informed by (1) Jack Halberstam’s notions of shadow feminism (which he defines as “a feminism grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence, and silence” that “offers spaces and modes of unknowing, failing, and forgetting as part of an alternative feminist project”); (2) queer time; (3) Gaga feminism, particularly the embrace of failure as productive, identity as permeable, time as nonlinear, and rupture as sacred; and (4) Kathy Bond Stockton’s “queer child” (like Lolita of the Nabokov novel and the ambivalent namesake of the related-but-not-related Japanese subculture), who “grows sideways” even as her chronologically normative counterpart grows up.

Like Stockton’s Lolita in *The Queer Child*, “growing sideways” from these ideas is the notion of the female grotesque, as articulated by Mary Russo in *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*, and how it might be mapped onto the figure of the girl. Corinee Guy describes the female grotesque as “a term proffered by Mary Russo for female anomaly” (Guy 5) and “claims that the female grotesque exists as a scapegoat for masculine insufficiency, as an explanation for the ill-health of society, as a demonization of Other, and as a portraiture of authoritative anxiety. She [the female grotesque] distorts language and plays an integral part in purgative and reformatory processes” (5), linking the concept firmly to Kristeva’s abjection.

Furthermore, as Celia Marshik describes in her review of Russo's work, the female grotesque body:

in its incorporation and integration of abject aspects of society, provides "room for chance" within "the very constrained spaces of normalization" (11), incorporating "female exceptionalism" and the "monstrous and lacking," taking in both "high" and "low" bodies (22–23). . . . Russo contests traditional readings of these bodies as victimized and powerless, arguing that "the *assumption* of death, risk, and invisibility may be the price of moving beyond a narrow politics of identity and place" and possibly can contribute to a more heterogeneous society, "a state of intimacy without oneness. (11-12)

This concept of the female grotesque is deeply tied to Kristevan abjection, which festers at the site of the cast-off mother and bubbles into fruition in the muck of the presymbolic realm, where mother and child were one, the semiotic chora where the boundary between subject and object is blurred and language is not yet articulable—amniotic fluid, the whooshing silence of womb and coffin. In describing the chaotic space of the abject, Kristeva evokes images of Woman at her most becoming-woman, burdened by the mess of birth, menstrual blood, feces and piss, all that we look away from when we turn our hopeful eyes towards the linear path of paternalism and are inducted into the symbolic order.

Sideways Research Questions

This dissertation's first research question is the following: What, then, is a *cast-off girl*, and what is her relationship to the abject? What is a girl who refuses linear progression through the Freudian stages and rejects her own ascension into the symbolic law of the Father, whether through deliberate delays, the "sideways growth" in Stockton's accounts of the queer child, or through overzealous embrace of the trappings of girlhood (through "adolescent drag," the ruffles of a dollified Lolita, or

their shadowy cousins, the beating hearts and damaged flesh behind sensationalistic headlines about sexting and self-harm)? This dissertation's second research question is the following: If the girl is so innately harmless, why are we so afraid of her? Why do we proliferate so many copies of her, mass-producing them as if to stick them on the ominous sides of milk cartons? In answering these questions, the focus is not on girls who become women but rather on women who become girls, on girl-as-verb, on women who girl themselves, thereby returning to that semiotic chora they were always expected to betray, whether by becoming the mistresses of their own destruction or by accident, through disability, queerness, or deliberate performance of anachronistic girlhoods reimagined.

The analyses of pop culture imagery I use to illustrate the "mad girl," give us material to investigate the research questions by showing what the girl grotesque would look like and what the affect circulated by it would be. My chapters explore what the girl grotesque disrupts, what she subverts, and what norms she reifies. Could a girl grotesque be located in the body of the paralyzed hysteric, Rhoda's anachronistic patent-leather shoes and perfect manners (and poker face) in *The Bad Seed*, deliberately exposed scars on wrists and the dissemination of those images on Snapchat, adult women with backs defiantly beribboned and stitched up to look like permanent corsets, the big-eyed bored-sad girls sprouting tentacles and clutching bloody knives and bubble gum in Ray Caesar's and Mark Ryden's pop surrealist paintings, or garish purple braids on a Gothic Lolita? Via readings of psychosocially disabled girls in art and media, a concept of the girl-grotesque and the "mad girl" is

advanced, a concept whose primary characteristics are interrelationality (in literature, intertextuality; in headlines, contagious or viral), masochism (not necessarily in the colloquial/sexual sense, but aesthetically, as related to fantasy, delay, and disavowal or disidentification), and maximalism (or excess, redundancy). Her expression is seen in girlsonas and skin speaking. She is the female grotesque's little sister, but lost. To what extent these performative practices are fertile with subversive, productive potential is an open question at this point. The last chapter of this dissertation reflects on this fraught issue.

Chapter Outline

Chapter two, "You're Too Pretty to Cut," focuses on girl-led digital communities and subcultures that form around the practice of self-harm, including YouTube depictions that can hurt other self-harmers while also producing attachment and affiliation through such taboo practices. The chapter examines self-harm as an interdisciplinary phenomenon in light of Cvetkovich's approach to the so-called "depression epidemic" and Lennard Davis's call to examine disability through a biocultural lens. The representation of self-harm in popular culture generates a tangle of narratives about girls, selfishness, narcissism, and mental illness. For example, self-cutting in film "is used as a shorthand for dysfunction, whether sexual pathology, individual mental illness in teenage girls, the dysfunction of an entire corrupt society or the apparently inherent madness of the female gender" (McPhee, 119). Self-harm narratives that are disseminated by girls through social media and other online platforms often take the form of the contemporary homonormative "uncloseting"

narrative for LGBT teens, contributing to a common whitewashing of self-harm as a practice (also reflected in representations of disorders like BPD) and the construction of linear before/after identities that elide the painful realities of living with and managing self-harm.

Chapter three, “Representations of Borderline Personality Disorder and the ‘New’ Hysteria” unpacks the history and onscreen/onstage representations of borderline personality disorder (BPD). BPD has been associated in popular culture with the archetype of the “troubled” young woman and provides a key entry point to the exploration of psychosocial disabilities, which can be represented as material entities, biocultural phenomena (Davis), interdisciplinary phenomena (Cvetkovich), or kaleidoscopic lenses that reflect cultural attitudes, prejudices, and trends. Just as with the general history of hysteria, BPD not only is gendered but particularly associated with young, queer, or hypersexualized women and girls, an association thrown into sharp relief by scholarship in the feminist history of BPD (Kahn) as well as the anti-psychiatry tradition in Canadian mad studies (Burstow; Ingram; and LeFrancois).

Chapter four, “Trauma in Emilie Autumn’s Neo-Victorian Performances,” explores Emilie Autumn’s controversial Lolita-like artistic performances in light of both neo-Victorian and Japanese Lolita subcultures as well as Morrigan’s “trauma time.” Autumn’s performative persona takes the form of a traumatized and subsequently institutionalized Victorian girl whose songs address themes of molestation and other forms of severe childhood trauma. Using Fisher’s work on

“adolescent drag,” the chapter focuses particularly on Autumn’s representations of girlhood-after-trauma.

Chapter five, “Welcome to Martinez’s Pop Surrealist D-o-l-l-h-o-u-se,” explores a mainstream counterpart to the previous chapter’s subject. Melanie Martinez, a pop star and self-described “Lolita,” uses neo-Victorian themes, bricolage, and cultural pastiche to spotlight the ways that mental illness and suicidal ideation in young women and girls are often dismissed or stigmatized. The analysis of Martinez’s work is informed by scholarship on subcultures of Japanese fashion and Japanese manga (Bergstrom) as well as on “dollification” (Hall & Ellis).

Chapter Two

You're Too Pretty to Cut:

Digital Subcultures and the Narrative of Self-Harm

Can we help? Posts with words or tags you're searching for often encourage behavior that can cause harm and even lead to death. If you're going through something difficult, we'd like to help.

After Instagram launched what it called a “self-help campaign” in 2016 to aid users deemed at risk for practices such as self-harm and disordered eating behaviors, the above “Can we help?” prompt is what users encounter if they search for hashtags like #selfharmmm or #secret_society123, both of which are replacements for the blunter, already censored hashtags #selfharm, #cutting, #icutmyself, and so on. Depending upon the response, the prompt leads users to various options such as “contacting local law enforcement,” calling suicide hotlines, or activities under the rubric of “giving yourself a break” (“Guidelines”), such as looking at the clouds, taking a hot shower, and doodling. Under the new guidelines, users can also report another user’s post that includes images or descriptions of self-harm by marking “It’s Inappropriate” with the reason being “Self-injury.” Instagram was lauded within popular discourse as potentially saving lives by providing these warnings and opportunities to report fellow users. Actual images or posts that show or describe self-harm cuts or scars risk deletion, and users who propagate those images technically risk being banned, though Instagram is, largely, still relatively unregulated. YouTube, Facebook, and Tumblr made similar promises to censor their content to varying

degrees, with YouTube providing the option of either complete censorship or an age-restriction content warning before every video featuring discussions of self-harm.

These efforts on the part of Instagram, Tumblr, YouTube, and Facebook were launched in response to what users saw as an alarming rise in online subcultures dedicated to the discussion and representation of self-harm, particularly among girls and young women. As with many things related to young girls, girls' concerns are regarded as less than and immature while paradoxically also in need of censorship and prolonged media pearl clutching. The cast-off girl is disallowed from speaking for herself, her message being at once inconsequential and potentially harmful. The media narrative disturbingly lumped self-harm (used specifically here to mean the practice of self-cutting)—often described as the quintessential example of adolescent “drama”—into the same categories as adolescent girls' predilections for Snapchatting and partying, while anorexia and bulimia receded in terms of journalistic panic. Provocative headlines throughout the 2010s in particular have repeatedly declared adolescent girls under siege due to the trifecta of sexting, selfies, and self-harm (Gabriel), with the latter in particular described as a “shocking” teen trend and as inherently linked to the use of social media (Nannar). These efforts at warnings and censorship, however well-intentioned, have left many mental health rights activists skeptical or outright critical, claiming that the censorship would only serve to further stigmatize and alienate those undergoing psychic distress and potentially could lead to criminalization and institutionalization. At the very least, they wondered what was causing all the drama. If teen self-harm is such a common practice, why are these

posts in particular such a source of public hysteria and anxiety? The hysteria isn't limited to posts that *include* cuts, but anything tangentially related to or vaguely referencing self-harm, even in one's history. Why can't these very publicly offered narratives potentially serve as public health projects, providing a springboard for further communication with girls rather than closing "us" (and them) off? If well-meaning adults are so concerned about discovering the reasons behind self-harm, why, then, were these narratives so heavily censored? The immediate, if naïve, answer might be that the adults are worried about copycat phenomena and in doing so the well-meaning intention seems to be at least to display an affect of caring. But, this reflexive answer might be too simplistic or even self-serving, leaving us with deeper questions about other motivations.

My aim in this exploration is not therapeutic. This is not to deny the psychic distress that sometimes leads to or is caused by the practice of self-harm or the abatement of that distress that sometimes accompanies clinical treatment for, or cessation of, the practice. It is also not liberatory or radically anti-psychiatry; in other words, I'm not seeking to posit self-harm as either an explicitly feminist practice or as a unilaterally and deliberately transgressive, politically productive response to oppression and the workings of disciplinary power. I am, however, working towards a less immediately reactionary and emotionally charged understanding of the loaded practice of self-harm, particularly of the girl culture that has evolved around it, and to examine current representations of the practice through the lens of performance and performativity in order to interrogate its possible meanings beyond the reductive and

sensationalized narratives often offered by dominant psychiatric and media discourses. In this vein, three questions guide this chapter: (1) Within the masochistic aesthetic and along the spectrum of the performative practices of self-harm, who is speaking and, relatedly, who is allowed to speak? (2) If self-harm is a performance, who is its audience? (3) How do conceptions of self-harm, particularly those that hystericize and pathologize, reflect and perpetuate our cultural fears about girls and girl culture(s)?

Following Self-Harm

I began to explore these questions in 2015, when I started a poetry and visual art Instagram under a pen name. As I gained followers, I noticed that the overwhelming majority of them were girls or young women, from teens up to mid-twenties. As my network grew, I discovered that a fairly large minority, approximately 1/3, of the posts dealt with issues of depression and trauma, with a smaller but vocal and prolific minority within those openly discussing self-harm: practicing it, avoiding it, recovering from it, or making art and memes based on it. Because these circles are populated disproportionately by teen girls, and because I was potentially being read as one myself, I felt viscerally uncomfortable both at being read as girl and at being what felt like “bombarded” with images of self-inflicted violence.

Such feelings of repulsion, fear, and deep concern are common when it comes to self-harm, especially when self-harm is enacted or discussed by girls or young women. Noting the visceral reactions of her colleagues at a conference where video excerpts from the New French Extremity film *In My Skin (Dans ma peau)*, which explores issues of female masochism and self-inflicted violence, were shown, Angela

Failler wonders in “Narrative Skin Repair” “why representations of self-harm might be difficult or even unbearable to witness and, second, what the implications of this are for the potential to cultivate empathic understandings of self-harm and of those who practise self-harm.” In “Carved in Skin: Bearing Witness to Self-Harm,” Jane Kilby asks a similar question about the difficulty of being the “audience” to the practice of self-harm:

The act of self-harm renders skin a deeply eloquent form of testimony, where a plea is made for social recognition. . . . Yet there is something particularly hard to witness here. . . . Arguably, then, there is something about this “voice” that defies witnessing. . . . What is the nature of self-cut skin such that it is difficult to bear witness to? What is the nature of witnessing such that there is a resistance in the testimonial project of self-cut skin? (98)

Examining the way these images activated shame, guilt, and disgust for me, as well as nostalgia, led me to a deeper interest in the tie between self-harm, girlhood, disability, and notions of illness, wellness, and censorship.⁵ The feeling of nostalgia struck me as particularly odd; presumably the nostalgia was a yearning for kinship, connection, and recognized identity—perhaps linkable to the act of self-harm itself. In particular, the conventional media narrative of “girls encouraging each other to cut” online, such as a 2015 *Globe and Mail* article titled “The cluster effect: Is self-harming contagious?”, though not 100% inaccurate in every case, is worth probing, as it is far too reductive to explain what’s really going on in these co-creative circles (Hoffman 57). Girls in these communities are not only posting images of fresh cuts or sharing laments. The

⁵ As a teen myself, I occasionally haunted “pro-ana” forums (at their peak at the time). Though I had no eating disorder, I was viscerally and voyeuristically fascinated by the strange communitas-through-liminality formed by these groups of girls who worshipped what they referred to as the twin goddesses of “Anna” and “Mia.”

communities are far too complex to be dismissed as anxious girls following a trend; these are communities featuring visual artists, poets, songwriters, advice vloggers, photographers, models, minor “celebrities,” and public figures. The media at large misses that this is a community of like-minded girls acting upon shared behaviors. The disseminated message is not merely instructions on how to effectively cut, but a complex web of cutting related behaviors and advices: how to stop cutting, how to suppress the urge to cut, how to reduce frequency, how to cut safely, and even how to talk about cutting without resuming the practice. These communities are often censored for touching upon cutting regardless of the communities’ individual stances on cutting.

All the girls whose posts are analyzed in this chapter explicitly seek out followers and public feedback, work as community leaders, give out personal information, make no attempt to hide their identities or any of their online activities, and operate as public figures to varying degrees of moderate to extremely high visibility. They are running a hybrid, difficult-to-define network of peer support, self-branding, capitalist venture, and public journaling, as well as a contemporary iteration of DIY/zine culture. Furthermore, the average “girl” in these groups is getting older; while pro-ana and pro-mia (pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia) groups were seemingly populated primarily by adolescent girls, the most well-known participants in self-harm communities are technically adults (depending on the region) between the ages of 17

and 23, though they often identify as girls and circulate the objects, aesthetics, cultural forms, and affects associated with girl culture.⁶

Self-Harm Communities and Scholarship

Pro-ana and pro-mia (pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia) blogs and websites developed in the early 1990s, reaching their peak in the mid-to-late years of the same decade, prompted a similar kind of media panic. While self-harm communities (very few of them ever describe themselves as “pro”-cutting) comprised primarily of girls have thus far received little scholarly attention, feminist theorists have occasionally taken up pro-ana forums and blogs as sites of inquiry, particularly into the performance of gendered selves within these communities, with scholars concluding in turn that they reinforce patriarchal norms about beauty and “taking up space,” that they provide a complex virtual space for girls to work out their own identities in response to dominant beauty standards, or that they actually help young women work through different possible selves during a period of identity diffusion, as well as documenting the groups’ complicated relationships to agency and control over one’s body. Of the cultural purposes these groups serve, Marisa Helena Silva Farah and Cecilia Hanna Mate write in “Practices of Anorexia and Bulimia as an Aesthetics of Existence” that

Having their own blog is a rite of passage for these young women as they reaffirm their belonging to a collective identity and strengthen their individual

⁶ Pro-ana and pro-mia refer to the promotion of behaviors related to the eating disorders anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Organizations have widely different stances: as non-judgmental environments for anorexics, a place to discuss their illness, and to support those who choose to enter recovery; others claim that anorexia is a “lifestyle choice” rather than a mental illness.

identities. This is evidenced by the creation of new designs and forms of accounts to express ideas and experiences which favor the development of a new matrix to be followed—the blog created—and an expression of identity network.

Remarkably, these blogs are often substitutes for the actual act of self-harm, yet are nonetheless monitored and censored for fear that they may spread the contagion of desire to self-harm. They strengthen individual identities outside of the act of cutting, yet the fear of a cluster effect and collective response encourages outsider intercession into these communities.

Emerging self-harm communities employ similar strategies aimed at providing means for girls' self-expression, with similar focuses on art-making, emotionality, intimacy among members, and outreach (giving and getting advice and support), and with similar narratives about ambivalent relationships to the medical industry (particularly psychiatrists and psychologists) and family members (who engender the fear both of not being heard and of the ramifications of being heard). The most comprehensive study of these communities is Eda R. Uca's *Ana's Girls: The Essential Guide to the Underground Eating Disorder Community Online*, in which Uca explores the primary ideological perspectives shared by various ED online support groups: "none of your business" (individualism and personal choice, bodily autonomy); "it's a lifestyle, not a disease" (pushing against the biomedical model of anorexia), and "ana as religion," complete with sacred texts, including prayers to the goddesses of An(n)a and Mia. Pro-ana and pro-mia groups are distinct from, but in many ways the cultural predecessors of, the emergent subculture of self-harm. For one thing, anorexia is publicly perceived similarly to the practice of self-harm in terms of its reputation as

tied to “dramatic” or “attention-seeking” behaviors. However, anorexia is both arguably more dangerous in the long-term than is the practice of self-harm (and less likely to be noticed immediately). Societal reactions to the practices/disordered behaviors are also different, with conventional beauty standards making significant weight loss a socially desirable behavior to a point, while self-harm among girls (which was previously treated as a “masculine” or “aggressive” behavior) is met with immediate disapproval and pathologization when discovered, leading to differences in the communities that form around the practice. Biomedical models of mental illness have also been popularized throughout the 2000s, while attachments to spirituality and religion have decreased among millennials (pewforum.org), meaning that many online self-harmers have a more ambivalent attitude (i.e., identifying their own practices as addictions, things they would like to stop, or as a mode of self-care or healing from mental illness or psychic distress) towards their practice of cutting than did pro-anorexic young women towards their practices of fasting, bingeing, or purging.

Though body modification and self-mutilation have a long history within spiritual and ritualistic practices (Hewitt 2), in more recent years the practice of self-harm has been stigmatized among the public and clinicians alike, as it is frequently associated with attention-seeking behaviors, “dramatic” tendencies, or failed attempts at suicide, which may help to explain some of the hystericized responses to its seeming online popularity, and which is difficult to extricate completely from the practice’s association with girls and teen “angst.” Patricia A. Adler and Peter Adler point to this tendency towards stigmatization in *The Tender Cut: Inside the Hidden*

World of Self-Injury: “The simplest and least sympathetic interpretation of self-harm is that it is self-serving: motivated by the desired for gain in forms that might include attention and sympathy from family or doctors” (13). This stereotype is complicated, exacerbated, and potentially ‘confirmed’ by subcultures that are read as promoting the practice or as using the practice to ‘go viral’ or gain followers. Because of the practice’s stigma, it has faced censorship from its first online appearances, raising ethical questions about what bodily practices and functions (bleeding? Those associated with psychic distress?) should remain private. Building off of Erving Goffman’s and Susan Sontag’s work in the same vein, Lorita Coleman Brown’s exploration of why certain disabilities or illnesses are particularly stigmatized, in “Stigma: An Enigma Demystified,” gives a clue as to why self-harm in particular is treated with such repulsion and suspicion: “Certain physical characteristics or illnesses elicit fear because the etiology of the attribute or disease is unknown, unpredictable, and unexpected” (155).

Self-harm scars, like other attributes with no known single cause, evoke anxiety in witnesses partly because they potentially open up their own bodily and emotional vulnerabilities. This stigmatization and aura of mystery is perpetuated not only by the public, but by medical professionals as well, with many of them confounded, angered, or irritated by the practice, considering it a baffling distraction from others’ physically manifested and socially legitimated problems and leading them to deprioritize the care of patients with a history of self-harm or to treat those patients with suspicion, as Leigh Dale notes in *Responses to Self Harm: An Historical*

Analysis of Medical, Religious, Military and Psychological Perspectives: “Some and perhaps many medical professionals see those patients as ‘neither ill, nor victim,’ as the title of Rosana Machin’s 2009 study of the emergency department of a public hospital...puts it. At the very least, many who encounter those who self harm . . . are puzzled” (Dale 5). Adler and Adler note that, very recently, views of the practice have begun to shift again, partially in response to the proliferation of youth cultures that claim the practice as a coping mechanism: “Self injury’s movement in the twenty-first century from under the medicalized rubric of mental illness to the voluntary choice of deviance has further destigmatized it for some. To be seen as ill is to be derogated; to be seen as self-healing is normal” (12). While this perspective partially obscures the ambivalent “middle position” occupied by many self-harmers in relationship to their self-harm—seeing it as both personal choice and as a potentially unhealthy response to distress, and both advocating for its acceptance and fellow self-harmers’ recovery—it does reflect the current shift in discussions around the practice.

In *Psyche on the Skin: A History of Self-Harm*, Sarah Chaney traces the history of self-mutilation practices such as ancient castration and medicinal bloodletting, which was not pathologized until the twentieth century alongside the emergence of psychiatry, to their contemporary iterations and particularly their reception within digital cultures. Associated with borderline and sometimes schizophrenic inpatients until the mid-1990s, self-harm gathered awareness as a practice among girls and young women in the second half of the decade. Caroline Kettlewell’s 1999 memoir *Skin Game*, similar to Marya Hornbacher’s bestselling anorexia and bulimia memoir,

Wasted, in the previous year, presented cutting as a rite of passage in the coming-of-age trajectory of a troubled girlhood. Accompanied by pop psychology texts like Marilee Strong's *A Bright Red Scream* and cautionary tales like Steven Levenkron's teen novel *The Luckiest Girl in the World* and Patricia McCormick's YA novel *Cut*, a popular image developed of the quintessential contemporary "cutter" as fragile and, usually, as a girl, one who was troubled, required treatment, and needed the protection of Father Medicine.

Self-harm's association with adolescent girls is not entirely socially constructed or unjustified, though the assumption that it is virtually exclusive to girls has been subsequently disproven. Nevertheless, a 2008 study in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* found that "56 percent of adolescent girls reported doing some form of self-harm in their lifetimes" (Adler and Adler 18). Studies in the 1980s and 1990s showed much lower rates of self-injurious behavior among girls. Meanwhile, rates of eating disorders among young girls, while still high, have steadily decreased over the same period. Self-harm was racialized in the mainstream cultural narrative as white⁷ and presumed to be especially popular among the middle class: The pathologized practice quickly became associated with decadence and privilege, as well as a need for paternal authority, not only for the girls who practice self-harm, but for those who might see it, be triggered by it, or be "contaminated" with it. Chaney notes that "the modern view of self-harm as a coping

⁷ Subsequent studies have shown it, unlike eating disorders, to be far more equally distributed among racial, socioeconomic, and age groups than was previously believed.

mechanism sits awkwardly alongside the paternalistic, protective model applied to self-injurious behaviour in youth culture” (206), reflected in part by social-media based attempts to “police this continuous flow of online information” (207). Adler and Adler posit that “during the 1990s the behavior began to expand...becoming a cult youth phenomenon, then a form of more typical teenage angst, and then the province of a wide swath of socially disempowered individuals in broader age, race, gender, and class groups” (Adler and Adler 4). Thus, the practice is seen as “spreading” in particular because many girls who are now exposing their self-harm are not white, middle-class, or able-bodied.

Rather than assuming that the practice was wrongly racialized as white as a default or classed as middle-class as default, or that it is less specific to young girls than was previously believed, media panic has assumed that the problem both originates from and is spread by girls (Thiel-Stern 145), exposing several contradictory underlying and persistent cultural beliefs about girls: They are at once threatening and perpetually threatened, socially powerful and vulnerable, the consummate consumers and frighteningly prolific cultural producers.

Girl Problems and Girl Power

The twin discourses of “girl problems” (or “girls in crisis”) and “girl power that developed in the 1990s and proliferated throughout the 2000s serve as a backdrop for the media representations of, and responses to, online communities of girls that developed around eating disorders, self-harm, and other indications of psychic

distress. Rebecca Hains contrasts the two competing discourses in *Growing Up With Girl Power: Girlhood on Screen and in Everyday Life*:

Girl power can be understood as a discourse that emerged in response to a popular set of discourses I call the “girl crisis.” The girl crisis centered upon the societal devaluation of girls in U.S. culture, a circumstance that gained widespread recognition in the 1990s. Parents, academics, and cultural critics became concerned that girls were being treated inequitably. (102)

The seminal girl-crisis text usually cited by media and girlhood studies scholars is psychologist Mary Pipher’s 1994 *Reviving Ophelia*, which explored girls’ alleged increase in disordered eating practices, vulnerabilities to sexual assault and domestic violence, problems at school, and sexual practices deemed promiscuous or potentially harmful. Pipher’s account of girlhood-under-threat by external forces and by girls themselves and their alleged pathologies was media fuel for an already-burgeoning fear about what girlhood in the 1990s meant, what it looked like, and the ways in which it was radically changing. To be a girl, the girl-problem discourse alleged, was to be a victim or potential victim. Pipher’s work evolved into a girl-problem genre that continues today, propagated by feminist and postfeminist nonfiction writers, pop culture commentators, and mental health clinicians. In 2012’s *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, Peggy Orenstein, who has largely taken up Pipher’s mantle of girls-as-threat or as under-threat, issues a takedown of princess-obsessed girl culture and installs in her audience the perpetual fear of girls’ online communities (“Just You, Me, and My 622 BFFs” is one ominous chapter title).

Indeed, beyond fears about girls’ premature sexualization and vulnerability to substance abuse and objectification, by far the most common sentiment expressed in

popular nonfiction and pop psychology texts that respond to and perpetuate cultural anxieties about girls and their futures centers on their behavior online and the tenor of their Internet-based interactions with other girls (peer pressure, competition, and “mean girls,” for example). Thus, it is easy to discern, at least on a superficial level, why online subcultures and cultural productions centered on practices seen as the epitomes of “mad/bad/sad girl” behaviors (such as fasting, binging, purging, or cutting) activate those anxieties so pointedly and urgently. Even without the added stigmas and fears linked to self-harm and explicit narratives of psychic distress, social media is often discursively framed in pathologizing terms: an addiction, affliction, obsession, fixation, or epidemic. Nancy Jo Sales asks in *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers*, “Are girls addicted to social media?” (10). She answers her rhetorical question by framing social media in the terms of substance use and a shared virtual space unique to girls that is walled off to an extent from adults. “It’s an extraordinary new reality, and it’s happened so fast,” Sales writes. “For the first time, most American girls are engaged in the same activity most of the time. . . . When we talk about social media, we say we’re ‘going on’ it, similar to the way we talk about going on a trip. We seem to experience it as a sort of mental journey to another place” (10).

It doesn’t help to disarm this conventional media narrative—which links toxicity on social media to girls and alleges that that toxicity originates from and is spread by girls themselves—when the practices associated with these specific subcultures (especially self-harm, but also pro-ana and pro-mia) are often presented as

inextricable from girls and girlhood. Elad Yom-Tov writes about this phenomenon in *Crowdsourced Health: How What You Do on the Internet Will Improve Medicine*:

In the course of one of my studies on eating disorders, I used photographs that people had posted on a photo-sharing site to characterize those individuals' stances with regard to anorexia. I browsed the images (mostly of emaciated women). . . . One of my colleagues passed my cubicle, saw the images I was labeling, and remarked "Good thing you only have boys." (40)

"Good thing you only have boys" insinuates, of course, that girls and girlhood are particularly prone to trouble, but also exposes the underlying cultural trend of circulating the image of the girl and all her presumed attendant crisis points as the barometer of the shifting social landscape. As Anita Harris describes in *Future Girl*, "Girlhood now operates...as a space for worries about unknown futures, about the ability to succeed and dominate in changing...cultural landscapes" (2). While girl-problem discourse exemplifies societal concerns about both girls and major cultural shifts (the girl functioning as the sign of the times), girl-power discourse presents the solution: capitalism, consumerism, and the tyranny of individual, rational choice (a girlified "pull yourself up by your bootstraps"). Self-harm communities, where girls openly express extreme sadness online in the face of the allegedly wide array of choices available, potentially throw a wrench into the popular notion that choice is everything or even possible when it comes to mood, distress, debility, or disability.

In *Postfeminist Digital Cultures: Femininity, Social Media, and Representation*, Amy Shields Dobson posits the image of the "can do" girl—emerging from girl-power discourse and notions of neoliberal subject formation and radical individualism—as the idealized contemporary girl, characterized by her dedication to

rational choices, assertive agency, and total control over her own subjectivity. Dobson contrasts the cultural recognition of “can do girls” and “girls in crisis,” with the latter “often marked by asking for feedback or mediating pain through social media, no longer just at risk but in active crisis” (62). Referencing girls who participated in the popular 2015-2016 “Am I pretty or ugly?” challenge in which young (mostly prepubescent and early adolescent) girls asked fellow YouTube viewers to weigh in on their relative attractiveness, Dobson questions her own, visceral, disgusted reaction to these videos and argues that these girls were seen in media portrayals as “the opposite of postfeminist, girl-powered performative digital subjectivities” (61) that focus on neoliberal self-branding and immunity from criticism and from the intersubjective, relational space that requires feedback. Without asking the girls themselves, media narratives declared an epidemic of girls (as evidenced by high rates of participation in the challenge) who considered themselves “worthless,” as “needy,” or requiring feedback for the basic upkeep of their self-esteem, prompting circulations of media “horror” and “dismay” (Dobson 67). Dobson argues further that “The framing of these videos as ‘simply an issue of girls’ self-esteem’ obscures law and policy battles through which women’s bodily rights are being stripped back at the same time as women are responsabilized—charged with managing their own sense of value and self-esteem” (69). Thus, by presenting the problem as one relegated to the neurochemistry or the drama-seeking behaviors of an individual girl, society abdicates responsibility for creating the environment and circumstances that fostered those unwanted behaviors. Dobson’s arguments about how certain girls’ behaviors, particularly in the

digital sphere, are framed as indicative of their value/values, self-worth, and relative mental health, can easily be mapped onto the workings of girls' online self-harm subcultures.

When Girls Speak, Who is Listening/Reading/Witnessing?

Two of the emergent narratives in girls' self-harm subcultures are what I have referred to as skin speaking and the narrative of the closet. Both of these narratives deal with questions of divisions between the public and private spheres and how those relate to both trauma and perceptions of girlhood, as well as who serves as the audience or witness when girls expose their self-harm or stories of self-harm and psychic distress online.

One prominent subgenre of video-based self-harm narratives (alongside Instagram memes and images, the most popular form of participation in online self-harm communities) by and for girls is the "self-harm excuse" video, and another is the "how to tell your parents" or what I refer to as the "uncloseting" narrative. Both of these address themes of secrecy, sometimes exacerbating existing cultural anxieties about girls and their alleged surreptitiousness: If you self-harm, should you tell someone, and if you do, when? Some of the girls claim to have thought the practice was normal until they were met with harsh or stigmatizing reactions from parents or classmates, thus complicating the idea that the practice itself is spreading virally or specifically via the internet. Others say they kept it secret, some advise their peers to do so as well, and some emphasize instead the recovery model, referencing both AA-like ideologies about rehabilitation ("Acknowledge you are powerless over your

addiction”) and the contemporary, homonormative LGBT “It gets better” narrative by pushing the need to expose oneself in order to “heal” or “get better.”

One common aspect among most of the girls’ narratives within these subgenres, and particularly the “how to tell your parents” or “reaction” subgenre, is a desire for an empathetic witness, which complicates the idea of girls’ “bedroom culture” as first defined by Frith, which posits that girls’ culture starts and ends in the bedroom. What happens when that bedroom culture becomes both virtual and public, when journal writing goes viral, or when the bedroom in question has a witness? For some, that witness is a parent, teacher, or other adult. For others, the camera is the mediator, with the imagined audience of fellow girls and potential self-harmers as a collective of witnesses. The significance of witnessing in a subject’s navigation of trauma has been noted by Cvetkovich in *Depression: A Public Feeling* as well as in Failler’s and Kilby’s readings of the practice of self-harm. Similarly, Janice McLane elaborates self-harm’s potential as an act of testimony (hence, of course, also requiring a witness) in “The Voice on the Skin: Self-Mutilation and Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of Language.” Self-harm in adolescence and adulthood has been repeatedly statistically linked to many kinds of trauma and abuse, particularly childhood sexual abuse. Kilby notes that there is a historically recognized “relationship between the disavowed trauma of childhood sexual violation and self-cutting” (68). Of the relationship between trauma and testimony, Cvetkovich writes, “Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s work in *Testimony* speaks to the specificity of testimony as cultural and historical genre, an event that seeks a witness but may not find one, an interactive

occasion in which the relation between speaker and hearer is crucial to the narrative, which becomes performative rather than constative” (14). McLane, in turn, emphasizes the primary significance of cutting and its frequent linkage to femininity and youth as its refusal of the symbolic order. Cutting the skin, she writes, “gains its significance because it represents an exaggerated breaking with language: it supplants the promise of language to communicate trauma by rendering the site of pain a language in itself” (125). Yet, as a site of trauma, the skin demands a witness, and its “speaking” of the unspeakable, or the average witness’s inability to read the language being spoken or to speak back, provokes anxiety.

The three primary affective responses to the exposure of self-harm, on the part of both speaker (cutter) and witness, are, according to the girls’ self-harm narratives, *fear* (often resulting in institutionalization or medicalization), *shame* (for the speaker, *Why can’t I take it further?* or *Why do I do this?*), and *guilt* (for the witness, *Should I have done more to stop it?* For the speaker, *Why can’t I stop?* Or *Why can’t I hide it better?*). These affective responses raise questions about why cutting makes so many people so viscerally uncomfortable. Is it, for example, because it is exposed or performed (people prefer a “don’t-ask-don’t-tell” policy), or because it was not initially performed for the public and it smacks of what really goes down at sleepovers and in girls’ bedroom culture? McLane claims that some of this anxiety comes from the apparent “unreadability” of self-harm: “As gestural communication, self-mutilation can reorganize and stabilize the trauma victim’s world, providing a ‘voice on the skin’ when the actual voice is forbidden” (124), with many claiming that it

“replaces language” (125), representing, perhaps, a form of Cixousian écriture feminine or an attempt to “express the inexpressible” by escaping the symbolic order. The girls’ narratives reflect this sense of ineffability, often wondering aloud at both why they engage in the practice and why it evokes the reactions it does, as well as lamenting the fact that it doesn’t always communicate what they want it to.

Furthermore, sometimes the trauma to be witnessed is not only the act of self-harm and not only the psychic distress or abuse that may have preceded it, but after the self-harm itself in the reactions or non-reactions of others, rendering the socially accepted linear uncloseting narrative (self-harm occurs, the secrecy disrupts a girl’s life, she “goes public” with it, and she is saved/protected/recovers) more questionable. Hannah Vancouver, a popular 19-year-old self-harm YouTube vlogger, unlike many of her contemporaries, claims to have never been invested in hiding her self-harm to begin with: “I’ve never been much for hiding self-harm, I was always just kind of like, fuck it,” she says in one video. In several others, she encourages girls not to hide their scars with clothing or jewelry. Yet she expresses disappointment over her parents’ lack of reaction and their refusal to witness her pain. In her video “Parents’ Reaction to Self Harm,” she says,

People are like, always asking me for advice about how to tell their parents about their self-harm, and I don’t have a lot of advice for it because personally, I’ve never really told them. . . . [When my mom found out] she basically said, “Ok, you have to stop doing it,” and I basically just said, “OK, I’ll stop doing it,” and that was kind of the end of it, but the things is, I *didn’t* stop doing it. I’m not sure if they noticed. I’ve honestly never asked them, what do you think about my self-harm? They probably noticed that I was still doing it, but they didn’t say anything (Vancouver).

The first half of Hannah's uncloseting narrative follows the don't-ask-don't-tell trajectory common to self-harm and addiction stories and, often, queer outings as well. Betrayed by their body's truth-telling in some way (mannerisms read as queer, self-harm scars, slips of the tongue, or physical signs of substance abuse), the "outed" person is "found out," only to be politely asked to slip back in. Having previously been hospitalized for an eating disorder and suicidal ideation, Hannah is eventually discovered again (again due to the self-harm scars she refuses to hide) at a school program called CHOICES that is tailored to students with mental health issues: "My teacher was tying a ribbon around my wrist, and she saw. They called me aside. . . . I'm kind of glad they noticed it, because they were able to tell my parents for me. They basically told me that I needed to stop doing it." Hannah is both grateful for a witness-of-sorts who serves as mediator ("they were able to tell my parents for me") and emphasizes the truth and reality of her practice to her parents, who were initially dismissive ("girl problems") and disappointed that her testimony did not gain a true witness. Instead, she was repeatedly told to "just stop," something she repeats rather incredulously, as if the gesture is not only useless but somewhat baffling in its naivete.

Ultimately, though, Hannah finds a witness for her self-harm testimony: her online community-audience of fellow self-harmers past and present, who are all at various stages of wanting to stop—or not. Interestingly, like many LGBT teens, unlike the veil of secrecy that shrouds the practice of cutting by teens and young women in media portrayals, and markedly unlike her history of disordered eating practices (according to Hannah, at least), Hannah seems to want her parents in particular to

know in any way they can, even if tangentially: “My parents watch my videos and they hear me making my videos and they probably hear about things that they never knew about before.” She concludes rather dejectedly, “My parents are still very suspicious of me when I’m doing it.” This kind of ambivalent relationship to audience and witness (hiding one’s practice by omission, while longing for acceptance and regularly seeking out viewers or listeners for one’s skin testimony) complicates the narrative that pushes for the aftermath of exposure (i.e., medicalization/institutionalization, or, in many cases, admonishment to stop the practice) as the site of recovery, implying that empathetic witnessing itself is an important mode of healing within girls’ self-harm communities.

Belle DeMasi and Johanna Cadence, two other similarly-aged popular social media personalities across a wide variety of platforms, with similar followings and themes, are similarly disappointed with the reactions of others to their self-harm. DeMasi in particular fully embraces the medical model and the language of recovery to describe her history of self-harm and her struggle to remain “clean.” Her uncloseting narrative, relatedly, also differs from Hannah’s in her relationship to secrecy. While DeMasi, too, longs for an empathetic witness, she identifies herself as having purposely hid her closeted “identity” as a self-harmer for quite some time: “I did a very good job, I was very hush hush, because at the time I didn’t think it was normal, I didn’t know why I was doing it, you know, whatever.” She echoes the notions of her illegibility and incredulity even to/about herself, as well as the idea of having previously “been in the closet” about her true identity as a self-harmer. She,

more directly than Hannah, criticizes her parents' response and their desire to keep her in the closet: "My mom wanted to keep it hush hush and didn't want to make a big deal out of it. I feel like that's a sense of not understanding, plus being scared and in denial. A lot of parents just don't believe it. A lot of people are like, not MY kid." Though she admits later that she understands the fear and guilt a parent might feel at discovering their child's stigmatized identity, DeMasi advocates that self-harmers push their parents to accept and come to terms with their identity as self-harmers, drawing clear ties to LGBT narratives of the need to elicit acceptance from one's parents and peers as part of the uncloseting/coming out process.

Cadence has less empathy for those who, she believes, wronged her in the course of her own coming out process. While DeMasi takes on the role of a sage advice-giver, and Hannah more that of a leader of a peer (support) group, Cadence is a digital storyteller, with her public persona framed around a series of anecdotes and personal stories told in the forms of digital diary entries. She begins her story "My School Reacted Horribly to My Self-Harm Scars" with a profession of her previous belief of her own normalcy and subsequent discovery that there was something she either needed to hide or "come out" about or face the consequences. "Because we see [our cuts], as self-harmers, we see them all the time, so it becomes a normal thing," Cadence says, "we don't feel the need to hide it . . . because we forget that other people don't see it as normal. At that time, I thought it was a normal human thing. I thought it was something that . . . I thought it was a normal human function in a way." Later, she brushes against the stigma of self-harm when she is isolated at, and later

expelled from, school due to her self-harm: “I realized that people don’t react well to self-harm. So then I realized that I had to start hiding them. For us, it’s like, a normal part of your body, it’s a normal part of your skin, you know?” Ultimately, Cadence identifies herself as having an “addiction,” a psychiatrized identity that she previously professes not to have known she had. Told repeatedly of the unacceptability and abnormality of her behavior, she recognizes her identity, but remains angered by her forced extended period in a closeted state.

In Marina Abramovic’s *Rhythm 10* piece, Abramovic publicly self-harms, ritualistically slicing the spaces between each of her fingers with ten different knives before starting over with the first knife and repeating the pattern. In a reflection about the performance for the MoMA archives, she says,

This was one of my first performances, [in] which I understood that I had become a performance artist. In this *Rhythm 10* piece, it was kind of demanding physically and mentally, but it was the first time what means energy of the audience, and how actually this energy I could take and transmit it to my own and give it back, and it was the first time that I didn’t feel pain or any kind of discomfort doing it, that I understood that in performance my body is object and subject, and I could push the limits in front of the public as much as I can, much more than if I would do it in my own private life.

While the embodied reality of Abramovic’s practices in this piece are likely not too different from those of many of the girls in self-harm communities, her piece, while controversial and likely disturbing, is legitimized rather than pathologized. The differences between her self-harm and that of its psychiatrized counterparts are, most significantly, (1) a patterned, orderly ritual, which implies that the practice is temporary and carried out for a particular purpose, unlike the ongoing practice of self-harm which is seen as “meaningless” or chaotic; (2) her status as an artist, (3) the

public nature of her act (she is already “out”), and (4) the fact of an audience (a witness). Here, it is the presence of a mediator—an audience—that elevates Abramovic’s self-mutilation beyond the category of pathology, allowing it to evade the potential of institutionalization or medicalization. In the case of the girls who use social media to find such an audience, their speech is delegitimized because it is embodied, because it is read as hysterical, because they are girls, because it finds its way online (which is regarded as the modern frontier, the threatening wilds), and because it communicates psychic distress or a story that provokes anxiety. They speak, then, impossibly, which threatens their legitimacy as subjects, as speakers.

Echoing Butler, Kilby writes about the struggle for the illegible to be made legible:

If the subject speaks impossibly, speaks in ways that cannot be regarded as speech or as the speech of a subject, then that speech is discounted and the viability of the subject called into question. The consequence of such an irruption of the unspeakable may range from a sense that one is “falling apart” to the intervention of the state to secure criminal or psychiatric incarceration. (125)

If they can’t find a proper witness, then one may be appointed for them. Abramovic’s proper witness could be read as the neoliberal art gallery patron; she speaks to a legitimized and codified audience. Meanwhile, the self-harming girl participating in YouTube vlogs and online communities speaks through her harmed skin to new/modern and, as of yet, not fully legitimized, media. The profit potential of her act is not as easily seen as Abramovic’s; thus, the state interest of criminal or psychiatric intervention intercedes in order to imbue her act with meaning. The viability of meaning produced by the self-harming girls’ expression is defined according to the

ideals of a capitalist, neoliberal patriarchy rather than through the values (such as *communitas*, self-expression, and suicide avoidance) that the girls themselves evoke with such acts.

Pathologized Online Girl Communities, the Panopticon, and Reversing the Gaze

Sandra Lee Bartky argues in “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power” that Foucauldian “docile bodies” are produced in particular, gendered ways during the process of women’s development and indoctrination into the contemporary disciplinary regime: for example, through scientized beauty regimens and routines, and from minute adjustments of the body to take up less physical space at any given time to major cosmetic surgeries and body modifications aimed at increasing one’s adherence to conventional beauty standards. This disciplinary power applies in specific ways, Bartky posits, to feminine subjects. Gendered disciplinary practices, she says, “produce a body which in gesture and appearance is recognizably feminine” (132), with some examples of those practices being diet and exercise (“imposed upon a body subject to the ‘tyranny of slenderness’”) (133); female faces and bodies being restricted in their movements and “trained to the expression of deference” (135); the development of various kinds of disciplinary practices and regimens involved with skin care (including various artifacts, like lotions, creams, masks, pomades); and the process of learning to manipulate “a large number of devices—the blow dryer, styling brush, curling iron. . . eye liner, lipliner, lipstick brush, eyelash curler . . .and the correct manner of application of a wide variety of products” (138). The arbiters of morality and adherence to the strict standards in this

regime are ubiquitous, existing at the level of everyday routines and of a woman's adjustment of her facial expression so as not to appear too assertive at any given time: "The disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular" (Bartky 142). These micropolitics play a significant role in potential readings of self-harm and in online subcultures dedicated to it. Just as overweight women are admonished to diet more fiercely when they expose their bodies or when they "go public" with those bodies (as in modeling or crafting a public persona on social media or elsewhere), so is the self-harmer subject to more pushback and harsher brushes with disciplinary power (from formal institutionalization to consequences and further scrutinization from family or school) the more she "goes public" with her practice, either explicitly or as part of her everyday life.

Following Bartky, it would seem that a feminized and hystericized disorder like anorexia or a pathologized practice such as self-harm would reinforce and expose the power of the panopticon, pushing each girl to monitor and surveil her own body to the point of physical harm, but Mebbie Bell argues the opposite in "Re/Forming the Anorexic 'Prisoner': Inpatient Medical Treatment as the Return to Panoptic Femininity," claiming instead that anorectic practices disrupt the process of the production of the docile body, and that it is the routinization and medicalization that follow the discovery of such practices that constitute Foucauldian panopticism:

From a Foucauldian and feminist perspective, treatment mechanisms of surveillance and routinization function as a medical panopticon constructed to re/form the anorexic woman . . . anorectic practices violate the disciplinary boundaries of the contemporary "docile" female body in that they replicate a

traditionally male role: control of the female body . . . In turn, the medical treatment protocols for anorexia are a means by which women are returned to the realm of such masculinist control. (83)

Many popular social media personalities who share their experiences with self-harm express views in this vein—that is, that stigmas against and attempts to control their self-harm in authoritative ways or through coerced adherence to normative standards of beauty, self-presentation, or mental health cause them distress; display a fundamental misunderstanding of their behaviors and the reasons behind them; and, if anything, disrupt their processes of recovery. I don't fully espouse this view, as I would argue that anorexia and bulimia are in some ways ideological extensions of the increasing extremity of allegedly “normative” beauty standards; anorexia and bulimia are excessive extensions of a misconstrued thin standard of beauty.

In self-harm online subcultures, many of the girls' narratives critique various processes of routinization, medicalization, and the workings of disciplinary power in their lives. These critiques, which threaten to expose the gaps or inadequacies in the institutions in which the girls participate, likely contribute to the panic those narratives induce. Refusing to be merely objects of the medical, patriarchal, parental, or institutional gaze, they *gaze back* at school counselors, teachers, parents, therapists, nurses, and social myths about their pathologized practices. This reversal of the gaze is most obvious in “self-harm excuse” videos (many of which are comedic or tongue-in-cheek). LollysandCiggies, one popular self-harm and depression vlogger, emphasizes that girls who self-harm don't owe anyone information about their bodies, particularly about their scars, and advocates sarcasm, which she uses “when people who I do not

like are confronting me and you know they're only asking you because they want to know your business . . . you know, all those people who come to you and say 'What the fuck is that on your arm?'" Some of her suggestions for responses to get them to "fuck off" are "I tried to have sex with a porcupine, it didn't work out very well," "Oh this? You should see what's on my butt," "I tried to climb the fence to escape this hellhole they call school," and "I did this as a sacrament to Satan," all of which push back against popular myths about self-harm (that it's the result of sexual "deviance" or hypersexuality, teen angst, or participation in Satan worship or "emo" culture, for example). Poking fun at popular assumptions about self-harmers' lack of insight into and self-awareness of their own behavior, she adds, "Another really good one is to just look at it and look down at your arm, and scream, and just run away. They'll never ask you again," finishing her litany of "excuses" with "My personal favorite is 'It's none of your business, fuck off . . . you are allowed to be sarcastic to someone who is being sarcastic or invasive to you.'" She, like Hannah, argues for self-harmers' right to live inside a scarred body, even a self-scarred one, without having to live as a walking trigger warning or disclaimer, using humor to diffuse the popular hysteria that often accompanies the sight or mention of scars or that assumes that the mere sight will encourage the practice's implementation by others. Similarly, in the aforementioned "My School Reacted Horribly to My Self-Harm Scars," Cadence lays out the ways that she feels the system designed to help her has failed her: namely, in forcing her to cover up her scars at all times or be expelled. "I felt like they judged me, like crazy, when I left school, or when I got kicked out," she laments, noting the effects of the

isolation she faced at school as a contributing factor to rather than a deterrent from her tendency towards self-mutilation. “Instead of making [self-harmers] feel isolated,” she says, “we should make them feel loved.”

Girls’ narratives within self-harm communities often indicate that they are hyperaware of the relationship between their practices and the beauty regimens that Bartky likens to Foucauldian panoptic controls, noting and critiquing cultural fixations on their youth and beauty rather than on the trauma or violation that may have precipitated what is read as their disruption or “waste” of that beauty. Chaney notes that even clinicians and professional researchers have shared this view of self-harm, stating that sociologists Hugh Bryan McKay and Robert Robertson Ross were “appalled,” “dismayed,” and “concerned” about the “contrast between the young, attractive female population” of an institution in Ontario, Canada, and “the ‘disfiguring’ nature of their wounds” (Chaney 221). Vlogger Bex Louise, in her video “20 Sentences People Who Self Harm Don’t Want to Hear,” resists the notion that a threatened loss of conventional beauty will deter anyone from cutting. She attempts to dissuade viewers from saying things like “You’re too pretty to hurt yourself” and “Why would you want to make yourself ugly?” responding instead that “Beauty and what you look like has nothing to do with whether you self-harm or not.” Hannah Vancouver agrees in her own “Things Not to Say to Someone Who Self Harms”

video, as she says with a sigh, “You’re too pretty to cut. THAT is one that, like, really bothers me. It’s nothing to do with how *pretty* I am.”⁸

Additionally, “self-harm excuse” videos often respond to myths that circulate and that uphold the necessity of the implementation of disciplinary medicalized power in the wake of the discovery of self-harm, such as what the girls claim is the “myth” that self-harm represents a failed suicidal gesture, echoing notions of female adolescence as immature or incomplete, as in, in this case, an “immature” or “incomplete” suicidal act. Many argue that the notion that self-harm represents failed suicide is a myth, with the cuts each representing instead a struggle to survive, a cry into the void that says, “I am here, I am embodied, I am present” (Kirby 126). Bex critiques the popular tendency of associating suicide with self-harm: “‘So like, are you not strong enough to end it all?’ I need to breathe right now before I punch somebody in the face with this one. Self-harm doesn’t mean that you are suicidal, it doesn’t always go in a box together” (Louise). Hannah echoes that sentiment:

When people say, like, oh, did you try and kill yourself and failed? Self-harm is more like a kind of coping mechanism than like an ending sort of thing . . . self-harm is more like I’m trying to cope so I *don’t* try to end things. I have, like, a bazillion cuts all up and down my legs. It would have been a really poor attempt at killing myself if I’d been trying to do that.

While self-harm is often an indicator for possible future suicidal ideation or threats, recent research supports the girls’ personal experiences. Adler and Adler write

⁸ As an aside, she adds a bit defiantly, “I think I’m pretty, I don’t know . . . I know you’re not supposed to say you’re pretty, you’re supposed to let other people tell you you’re pretty, but I think I’m pretty,” in accordance with her public persona, which is framed around a robust sense of skepticism and critique, but not a wholesale rejection, of normative gendered and behavioral expectation.

that “it must be emphasized that SIV [self-inflicted violence] is not an attempt at or gesture of suicide (Walsh and Rosen 1988, 15-53). In fact, self-mutilators who address the issue describe their injuring behavior as a decided help in refraining from suicide” (22). That is, even if self-harmers do attempt suicide, the practice is less likely to lead to suicide than it is to indicate a history of trauma or distress that puts them at risk for suicide. Rather than a spectrum with suicide at the far end and self-harm somewhere in the middle, self-harm is often, a potential interruption of what might otherwise be a path to a suicide attempt. Raychelle Cassada Lohmann writes in *Psychology Today*:

Generally people who self-harm do not wish to kill themselves; whereas suicide is a way of ending life.... Suicidal acts usually come from a place of hopelessness, depression and worthlessness. The underlying mindset between someone who is suicidal and someone who self-harms is very different.... On the flip side, many people who self-harm view hurting themselves as a way of coping with life. In fact, for some, the self-infliction of pain reassures them they are still alive.

Girls in self-harm communities often counter the narrative that they are suicidal, and also that self-harm should be read as a “failed” suicide attempt, a lesser form of suicide. Rather, self-harm is often an assertion of bodily autonomy and individual choice. Self-harm is generally conceptualized as a lesser (i.e., feminine, or immature) form of suicide, but it generally stems from an altogether separate motivation.

Girls Reaching Out for Intimacy, Attention, and Community

Girls in online self-harm communities reach out openly for intimacy, support, and friendship from their peers. This is the flip side of the media’s fear of contagion among self-harmers and their potential “victims” and the practice’s reputation within psychiatry as fundamentally attention-seeking (many psychiatric nurses openly state

that they view self-harming patients as self-centered, rather than other-centered). Girls' online self-harm communities and the affective relationships that circulate within them, as well as media and societal reactions to those relationships, echo Dobson's argument that it is often the very desire for feedback itself that is pathologized in girls as it potentially exposes the inadequacy or failure of the "individual choice" message favored by girl-power discourse.

A frequent question asked by girls in self-harm subcultures is some variation of "Do you love me/will I be loved?" Bex warns people against asking, "You think people will love you with those scars?" (Louise), because, she claims, self-harmers already live in fear that they will be isolated and unloved. Like the girls engaged in Dobson's "Am I pretty?" challenge, these girls are often open in their need and craving for love in the face of their stigmatized practices and all that they might culturally imply—for example, a sense of "brokenness," distress, or vulnerability. It's not just the scars, then, that cause the anxiety: It's the open desire for love, particularly in the face of enduring girl-problem discourse that indicates that girls' problems exist precisely *because* they long for so much intimacy, so much togetherness and approval. Bex speaks directly to the tension between these two competing (but also quite similar) discourses about how girls should relate to their bodies when she critiques onlookers for saying, upon discovering a self-harmer's practice, "Whatever, it's your body, you do what you want—that makes them feel really bad because they want to know that you care, and when you say 'do what you want,' it really seems like you don't at all" (Louise). This desire—for others to care what she does with her body—

flies in the face of both girl-problem, medicalizing discourse, which would discipline, monitor, and routinize a self-harmer's body, and girl-power, libertarian/radical individualistic discourse, which would responsabilize that body as needing to sustain and care for itself. It is not necessarily the narration of pain, but the mediation of the camera/audience and the explicit, active search for "relationality, connectivity, and attention from others in networked publics [that] are . . . increasingly pathologized as lacking value or values" (Dobson 62). Girls like Bex, who ask for commentary on their bodily practices or aesthetics, are "presumed to have low self esteem, to be morally deficient or to lack 'self-respect'" (Dobson 65).

Girls in these communities also often ask for feedback, voice their support for each other, and openly elicit support, sympathy, and intimacy. Hannah speaks of the significance of her audience of peer supporters in one video, saying, "I can perfectly talk about self-harm with like to you guys, and my camera, and when I talk to my camera, I don't think of it as my camera, I think of it as talking to you guys. But basically when I talk to you guys about it I don't think about it as very strange" (Vancouver). She makes it clear, then, what her audience means to her emotionally, what emotional gaps they fill for her, and the significance of their shared intimacy, particularly around issues of mental health, in her life. Vlogger Diana, who goes by ChaseHappyness and identifies as a recovered self-harmer with social anxiety and depression, functions more as an older sister to her viewers, especially those who are currently self-harming. In her video about how to hide self-harm at school, Diana shares:

So with it being back to school season and all . . . I understand that it can be really difficult to, first of all, handle situations that will cause you to self-harm, and of course hiding them at school from anyone who might see them, to prevent anything else from happening. I do not promote, support, I do not encourage anyone to self-harm, but I understand it's reality, it's what happens, and instead of pretending it doesn't happen, and turning my back towards it, I want to give you some tools you can use at school so you don't get bullied for self-harming.

Thus, self-harm communities are an intersubjective space, with active participation and reception to feedback from both sides of the performer/audience divide. Many “things you shouldn't say to self-harmers” videos end with variations of “I'm sorry for all of you who've had these things said to them,” with vloggers expressing sympathy. Most self-harm vloggers provide P.O. boxes or residential mailing addresses, personal emails, and other forms of direct contact for viewers, encouraging peers to write them with questions, suggestions, and requests for new video topics. “What do you guys want to see next? What's your own experience with self-harm? Is it different from mine? Let me know in the comments!” is a frequent sign-off within the personal storytelling/advice genre, with girls openly indicating that they are aware of their audience and want to please them with their future performances and dialogues. These tactics of viewer/reader engagement and open indications of a desire for relationality and collective participation are reminiscent of riot grrrl and zine cultures that emerged prior to their commodification, co-optation, and diversion into girl-problem and girl-power discourses.

Echoing Cvetkovich's call to expose depression as a “public feeling”—one that is acknowledged as shared by many, rather than individually pathologized—the performances of “sad girls” and self-harmers online can be read as exposing existing

contradictions within media, cultural, and psychiatric discourses around girls and possibly interpretations of their behaviors, and, in turn, contradictory pressures that affect girls experiencing psychic distress (to be in complete control of one's body and emotion versus to submit to patriarchal/medical authority over one's body, for example). Perhaps, then, the cast-off girl becomes abject and fearful as we become less able to mitigate and answer her concerns. Perhaps her concerns are legitimate, but our inability to engage with them leads us to read her as needy and desperate. The cast-off girl is positioned as a threat to the neoliberal project while at the same time is regarded as too inconsequential and, dare I say, "girlish" to actually pose any manifest threat. The dismissal of any purported legitimate purpose to self-harm and self-harm communities attempts to dismiss the ability of the girl to affect change precisely because of the powerful potential of girlhood. Here, I echo Sue McAndrew and Tony Warne's call to begin to rewrite stigmatized affects associated with self-harm such as "neediness" or "desperation" to explore what is going on beneath the skin. In "Cutting Across Boundaries: A Case Study Using Feminist Praxis to Understand the Meanings of Self-Harm," they argue, "Often women who deliberately harm themselves are labelled as 'attention seeking' whereas we, similar to a number of other authors, argue that a better description might be 'attention needing.'" Rather than pathologizing and censoring girls' communities based around behaviors which are frequently read as, and may very well be, unhealthy or indicative of psychic distress, any of these practices can be read as exercises in building agency and community and as potentially useful in making explicit the needs of participants for peers and potential

mentors or supporters. With their message seemingly un-reconcilable into the neoliberal project, the cast-off girl is both disregarded and censored; she is at once desperate and not worth our time while at the same time worthy of reprimand and psychological counseling. Cutting, skin speaking as I have termed it here, acts performatively to establish the consequences of being viewed as inconsequential. The complications foregrounded by girls' bodies act as proof of collective cultural expectations and the burden they impose on those who bear them, and secondly as the writings of skin that is expected not to speak, and as attempts (if unhealthy) of silenced actors to communicate through the flesh that is foregrounded as the most important thing about them.

Chapter Three:

Representations of Borderline Personality Disorder and the “New” Hysteria

Twelve-year-old Frankie in Carson McCullers’ 1946 novel *The Member of the Wedding* wants to go on her sister’s honeymoon. No: she needs to go—and not to take her sister’s husband, but perhaps to be her husband. And to be her husband’s wife, and perhaps, their adopted daughter. Probably all three. Frankie talks about the wedding and her role in it all summer to anyone who will listen, but in the climactic scene, as her sister and her new husband drive off after their wedding, Frankie finds she can only say two words:

You are the we of me, her heart was saying, but she could only say aloud: “Take me!” And they pleaded and begged with her, but she was already in the car. At the last she clung to the steering wheel until her father and somebody else had hauled and dragged her from the car, and even then she could only cry in the dust of the empty road: “Take me! Take me!” (McCullers quoted in Becker 113).

In *Through the Looking Glass: Women and Borderline Personality Disorder*, Dana Becker considers adolescent Frankie’s fundamental question—the question of fashioning a life around the cry of “take me”—as the definitive “question” of borderline personality disorder, prompting her to wonder “whether ‘borderline’ and ‘adolescent’ behaviors have a closer relationship than we might previously have imagined” (Becker 113). Merri Lisa Johnson, a diagnosed borderline but very much an adult (and a scholar of gender and disability studies), nevertheless fashions her own life much as Frankie does, in search of a subject to make her into an object (but only the object she wants to become). In her memoir *Girl In Need of a Tourniquet: Memoir of a Borderline Personality*, Johnson writes, “I fell in love again four years later and

crafted my life into a poem for [her lover]. The poem had two words. LOVE ME” (Johnson 13).

Despite all this me-ness, the “me” of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) has been evoked frequently—in pop psychology, in DSM-III and -IV and -V, on dating sites as a warning, as neo-noir and B-movie horror genre canon, as viral clickbait about who best to avoid if you’d like to keep your home and your children and your penis—but rarely clarified. From Glenn Close’s bunny-boiling, self-mutilating, hyperdependent seductress in *Fatal Attraction* to Alicia Silverstone’s Lolitan Eve-in-training in *The Crush* and debates within psychoanalysis and psychiatry, the attempt to pin down BPD definitionally and diagnostically has been as circular and inscrutable (and juicy) as its elusive subject. If, as Erving Goffman claims in *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, personhood itself requires a mask, and that mask “represents the conception we have formed of ourselves—the role we are striving to live up to...our truer self, the self we would like to be” (Goffman 19), the borderline mask represents what happens when that conception is fractured or not fully formed, rendering the ‘role’ distractingly artificial and the borders between ‘genuine’ and ‘theatrical’ blurry.

Relatedly, in cultural representations like *Girl, Interrupted* and *Prozac Nation*, which I will analyze through this chapter, borderline characters are commonly used to represent the threat of castration (a threat that is, in most representations, ultimately destroyed) or of removing the ‘mask’: of social propriety, of a male counterpart, or of the analyst. After looking at these two films, I will examine how other recent

performative practices like performative writing and musical theatre, drama therapy/performative autoethnography work (to various degrees of effectiveness) to understand the lived experience of BPD rather than as a perceived threat of castration. I will look at two recent examples of this with respect to BPD: Merri Lisa Johnson's memoir *Girl in Need of a Tourniquet*, an example of performative writing as scholarship and disability autoethnography/life writing, and a 2014 production of the musical *Borderline*, produced by Dr. Robert Landy, a professor at the Drama Therapy program at NYU's Steinhardt School, as an example of what can go awry when psychiatrically disabled individuals are not foregrounded in attempts to represent their narratives in performance.

Like the threat that the borderline presents to the analyst's possibility of using specialized knowledge toward the goal of diagnosis and cure, her cultural representation also points toward a fear of impotence, futility of positive character progression, and resolution. While what precisely is under threat of exposure (a transgression, an inadequacy, the machinations of analysis) depends on the male character, the institution, or the historical context, borderline characters risk the revelation of the inner workings of disciplinary power (whether institutional or interpersonal). The workings of cultural production, and indeed the performative nature of affective relationships and life itself, are ill-concealed in patients deemed 'borderline'; they are fundamentally deceptive in a way that 'exposes' themselves but also the ongoing performance of therapy or of gender relations (Bayliss 583).

Borderlines and their cultural representation threaten, through their behavior but also

through their presence itself, to undermine the authority of the analyst (after all, they originated as ‘the unanalyzables’) or to disrupt the performance of seductive womanhood. Here, the dark continent of femininity and the unanalyzability of the borderline are conflated, mapping onto and mirroring one another to form a matrix of ‘female trouble’ and all the cultural anxieties that inspires.

I begin with a history of the diagnosis itself; as we’ll see from the constantly contested and malleable nature of the diagnosis, BPD is frustratingly difficult to pin down. This seems to point to the very aspects of it that also make it particularly ripe for depiction on film. BPD exasperates us with an unresolvable aspect and lends itself to a tense and dark filmic style. Pinning BPD down cinematically has proven to be just as problematic as containing it semantically and diagnostically, which seems to be part of the allure. Characters can be explicitly stated to be borderline, the film can make the implication, or the audience make the inference, but the value and veracity of the claim becomes a part of the cultural legacy of the film. Whether ‘famous’ borderlines-in-name (as in, the film explicitly states that the female protagonist is borderline) or in popular discourse—message boards and movie reviews endlessly debate just how ‘borderline’ a particular character is, and how close to reality ‘she’ is—the borderlines in the two commercial and popular films I’ll explore here (*Girl, Interrupted* and *Prozac Nation*) demonstrate the conceptual throughlines of the discursive tensions surrounding BPD throughout its history.

The BPD film genre (what I will call the lengthy canon of films that feature a woman who is explicitly or popularly believed to be ‘borderline’) is one that reflects

cultural anxieties about womanhood, girlhood, sex, violence, castration and engulfment. The BPD film genre's understanding of the borderline is a convoluted as the diagnosis. If, as Laura Mulvey suggests in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," "the paradox of phallogentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated women to give order and meaning to its world" (Mulvey 34), the figure of the borderline lends a touch of horror to every film she appears in, as she threatens to disrupt the symbolic order with her disordered mind-body and the slippages between her performance of female dependency-in-excess, girlified victimhood that masks a predator, bisexuality that transcends or even dismisses the possibility of the male gaze, and her grotesque imitations of the male role (through mockery, gender-bending, insatiable sexual appetite or superior manipulation skills). Rather than adhering entirely to Mulvey's idea of the binary pairing of male, sadistic, scopophilic spectator and female object of that viewership-violence, films in the BPD genre can be read more accurately through Gaylyn Studlar's "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema." Studlar articulates a view of the 'masochistic aesthetic' that includes "fantasy, disavowal, fetishism, and suspense" (Studlar 205), stresses the pregenital period in the development of desire (fittingly, the period said to be disrupted in borderlines) rather than the phallic phase, and has as its central fantasy the "primal desire" (207) of " 'dual unity and the complete symbiosis between child and mother'" (207). This is unattainable for the masochist as well as the borderline, as the borderline as she is culturally conceived cannot reconcile even the parts of herself (child and mother) in order to become whole. Thus, within the masochistic aesthetic,

which I argue is the aesthetic of the BPD genre, “death becomes the fantasy solution” (207), which is either realized or gestured towards through self-harm or ‘death of the self’ through total subjection to an idealized partner. In other films, this fantasy is elided entirely through escape into the symbolic order, whether through submission to analysis where disparate parts of the self can be, if not reconciled, appropriately compartmentalized, or through transformation by Foucauldian ‘disciplinary power’ and submission to the ‘technicalization’ of “the difficulties and contradictions of human life” and the ‘subjectification’ of the body—for example, through medicalization (psychiatric drugs, hospitalization, diagnosis, psychotherapy) administered by an external source rather than by oneself (cutting, substance use, manic writing, sexual pleasure, etc.). But, if the borderline girl on film demonstrates the conceptual throughlines of the discursive tensions permeating BPD’s history, first, let’s look into that history.

Borderline: A Brief History

Psychoanalyst Adolph Stern has frequently been called the “father” (a loaded term if ever there was one) of borderline personality disorder. Stern’s seminal description of borderline patients in 1938 displays, and indeed even begins with, a sense of weariness and confusion with which any researcher of this particular disorder will become well-acquainted: “It is well known that a large group of patients fit frankly neither into the psychotic nor into the psychoneurotic group, and that this border line group of patients is extremely difficult to handle effectively by any psychotherapeutic method” (Stern 54). Their defining characteristics are the

following: they are difficult, too accessible to be deemed impossible and then discarded, too illegible to be kept and read. Stern lists the telltale signs of these patients “at the border” as narcissism, psychic bleeding (disproportionate reactions to both minor and major stresses and traumas), inordinate hypersensitivity, psychic and body rigidity—“the rigid personality”—negative therapeutic reactions, deeply embedded feelings of inferiority, masochism (both physical and emotional), “deep organic insecurity or anxiety” (Stern 55), the use of projection mechanisms, and “difficulties in reality testing” (Stern 55), meaning that they were just a *tad* psychotic.

The next brave soul to undertake an in-depth look at borderline patients was psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch, who coined the term ““as-if” patients” to describe those whose “whole relationship to life has something about it which is lacking in genuineness and yet outwardly runs along ‘as if’ it were complete” (Deutsch 75). Characterized by “emptiness” (Deutsch 75) and a “lack of individuality” (Deutsch 75), along with suggestibility and “aggressive tendencies” (77) that “are almost completely masked by passivity, lending an air of negative goodness, of mild amiability which, however, is readily convertible to evil” (Deutsch 77), Deutsch’s as-ifs are able to mask their aggression with passivity and their near-psychosis with charm. Like porn, Deutsch suggests, we can’t exactly define a borderline, but we’ll know one when we see one, and it will be chilling. Deutsch was also the first to attribute childlike features to borderline patients (Deutsch 82), caused by the apparently unfortunate characteristic of not having been “seduced” adequately by parents’ warmth in order to create with them “a warm dynamic oedipus constellation” (Deutsch 80) (thus, like Deleuze’s

schizophrenic, existing outside the oedipal fantasy entirely). However, the primary legacy of Deutsch's perspective on the borderline has been its emphasis on the inherently performative and malleable nature of the shape-shifting BPD patient, traits that would eventually become loaded with gendered meaning and transform into the primary earmarks of what constitutes a borderline in both psychological texts and cultural representations.

In the first three decades of the 20th century, borderline patients were often seen as possessing a particularly inscrutable, latent, and/or mild form of schizophrenia (primarily due to schizophrenia's then-association with psychosis, and thus, with fundamental untreatability, or an inability to be analyzed) (Davis 265). Deutsch mentions this, wondering whether patients read as "borderline" are in fact in possession of a "schizophrenic disposition or...rudimentary symptoms of schizophrenia" (Deutsch 90). Paul Hoch and Phillip Polatin popularized this idea with their discussion of "pseudoneurotic" forms of schizophrenia, with borderline aficionado Robert Knight subsequently agreeing that "borderline patients are...likely to show...the various microscopic and macroscopic signs of schizophrenic illness" (Knight 167) when confronted with the stress of an unstructured psychiatric interview, claiming that the kind of "free association" psychiatrist-patient dialogues that were popular at the time would prove to be "antitherapeutic" for a borderline patient (Knight 167).

Borderline personality disorder's nervous entanglement with schizophrenia and its frequent characterization as a sort of schizophrenia-turned-inward, or

schizophrenia-yet-unrealized, foreshadowed its later characterization as the definitively feminine disorder. For several decades before it became the it-girl of diagnoses for difficult women and the illegible “other” of psychological diagnoses (illuminating all others with its relative inscrutability), BPD was the “other” of schizophrenia: less developed, less potent, and less knowable. In fact, in the 1970s, John Gunderson would describe the main differentiations between borderline personality disorder and schizophrenia as “overt dependent neediness” and “manipulativeness” (6), solidifying BPD traits as inherently and inextricably linked to gendered traits.

In the 1950s, Knight pushed for the integration of ego psychology (which prioritized the personality) with the Freudian stages of psychosexual development and their effects on the development of the psyche. Under Knight, the borderline moved from a psychoanalytic colloquialism meaning “neither/both psychotic and neurotic” to a personality *organization*, an underpinning that would throw other aspects of the personality into relief, exacerbating the more “primitive” defense mechanisms and weakening the ego in all respects. Compounding their reputation as manipulative maskers of their “true” hollow selves, Knight’s borderlines (like Deutsch’s) are highly performative, able to put on a “deceptive, superficially conventional, although neurotic, front, depending on how thoroughgoing and comprehensive the psychiatric investigation is with respect to the patient’s total ego functioning” (Knight 165). In the borderline personality organization, he writes, “normal ego functions of secondary-process thinking, integration, realistic planning adaptation to the environment,

maintenance of object relationships, and defenses against primitive unconscious impulses are severely weakened” (Knight 165). Also within the field of ego psychology, Erik Erikson’s psychosocial stages of development have been influential in subsequent rhetoric around borderline personality disorder and the fundamental lack of a coherent “self.” In particular, the identity diffusion stage, commonly associated with adolescence and young adulthood, has frequently been understood as a permanent state for borderline patients.

Borderline expert Otto Kernberg’s seminal 1975 text, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism*, on the connection between borderline personality and narcissism, brought borderline personality into the realm of a “syndrome,” consisting of a stable collection of traits. His work brought the disorder closer to inclusion in the DSM and to an understanding of borderline personality as adhering to a cohesive set of diagnostic criteria. Rejecting much of the earlier work on borderline personality as occupying a liminal or undefinable state, he critiques its frequent mischaracterization as a “catchall” or “wastebasket” category, noting that the same pathology has alternately been referred to as borderline states, preschizophrenic personality structure, psychotic characters, ambulatory schizophrenia, and pseudoneurotic schizophrenia, as-if personalities, schizoid personality structure, and severe ego distortions (Kernberg 279). (It was also later referred to as “emotionally unstable personality disorder” when it took on more coded gendered traits [David and Kapur 588]). By contrast, Kernberg’s text was the first substantial move towards defining borderline as a “specific, stable, pathological personality organization” rather than a “transitory state”

(279) or a psychological no man's land. As such, he also differed from his predecessors in his insistence that, with the right treatment, borderlines could indeed be effectively treated.

The diagnostic elements defining Kernberg's "borderline personality organization" or "syndrome" include "chronic, diffuse, free-floating anxiety" (Kernberg 284) and "polysymptomatic neurosis" (285), including phobias, obsessive-compulsive tendencies, "multiple, elaborate, or bizarre conversion symptoms" (285), "dissociative reactions, especially hysterical 'twilight states'" (285), hypochondriasis, and paranoia. Kernberg's research also introduced the significance of "polymorphous perverse sexual trends" (286) in the borderline personality; something like a consistent interest in masochism or a consistently homosexual identity, Kernberg argued, wouldn't indicate the possibility of borderline personality, but a combination of those would (for example, a gay masochist/submissive or bisexual sadist/dominant, someone who enjoyed both the sadistic and masochistic roles, or someone whose sexual identity and interests changed radically over time or intermittently throughout their life). Particularly for female patients, Kernberg also included hypersexual fantasies and fetishes, coupled with "frigidity" or a lack of interest in real-life sexual experiences, as indications of borderline personality syndrome. These observations contributed significantly to the association of borderlines with fluidity and multiplicity in sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as its association with hypersexuality and a knack for seduction (often pathologized more in women than in men). In this vein, Kernberg also furthered the notion of the borderline personality as primarily controlled

by the id. Finally, Kernberg's discussions of the borderline as often "hysterical" helped to solidify the presumed gender of the figure of the borderline. The theme of multiplicity is apparent in every aspect of the borderline: "multiple" crises, "multiple" drugs, "multiple" sexual partners and proclivities.

The Grinker study (Roy Grinker, Sr., B. Werble, and R.C. Drye) was the first piece of major clinical research that attempted, using all known sources on the subject within both psychoanalysis and psychology, to determine whether or not 'the borderline' was an actual stable diagnosis. Noting that previously "the psychiatric entity frequently referred to as borderline" (Grinker et al. 346) had previously "been used as a depository for clinical uncertainty" (346), Grinker and his colleagues determined that "the borderline disorder" was, indeed, a valid diagnosis based on stable criteria that remained relatively unchanged across time. However, they found they could not answer the question "How does a human become a borderline?" (Grinker et al. 352) and determined that further research on the etiology of the borderline was needed to come to any conclusions.

BPD was introduced in the DSM-III in 1980, long after debates about it had begun. It was included under the Axis II disorders (now referred to as Cluster B), which are commonly regarded as "more severe" than Axis I/Cluster A disorders. Around this time, John Gunderson, often cited as one of the primary experts on BPD, conducted influential research on the disorder that would cement many later understandings of it and inspire a great deal of further research. Gunderson, following Kernberg, emphasized the concept of "splitting" so central to a psychological

understanding of BPD. Resulting from “a developmental fixation in object relations” (Gunderson 43), splitting, Gunderson argues, is a primitive defense mechanism in borderlines that causes them to engage in “black and white” thinking or to see external objects and oneself as idealized or utterly worthless, either “all good” or “all bad.” Gunderson also expresses doubt in the face of common complaints of abuse from BPD patients, arguing that “even if” their claims are true, they don’t provide a reliable source of information for a therapist, given the patients’ tendencies to paint all authority figures or love-objects as omnipotent and perfect or entirely devoid of value. Notably, he states that he told one patient “she was not entitled to her rage in the here and now—whatever its origin in the past” (Gunderson 107).

Contesting the Definition

Almost immediately upon its codification, the DSM-III definition of BPD began to be critiqued. Like the patients it described, the criteria were hotly contested, considered to be insufficient by some and excessive by others. In particular, feminist and radical therapists (among some others) argued that trauma, particularly long-term severe childhood trauma, was more significant in the etiology of BPD than had been previously believed (or, in many cases, had been outright dismissed), with BPD being misdiagnosed or associated with other issues such as paranoia and masochism (Bedard 470; Savicki 283). Others critiqued the association of the “catchall” diagnosis of BPD with the pathologization of young girls and female adolescence itself, and especially those who engaged in “sexually deviant” relationships or acts such as BDSM or LGBT identities/communities. Lyn Wood, a member of STOP (Students and Teens Opposed

to Psychiatric Abuse), for example, in a protest against an NWSA conference on girlhood and mental health that included neither girls nor psychiatric services survivors/consumers (“nothing about us without us”), claimed to have been involuntarily hospitalized for being butch and gay, with diagnoses of BPD and the now-defunct “gender identity disorder” (Ruby 14).

In response to these increasingly vocal critiques, clinical psychologist Judith Herman developed criteria for a “new” form of post-traumatic stress disorder called C-PTSD (complex PTSD), which focused on the effects of long-term trauma such as that resulting from kidnapping, imprisonment (such as in POW camps), repeated sexual trauma by the same or multiple offenders, severe childhood trauma, or long-term domestic abuse (Herman 14). C-PTSD, though not an official diagnosis in the DSM, is widely used by trauma-based psychiatrists and therapists, and has been suggested repeatedly as a possible replacement for BPD. While Gunderson expressed the more common view among clinicians at that time that “it is commonplace for borderline patients to see themselves as having been repeatedly victimized and mistreated in a long series of previous relationships” (Gunderson 5), Herman and others insisted that the majority of BPD patients actually had been victims, which has been verified by extensive subsequent research. PTSD and BPD continue to have an entangled relationship (just the kind borderlines are said to love), with BPD playing the masochistic and pathologized underdog to the more legitimized and sympathy-inducing PTSD, and both being regularly misdiagnosed as the other (Hazen et al. 270).

Another common critique was BPD's fraught relationship to gender. Dana Becker's influential 1997 work *Through the Looking Glass* was the first exploration of the deeply gendered nature of the borderline diagnosis, now solidified as a "known fact" within psychiatry; women are three or more times as likely to be diagnosed with BPD as men. Janet Wirth-Cauchon's *Women and Borderline Personality Disorder: Symptoms and Stories* embarks on a similar critique, foregrounding the experiences of women labeled with the disorder rather than clinicians' experiences of those patients. Becker attributes the overrepresentation of women in the population diagnosed with BPD to "the stripping away in *DSM-III* (1980) of the transient psychotic and cognitive symptoms that had formerly often been associated with borderline psychopathology in favor of an affective loading" (Becker 62)—what is often referred to as the "affective turn" within psychological diagnoses and treatment in the 1980s. Women's associations with emotionality, she argues, and the likelihood that anything but submission towards medical practitioners will be read as particularly troublesome from female patients, renders them particularly vulnerable to being slapped with the 'difficult' borderline label. This text also serves to solidify the connection between BPD and the legacy of Freudian hysteria, with Becker claiming that BPD is the contemporary iteration of societal anxieties about female nonconformity and noncompliance. Sociologist and psychiatrist Allan Horwitz agrees, arguing in *Creating Mental Illness* that gender norms not only shape therapists' expectations of patients and the diagnoses with which they label them and shape narratives about them, but also influence patient behavior and their "performances" of psychic distress.

Their performances, for example, may emphasize women's tendencies to internalize rather than externalize their pain, to neglect themselves in favor of maintaining their attachments, and to avoid antisocial behaviors in favor of self-destructive means of responding to distress (Horwitz 128-129). Thus, patients themselves may respond to and perpetuate gendered criteria by enacting what they unconsciously believe is 'expected' of them as female psychiatric services consumers.

In keeping with the research conducted by Gunderson and others, and in response to the critiques leveled at the DSM-III definition, the DSM-IV, published in 1994, redefined the diagnostic criteria of BPD as "a pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self-image, affects, and marked impulsivity" as indicated by five or more of the following: "frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment;" "a pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal relationships" characterized by either idealization and devaluation; "identity disturbance;" "recurrent suicidal behavior, gestures, or threats, including self-mutilation;" "affective instability," "impulsivity in at least two areas that are potentially self-damaging," "chronic feelings of emptiness;" "inappropriate, intense anger;" and "transient, stress-related paranoid ideation" ("Diagnostic"). The 2011 DSM-V definition is more specific, requiring patients to exhibit impairments in self functioning (in the areas of identity and/or self-direction), interpersonal functioning (in the areas of empathy and/or intimacy), negative affectivity (including emotional lability, pervasive anxiety, separation insecurity, and/or depressivity), disinhibition (impulsivity and risk-taking), and antagonism (hostility) ("Diagnostic"). The DSM-V definition was considerably

reworked after extensive American Psychological Association (APA) debates, with some proposing to throw out the disorder entirely due to its bad-girl reputation among clinicians and their subsequent tendency to stereotype or ignore patients slapped with the label. Others argued that the DSM-III and -IV criteria were not narrow enough to result in a reliable diagnosis. Notably, the DSM-V description lacks any reference to hypersexuality, unlike its predecessors, and contains less stigmatizing and judgmental language.

Martha Linehan's development of dialectical-behavioral therapy (DBT) in the 1990s echoed other critiques about a tendency to dismiss BPD patients' claims of abuse and trauma. In her influential treatment plans for DBT and *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder*, Linehan called out fellow clinicians for their unwillingness to budge on the "borderline question" and their stubborn refusal to explore new modes of approaching the disorder, opting instead to assume untreatability on the part of BPD patients rather than to examine the inadequacy of existing treatment. DBT involves radical self-acceptance that seeks to manage dysfunctional or nonproductive emotions while avoiding self-criticism, thus eventually aiming to integrate the seemingly contradictory aspects of the self. Several years later, in a provocative moment of "uncloseting," Linehan "came out" as borderline herself, a spectacle that shocked the psychiatric community due to its effusive praise of Linehan and shared disdain for borderlines.

Other research in the 1990s firmed up the association of borderline patients with self-harm (particularly cutting), promiscuity (long a presumed feature of the

disorder), impulsive and reckless behaviors, and substance abuse (Farrugia). Women with this diagnosis remain overrepresented in the criminal justice population, the inpatient populations of psychiatric hospitals, and in self-harming populations (Conn). Other clinicians have veered away from dwelling on current dysfunctional behaviors in favor of focusing on the etiology of the controversial disorder. The significance of sexual and domestic violence in adulthood, as well as adverse childhood events (ACE) in the development of BPD, is now well-documented, while the possibility of its genetic origins are less clear (Bower 21; Fahs 68; Herman et al. 490). Medications and hormonal treatments have not proven to be substantially helpful in the treatment of BPD (Bower 15), though some may alleviate the symptoms of frequent comorbid disorders, such as anorexia, depression, and addiction. DBT and psychodynamic therapy, particularly trauma-based, continue to be the primarily accepted means of treatment.

Key “Stabilizing” Concepts

Though the history of the phenomenology of ‘the borderline’ is complex and often contradictory, there are nevertheless several conceptual throughlines in its development which speak to its intimate relationship to shifting societal understandings of gender, selfhood, and trauma, which have informed cultural narratives and discourse about the disorder, and which will inform my readings of significant cultural representations of BPD.

The first throughline is the association of borderline personality disorder/syndrome/organization with manipulation and the constant adoption of a

‘mask’ that obscures the pathology or inadequacy of what lies beneath. This alleged manipulation often takes the form of ‘parasuicide’ (suicidal attempts or gestures that are not read as genuine and which are often associated with women) and of self-harm (particularly cutting), believed by many to be so common to borderline personality disorder as to be considered inextricable from it or indicative of an automatic diagnosis (Gunderson). Gunderson calls them “manipulative suicide attempts” (5), referring to suicidal ‘gestures’ as “the most problematic expression of the manipulateness of borderline patients” (5). If, as Goffman claims personhood itself requires a mask, and that mask “represents the conception we have formed of ourselves—the role we are striving to live up to...our truer self, the self we would like to be” (Goffman 19), the borderline mask represents what happens when that conception is fractured or not fully formed, rendering the ‘role’ distractingly artificial and the borders between ‘genuine’ and ‘theatrical’ blurry. Accordingly, Lacanian theorists believe that the mirror stage, or the encounter with the imaginary realm that induces the subject’s identification and stimulates the development of the ego, is disrupted or not fully achieved in borderlines (Rusansky Drob 55-56).

The second throughline is that borderlines are often described in psychological discourse as performers. Specifically, they are able (it’s presumed) to perform both deceptive normativity which obscures their pathology and to perform ‘dramatic’ gestures that obscure their fundamental emptiness (in other words, as I will discuss further, they are defined by both excess and lack, too much and not enough, a fundamental tendency towards imbalance in either direction or both). Accordingly, the

words ‘drama’ and ‘dramatic’ appear in many descriptions of BPD patients and their behaviors; borderlines, it seems, have none of Goffman’s ‘dramaturgical discipline’ or the ‘naturalness’ of Judith Butler’s fully realized gendered subjects, whose gender performances appear unrehearsed due to a lifetime of conditioning—that is, their performances are not seamlessly integrated into everyday life. Their machinations may work to secure what they want and may temporarily allow others to access their vivid fantasy worlds, but they are obviously machinations. One guide for school counselors in spotting personality disorders in adolescents (a dangerous game, as many high school students meet most or all of the criteria in the DSM for various disorders, particularly disorders associated with self-absorption and/or identity confusion, such as NPD and BPD) warns readers about the possibility of BPD in teens who exhibit “dramatic student behavior such as suicidal gestures or self-mutilation” (Farrugia 195). The choice of the term ‘gesture’ is telling here: Borderlines tell stories about their bodies and selves, it’s believed (through cutting their skin, manipulating a psychoanalyst, seducing a lover with no intention of following through or pretending to be either more or less ‘insane’), but those stories are incomplete, never representing totality or linear progression. Their narratives are arcless, circular. They make spectacles *of* themselves rather than making *selves*, which leads to the suspicion and outright dismissal of their claims (of abuse, of love); their lack of trust in others, rather than as evidence for past abuse, is sometimes read as pathological and as originating internally (Meyer-Lindberg 778). In *New Maladies of the Soul*, Kristeva’s adolescent patient ‘Anne’ replaces her unhealthy seductions of police officers and other law

enforcement workers with extensive imaginary ‘cop stories.’ For Kristeva, however, this knack for narratives can be the key to resolution for the borderline rather than a sign of delinquency and brokenness; she writes of the significance of the imaginary for borderlines (Kristeva 137-138) to help them ‘resolve’ their symptoms or obsessions with fantasy.

By far borderline’s best-known and most consistent conceptual throughline is the BPD patient’s resistance to treatment (she is ‘born’ a mistake, fundamentally unanalyzable), as well as the responses they inspire from therapists and psychoanalysts. In fact, the ‘problem’ of the borderline that aroused so much interest was not the suffering of the patients, but of their therapists. Stern opens his introductory text on border disorders with, “Repeated failure in the past taught me that the knowledge we possessed was not adequate to treat these people” (Stern 54). Gunderson writes in *Borderline Personality Disorder*, “A...clinical observation that helped stimulate interest in defining borderline patients rose out of the intense countertransference reactions these patients generated in therapists— countertransference responses characteristically marked by feelings of helplessness and rage” (Gunderson 2). These reactions, he claims, were not indicative of a problem in the therapist-patient matrix, but they “were important insofar as they...reflected something perversely troublesome within the nature of these patients themselves” (Gunderson 2). Something is uncannily askew: the borderline’s origin.

Further evidence of this notorious reputation can be found in BPD’s representation in the self-help and pop psychology genres; far more texts are available

for the beleaguered family, friends, and partners of the borderline than for the patient herself. Books, courses, and message boards promise to help partners extricate themselves from borderline marriages. Even texts aimed at clinicians and other professionals, such as Janice M. Cauwels' *Imbroglia: Rising to the Challenge of Borderline Personality Disorder*, evoke a sense of mystification, confusion, and even fear that echo Freud's and other psychoanalysts' initial tentative steps towards the analysis of female sexuality. In *Mental Health Disorders in Adolescents: A Guide for Parents, Teachers, and Professionals*, a chapter ostensibly meant to cover all personality disorders is devoted almost entirely to the threat of the 'difficult' and 'troubling' diagnosis of BPD and its warning signs, with the others as mere afterthoughts (Hazen et al. 192).

Finally, the figure of the borderline is also associated with sexual multiplicity: bisexuality in the Freudian sense (possessing both masculine and feminine characteristics and tendencies) as well as sadomasochism (neither 'pure' sadist nor pure masochist, whether emotionally or sexually). Kernberg's "polymorphous perverse sexual trends" (Kernberg 286) as indicators of BPD became a mainstay of cultural representations and discourse around the disorder. "Patients whose genital life centers on a stable sexual deviation" (286) need not apply—borderlines exude multiplicity in a variety of ways. Comparing BPD to hysteria, disability theorist Susan Cahn writes, "In our own time, the troublesome behaviors identified by the psy professions—a term referring to psychiatry, clinical psychology, social work, and psychiatric nursing—contain a mixture of conventionally masculine and feminine

traits” (Cahn 260). She argues that the borderline is troublesome partly because she refuses to be patly categorized in terms of gender or orientation: at once aggressor and receiver of that aggression, perpetrator and victim, and relishing (if her critics are to be believed) in all of those roles.

The primary conceptual constant in BPD, in fact, is its untraceability and its perpetual representation as a conundrum that must be ‘demystified,’ unpacked, detangled, or, at the very least, broken down into its constituent parts and subsequently managed.

Ways of Reading/Theorizing the Borderline

Since its inception as a diagnosis, particularly during the second-wave feminist movement, as BPD was being ‘legitimized’ through the APA, feminist critics and medical professionals alike have noted the significant similarities between the 19th and 20th century understanding of hysteria and borderline personality disorder, with some going so far as to call BPD ‘the new hysteria.’ Like hysteria, the development of BPD as a diagnosis and the trajectory of its growth in popularity within psychological discourse is read by some critics as a reflection of societal changes in attitudes about the ‘self’ and how those attitudes are pathologized; in this view, BPD is seen as a feminized version of narcissism, which became a popular site of cultural and psychological fixation in the 20th century as psychotherapists noted a “trend towards self-absorption” (Battan 201). In 1993, Kristeva described BPD as a ‘contemporary malady’ alongside narcissism (Kristeva 1993, 8-9), a reflection of our cultural fixation on personality and the necessity of its readability and coherence. For feminist critics,

this cultural obsession with the primacy of the self aligned with shifting popular anxieties about the threats posed by particular feminized traits and troublesome aspects of womanhood to result in the notion of the borderline. Christopher Bollas, for example, argued in *Hysteria* that hysteria was a response to sexual development, which, for women, is ‘inherently’ traumatic; BPD, he argued, was the new iteration of hysteria.

BPD’s primary relationship to the legacy of hysteria is, of course, its association with troubling/troubled womanhood and its reputation as a repository for traits that are associated with femininity and thus pathologized: as Cahn writes, “Borderline personality disorder has become a generic female malady resembling the earlier twentieth-century diagnosis of hysteria, which, according to historian Elizabeth Lunbeck, was used ‘less as a proxy for symptoms than as an epithet expressive of...[psychiatrists’] disdain for troublesome aspects of womanhood” (Cahn 259). Indeed, descriptions throughout the development of the disorder often rely on gendered language which echoes that used to describe hysteria and hysterics. For example, Kernberg’s depiction of borderlines as characterized by emotional lability and ‘overinvolvement’—including diffuse boundaries, a desire for oneness that resembles infantilism, and a “hysterical overinvolvement in relationships” including “childlike clinging” and a tendency towards an “infantile personality” (289)—reflects the commonly described traits shared by 19th century hysterics. And while he writes that “nonsophisticated observers usually consider [symptoms of BPD] in women as

typical feminine charm” (289), a psychoanalyst ‘knows better’: this is womanhood gone awry.

Adolph Stern’s description of the embodied nature of borderline personality disorder echoes images of the paralysis and debilitating body spasms said to be experienced by hysterics: “The picture of a psychic bleeder is a familiar one. Instead of a resilient reaction to a painful or traumatic experience, the patient goes down in a heap, so to speak, and is at the point of death. There is immobility, lethargy instead of action, collapse instead of a rebound...Paralysis rather than flight or fight is the reaction” (Stern 57). The association of BPD with a lack of bodily control has enjoyed a lengthy legacy, culminating in BPD’s frequent association with ‘transgressive’ embodied patterns of behavior such as self-cutting and other forms of self-mutilation, anorexia, bulimia, suicidal ‘gestures,’ BDSM, and promiscuity. Like hysterics, borderlines were historically also presumed to be lying or exaggerating about their experiences of trauma (Freud famously posited that female neurosis/hysteria were due in part to childhood sexual abuse, only to retract his statements later in the wake of widespread skepticism). Stern paints the picture, for example, of a group that performs its suffering and victimhood; the question as to whether or not that suffering actually occurred is presumed irrelevant: “In this class of patients, self-pity and self-commiseration, the presentation of a long suffering, helpless picture of the injured one, are regularly met; also what I would call wound-licking” (Stern 61).

In a broader sense, borderline personality disorder can be and has been read as a performance of hyperfemininity or femininity-in-grotesque, a response to gendered

expectations in excess. Like the everywoman whose ‘self’ is perpetually divided into actor and spectator, voyeur and object, in John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*, for example, the borderline is frequently described as ‘watching herself’ or ‘knowing what she is doing.’ The borderline (as cultural archetype) takes what Berger posits as a requirement of feminine social existence (a split subjectivity) to its extreme, thus exposing its underlying artificial nature: “The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has come at the cost of a woman’s self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her image of herself” (Berger 46). Berger’s depiction of womanhood as inherently split is reminiscent of the conflation with the borderline as master manipulator; she is ‘dramatic,’ always performing, seemingly consciously. Thus, the borderline is an example of womanhood that fails to enact a seamless performance, matching form to content.

The structuring view of borderline, as posited by Allan Horwitz, “emphasizes the power of cultural norms and social movements to shape symptoms” (Horwitz 130) without contending that “the underlying disorders themselves must be cultural products” (130), including responses to gender norms and cultural anxieties about gendered behaviors. Horwitz, and the structuring view, don’t question the authenticity of the vulnerability or the suffering that produce culturally specific disorders such as bulimia, anorexia, and narcissistic and borderline personality disorders. In the same vein, while feminist readings of BPD from the 1990s to contemporary scholarship are

fruitful in illuminating the cultural underpinnings that partially explain the unique stigma experienced by borderlines, I am careful (especially as someone without the disorder) to eschew easy or romanticized readings or representations of the ‘fluidity’ and ‘liberation’ (Cahn 117) of BPD, or of any disorder which, while its cultural origins and diagnostic solidity may be questioned and critiqued, nevertheless causes real suffering to real individuals. Instead, like Cahn, I resist the adoption of borderline-as-metaphor—as a metaphor for the poststructuralist eruption of the boundaries of the “unique self inherited from the Enlightenment and modernism” (Cahn); for disability, as purely a social construct, an unabashed celebration of liminality, or as narrative prosthesis (not to be represented in its embodied reality, but only to serve as a metaphor to be used by able-bodied/able-minded consumers); for a queering of the notion of sexual identity as “fixed” and “unified” (Cahn); and/or for a deliberate, embodied, extreme, and performative version of the suffering of ‘every woman’ under patriarchal rule. Cahn argues (and I agree) that this view (i.e., that BPD and other feminized disorders are examples of feminist ‘liberation’) obscures the material realities of living with psychic distress, co-opting the suffering of real women who exhibit the symptoms of borderline (even if the name itself deserves ongoing contestation).

Victor Turner’s take on liminality has served as fruitful for disability studies scholars and mad studies theorists alike, and has particularly salient implications in discussions of the borderline as a cultural archetype. In “Liminality and Disability: Rites of Passage and Community in Hypermodern Society,” Jeffrey Willett and Mary

Jo Deegan argue that “physical disability functions in modern society as a status betwixt and between everyday assumptions about ‘normal’ physical strength and functioning” (Deegan and Willett), rendering disabled individuals permanently liminal (with the liminal stage representing the transitional phase in a social rite of passage). The concept of liminality and the symbolic associations between liminars (liminal persons or ‘threshold people’) and disabled individuals have frequently been evoked in discussions of discourse around and representations of physical disability, but they are also particularly fruitful in characterizing the figure of the borderline.

The attributes of liminars, writes Turner, “are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (95); they are “neither this nor that, child nor adult, woman nor mother” (95). The borderline, similarly, according to her discursive reputation, is both child and hypersexual adult, lover and villain, and perpetually attempts to cross the boundaries that have been laid for her (in seducing her therapist, for example, or longing for oneness with an inappropriate love-object). Rites of passage—such as girl to woman—are disrupted in the borderline; she separates and longs for reunion, but remains stuck in the abyss, a permanent neophyte, unable to resolve her progressive stages to rejoin society. Like her etiology and her name, she is characterized entirely by ambiguity, inspiring discomfort in those who watch her. Like the borderline and like Kristeva’s abject subjects, liminality is linked to “death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon” (Turner 96), encompassing all

manner of transgressive states and multiplicities in the borderlands, neither this nor that.

Moreover, the cultural figure of the borderline is unique in that she refuses her status: Liminars may be “disguised as monsters” (Turner 95) and are expected to be humble until their status or societal role is returned to them, or until their new status is achieved and they can be restored to the community, but borderlines refuse submission, instead ‘manipulating’ full members of society, including those charged to lead them through the necessary rites (male partners, analysts), and threatening them with liminal status as well if they fall into her clutches. Moreover, the transgressions of borderlines are all the more scandalous because of their liminal status. If liminality as a ritual phase is meant to be performed as a return to structure or a reinforcement of it (Turner 201), the borderline does everything she can (it’s believed) to subvert it instead. Refusing a carnivalesque temporary reversal of socially appropriate roles only to be reinstated as socially appropriate woman, wife, mother, mistress, or daughter, the borderline instead ‘chooses’ (it seems, based on what are believed to be her manipulations) a life of liminality (a distinction between borderline liminality and the liminality experienced by physically disabled populations). Resisting pat categorization, she manipulates but is only ambiguously manipulable. She penetrates but is impenetrable. Unlike ‘normative’ neophytes in the liminal phase of ritual, borderlines bear the distinction of being ‘stably unstable,’ permanently diffuse, never to be reintegrated into society, and characterized most consistently as ambiguous and unknowable. Despite recent research that has solidified earlier hunches

about BPD being fully treatable, the figure of the borderline still occupies a liminal social status and represents as such in film and other cultural texts, due to her long history of stigmatization, representation as ‘difficult,’ and the ongoing presumption of borderlines’ untreatability and illegibility.

Borderlines on Film

Analyzing cinematic representations of BPD is not a way, as some suggest, of reflecting psychological realities about disorders or for medical students and psychology majors to form a realistic understanding of a given psychiatric disability and its most effective treatments (Bluestone 142), an approach which calls to mind a more widely disseminated version of Charcot’s medical theatre⁹ and his probings-in-every-sense of poor Augustine, his ‘model hysteric’ (Kuppers 200). Instead, like Charcot’s hysterics, borderlines on film allow us to trace the etiology of the disorder rather than to necessarily gain an understanding of the disorder itself, and certainly not of its lived experience.

Capturing the presumed core of BPD has been semantically and diagnostically difficult, and *Girl, Interrupted* and *Prozac Nation* demonstrate the parallel problem of pinning it down cinematically. The BPD film genre (what I will call the lengthy canon

⁹ Jean-Martin Charcot (1825 – 1893) was a French neurologist and professor of anatomical pathology who methodically photographed hysterics at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, with the aim of providing skeptical colleagues with visual proof of hysteria’s specific form.

The photographs were anything but objective documentation. Charcot required his subjects to pose as their hysterical "type" for his photographs. “Bribed by the special status they enjoyed in the purgatory of experimentation and threatened with transfer back to the inferno of the incurables, the women patiently posed for the photographs and submitted to presentations of hysterical attacks before the crowds that gathered for Charcot’s lecture’s” (Didi-Huberman). Thus, hysteria became feminized and performed as a specific type under Charcot’s construction.

of films that feature a woman who is explicitly or popularly believed to be 'borderline') is one that reflects cultural anxieties about womanhood, girlhood, sex, violence, castration and engulfment. If, as Laura Mulvey suggests in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," "the paradox of phallogentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated women to give order and meaning to its world" (Mulvey 34), the figure of the borderline lends a touch of horror to every film she appears in, as she threatens to disrupt the symbolic order with her disordered mind-body and the slippages between her performance of female dependency-in-excess, girlified victimhood that masks a predator, bisexuality that transcends or even dismisses the possibility of the male gaze, and her grotesque imitations of the male role (through mockery, gender-bending, insatiable sexual appetite or superior manipulation skills). Rather than adhering entirely to Mulvey's idea of the binary pairing of male, sadistic, scopophilic spectator and female object of that viewership-violence, films in the BPD genre can be read more accurately through Gaylyn Studlar's "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema." Studlar articulates a view of the 'masochistic aesthetic' that includes "fantasy, disavowal, fetishism, and suspense" (Studlar 205), stresses the pregenital period in the development of desire (fittingly, the period said to be disrupted in borderlines) rather than the phallic phase, and has as its central fantasy the "primal desire" (207) of " 'dual unity and the complete symbiosis between child and mother'" (207). This is unattainable for the masochist as well as the borderline, as the borderline as she is culturally conceived cannot reconcile even the parts of herself (child and mother) in order to become

whole. Thus, within the masochistic aesthetic, which I argue is the aesthetic of the BPD genre, in other films, this fantasy is elided entirely through escape into the symbolic order, whether through submission to analysis where disparate parts of the self can be, if not reconciled, appropriately compartmentalized, or through transformation by Foucauldian ‘disciplinary power’ and submission to the ‘technicalization’ of “the difficulties and contradictions of human life” and the ‘subjectification’ of the body—for example, through medicalization (psychiatric drugs, hospitalization, diagnosis, psychotherapy) administered by an external source rather than by oneself (cutting, substance use, manic writing, sexual pleasure, etc.). In the following two films, as a testament, instead, to the power of the biomedical model of mental illness, this fantasy solution of death (whether through realized death, gestured symbolism, medicalized submission, or total subjection to an idealized partner) is only narrowly avoided.

Self-“Help” and “Self”-Centered: *Girl, Interrupted* (1999); *Prozac Nation* (2001)

Girl, Interrupted and *Prozac Nation* share a number of attributes: Both films attempt to represent what was popularly deemed a growing ‘epidemic’ of mental illness in young women throughout the 1980s and 1990s; both feature protagonists whose real-life counterparts were diagnosed with BPD; both were based on bestselling nonfiction titles of the same names (the former based on a memoir by Susanna Kaysen, the latter by Elizabeth Wurtzel), the ‘mental illness memoir’ being an especially popular one at the time; and both films’ central female characters were hated by much of the press and the public. One critic began his review of *Prozac*

Nation in the following way: “The self-centered brat...makes life miserable for everyone around her, but there’s no reason the public should have to pay for the same privilege” (McCarthy). This was par for the course in terms of audience and media reactions to Winona Ryder’s Susanna and Christina Ricci’s Liz.

Popular hatred of the protagonists may originate partly from their reliance on the common and inaccurate trope of presenting BPD as fundamentally decadent—the diagnosis acting as a repository for petulant and spoiled young girls who want more than they deserve. Susanna is a middle-class graduating high school student who has an affair with a married professor, a friend of her mother’s, and whose family has the resources to provide her with a relatively lush institutional experience after a suicide attempt that’s presented as nonsensical and indulgent; Liz, while the daughter of an absentee father and an overbearing mother, is off to Harvard to study journalism, and her antics only risk her potential expulsion or her abandonment into a sterile office building with a well-meaning therapist, not incarceration. The films’ youthful white protagonists reflect the inaccurate cultural scripting of BPD as overwhelmingly young, white, and wealthy; rarely, if ever, has a film or play explored the possibility of a woman with BPD as a person of color, as poor or working class, or as explicitly and unambiguously queer or gay.

Cahn argues that characters with BPD are primarily cast as young, feminine, conventionally attractive “white women of means” (Cahn 103) due to their reputation as beautiful-but-deadly (thus needing to adhere to racial, gendered, and age- and class-based cultural standards about who qualifies as seductive without immediately being

read as ‘aggressive,’ ‘desperate,’ or ‘threatening’). This casting tendency reflects an inaccurate stereotype, as BPD diagnoses have been statistically shown many times to be equally distributed among women of different racial identities, gender identities, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Cahn 117).

Beyond the ‘overindulged borderline patient’ trope, the two-woman mirrored pairing is also key to both films but particularly to *Girl, Interrupted*: critics and psychologist commentators couldn’t decide (and still can’t, judging by the continued popularity of the dispute on message boards) whether Susanna or notorious crazy-girl canon Lisa (played by Angelina Jolie) was the ‘real’ borderline. The two-woman matrix is so popular in the BPD genre as to be nearly inextricable from cultural narratives involving characters who are explicitly or who come to be, in popular discourse, ‘borderline.’ The pairing takes the shape of one of two possible configurations: the borderline as ‘other’ and her wronged female counterpart as the prototype of ‘typical’ femininity, inscribing victimhood onto the female body deemed ‘appropriate’ (as in *Fatal Attraction* and *Welcome to Me*), or, more commonly, a pairing in which the more dominant and aggressive/sadistic ‘bisexual’ (as in queer and/or both masculine and feminine) woman (*Girl, Interrupted*; *Thirteen*; *Single White Female*; *Chloe*) draws a more naïve, girlified femme woman into her witchy shared circle for a series of psychosexual games. Circling each other like predator and prey (with neither sure which is which), boundaries collapse and identities (individual, sexual, and oedipal) become mapped onto one another. This attempted union calls to mind a distorted version of the Lacanian mirror stage, which borderlines are presumed

not to be able to resolve meaningfully or cleanly. Indeed, the women together, and the slippages between them—with each reflecting the other’s vulnerability and fragility as well as their potential for monstrosity—often come to represent either a frantic attempted return to the mother/child bond and its illusion of oneness, or, more commonly, borderline in its totality, as no one woman, it seems, could be portrayed as containing the multitudes necessary to be fully borderline. Many times, these pairings, at once reifying the conventional virgin/whore dichotomy and inching it towards a queerer alternative, lead us to ask, ‘Who’s the borderline?’ Who caught it and who gave it; who’s contagious? And what will be left when one of the two is, as they always are, destroyed? Film posters in particular emphasize these pairings as a toxic, erotically charged dualism, with images often featuring showdowns or mapping each other’s faces onto the other, that suggest at once that the two women are one, that they are fractured or ‘broken mirrors’ of one another, that they are sexually attracted to each other, and/or that they are ‘trapped’ with one another in a sort of funhouse mirror of codependence.

This two-woman pairing leads *Girl, Interrupted* (and, to a lesser extent, *Prozac Nation*) to a fraught relationship with queerness that must be resolved through analysis or triangulation. Lisa’s queerness (or at least her queer-suggestiveness) is evident from the start. Returning to the girls’ mental institution after one of many escapes, she has a Rosaline, her previous roommate Jamie, who committed suicide precisely because of Lisa’s disappearance, and she sets her eye on Susanna immediately as the next possible Juliet. Lisa’s and Susanna’s obvious mutual obsession, along with their

regular forays into heterosexual promiscuity, reflect the pathologization of queer female sexuality, as well as the association of bisexuality in particular with BPD. In *The B Word: Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television*, Maria San Filippo argues that “Susanna’s diagnostic relegation to a psychological borderland signals a bi-textual correlation between the film’s construction of two types of inbetweenness—in mental status and in sexual desires” (131). Indeed, every time the film inches towards a queer onscreen reality, it’s quickly obscured and/or chalked up to crazy-girl antics. On the way to a club after escaping the institution, the two girls kiss. Nothing’s said about it, and they both promptly fuck the first men they meet upon entering the club. At another point, Susanna’s boyfriend Toby attempts to break her out; she considers, but ultimately decides, “I want to leave, but not with you” (“Girl”), looking bewildered by what she’s saying herself. Of Susanna’s choice, Filippo writes, “Though draft-dodging and breaking out of Claymoore are here equated as means of escape from an intolerable situation, Susanna will all too eagerly run away soon thereafter—but with Lisa. To leave with Toby—even under lawbreaking circumstances—would be, for Susanna, the safe choice: an escape, but one leading back into a life of heteronormative conformity” (128). Her reluctance to leave with Toby could read as a rejection of promiscuity or an acceptance of institutional authority, but the film quietly offers a queerer (though homonormative, and thus free of ‘borderline’-related stigma) alternative. After all, her therapist (the one with whom she ultimately connects, and who gives her a pathway to wellness) is referred to at one

point as a dyke; Susanna is returning, not only to Lisa, but to a girls' institution, her "dyke" clinician, and the silent possibility of a future as one herself.

In *Prozac Nation*, the two-woman pairings are between Liz and her best friend, Ruby (Michelle Williams), and between Liz and her overbearing mother (Jessica Lange). In particular, Ruby is the love-object of Lizzie's borderline obsession; at one point, she declares, "Ruby gets it. She gets me. If she were a guy, everything would be perfect" ("Prozac"). Liz hooks up with Ruby's boyfriend, giving him a blowjob, instead, and can't explain why, though the connection is obvious to viewers. On the outs with Ruby, Lizzie attempts to resolve their separation, and their unrealizable tension, through triangulation, getting her own boyfriend instead. He becomes her new idealized object, one by whom she wants to be contaminated and to possess: "I understand now how people sometimes want to kill their lovers. Eat their lovers. Inhale the ashes of their dead lovers. It's the only way to possess another person" ("Prozac"). This attempt at oneness, as a replacement for Ruby, ends in an encounter with a more 'obvious' disability than Lizzie's, this time a developmental disability. Upon discovering that her boyfriend is his sister's caregiver, Lizzie becomes enraged, claiming he gets off on others' misery. It's unclear whether she's jealous of his sister for her ability to garner pity and understanding for her uncontrollable condition, or whether she worries that he's interested in Lizzie, too, only for her misery—to feed off of it. Regardless, abandoned by her replacement love-object, Lizzie gets a female analyst and returns (forever trapped in the two-woman unrealizable matrix) to Ruby and her mother—dominant in the former relationship, submissive in the latter.

The 'borderline' (as diagnosis and as concept) in both films is ultimately resolved through a championing of the biomedical model of mental illness and the necessity of the disciplinary power of the asylum. In *Girl, Interrupted*, Turner's concepts of liminality and liminars and Erving Goffman's idea of total institutions as detailed in *Asylums* (or what Foucault refers to in *Discipline and Punish* as complete and austere institutions) converge in the body of the borderline (either Susanna or Lisa, depending on who you ask), in the charged, queer-loaded space between Susanna and Lisa, and in the girls' institution where Susanna is required to stay. Within the institution itself, there is an alternative space where much of the ultimate reckoning that defines Susanna's eventual recovery takes place: In the "bowels of the hospital" (Cross 48) is a basement where the patients regularly gather to engage in taboo activities (gossiping, smoking, drinking, and reading each other's diaries and their own diagnostic files). It's the others'-other of the asylum, a performative sacred space where liminars can find a crude form of *communitas* otherwise unavailable to them in normative society (theirs being the asylum proper). Their madness is 'contained' within the asylum, but roams free in the basement—Lisa's favorite place, in accordance with her role as the voice of the abject, subversion, and transgression. Accordingly, it's only when Susanna decides to escape the hospital and to submit to patriarchal authority (at least in that the asylum itself represents disciplinary power, which includes patriarchal rule) that she rushes to exit the basement, extricating herself forcefully from the 'borderline' (both Lisa and the basement space) to become, for better or for worse, the kind of submissive neophyte who gets the hell out of this

place—a place Lisa needs “to feel alive” (Cross 48). Writes Susan Cross in *Cineaste*, “She may have a ‘borderline personality disorder’ now, but she can step over that border if she wants and become an ‘orderly’ adult of her own creation” (Cross 48). Recognizing the abject in Lisa, or Lisa-as-abject, Susanna denies it within herself, which is the first step in her recovery under the linear biomedical model. When the girls gather at night to secretly read their medical files aloud to each other, commiserating over their pathologizing narratives, Susanna shares the description of BPD. Lisa scoffs, “That’s everybody,” indicating that madness is normal: a spectrum. To ‘recover’ from the borderline, however, Susanna has to admit that she is different and does not want to be, thus requiring her submission to the treatment process and her conversion into a ‘docile mind.’

Indeed, despite Susanna’s eventual assertion that she is now a recovered borderline, stamped and approved, her recovery only takes place in opposition to Lisa. To her therapist, she wonderingly offers, “Lisa thinks it's a gift...that it lets you see the truth” (“Girl”), meaning, of course, madness; the reply: “Lisa's been here for eight years.” The looming specter of the ‘total institution’ or of permanent liminality is enough to scare Susanna into a profession of faith in the recovery/biomedical model. So when Susanna attempts to escape the sacred space of the basement to the contained world of the asylum itself, Lisa confronts her: “You know, there are too many buttons in the world. There's too many buttons, and they're just...There's way too many just begging to be pressed...And it makes me wonder. You know, it really makes me fucking wonder...why doesn't anybody ever press mine?” The borderline, it appears,

wants nothing more than to be manipulated herself; why, she wonders, is she the one who has to be electrifying? Who has to seduce? In Lisa, the abject speaks: What was electrifying because taboo and ‘cast off,’ Susanna now sees as repulsive and wants to expel from herself. Boundaries between self and other become less collapsed: Lisa has become part of Susanna, and she must now cast that part of herself off in order to escape permanent liminal status: “Because you're dead already, Lisa! No one cares if you die, Lisa...because you're dead already...Maybe the whole world is stupid and ignorant. But I'd rather be in it. I'd rather be fucking in it...than down here with you” (“Girl”). Thus, Susanna’s skepticism of the biomedical model dissipates along with her passion for Lisa.

Lizzie, too, has a fraught relationship with therapy; initially, she claims she’s only there to be able to write again. Unlike Susanna, who begins to write obsessively only when she begins speaking to her therapist—indicating that access to language and the symbolic order is available to women ‘in their condition’ only through the process of analysis—Lizzie writes manically, then not at all, and seeks therapy to find a balance between the two. Later, when she begins taking medication, Lizzie never develops more than a deeply ambivalent relationship to Prozac or therapy. Like Susanna, Lizzie has a final confrontation with the possibility of her future, with borderline problematically being presented as a ‘choice.’ At her therapist’s office, she escapes to the bathroom, breaks a glass, and is poised to cut herself, only to be caught by her therapist and her young daughter. Confronted by a (re)productive future, as well as the possibility of permanent liminality and institutionalization that would

inevitably result if she put glass to skin, she continues with her medication instead, though she never expresses any further confidence in its usefulness or in the ‘truth’ it has to offer her. Confessing her doubts about the efficacy or ethics of the biomedical model in therapy, Lizzie muses, “I have this personality. It’s fucked up, but it’s me. I don’t know who I am anymore. And I see myself becoming this person who does the right thing...who says the right thing...but that's not me” (“Prozac”). Her disability, she argues, is a part of her, and not necessarily a shameful one. The pills, contend her therapist, will give her breathing space—perhaps to start writing again. And she does: “only now,” she says, “it wasn’t as if my life depended on it” (“Prozac”), a conclusion that could only be regarded as ambiguously hopeful.

Autoethnography and the Borderline: *Girl in Need of a Tourniquet*

The same year, 2013, that has been defined as marking ‘the mad turn’ within disability studies (referring to the increasing amount of scholarly work on psychiatric disability and representations of madness), Merri Lisa Johnson released her memoir, *Girl in Need of a Tourniquet*, which Johnson and Robert McRuer describe as “a queer/crip read—a claiming, an inhabiting—of borderline personality” (Johnson and McRuer 129), a memoir that “sutured together many types of discourse (medical texts, self-help books, fairy-tale, personal email, autobiographical memory) to evoke a stuttering, self-interrupting flood of ways of telling her particular story instead of adhering to one voice or paradigm of illness narrative” (Johnson and McRuer 129). Johnson’s memoir and subsequent work with McRuer marked one of the first major attempts to fold BPD into disability theory and queer studies; previously, scholarly

attention to it outside of the social sciences was limited primarily to feminist critiques of its etiology.

Also in that year, in the same special issue of the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* in which ‘cripistemology’ (a marriage between crip theory, reconsidered ways of ‘knowing’ disability history outside the existing models, and Eve Sedgwick’s epistemology of the closet) was coined, Anna Mollow coined the terms ‘criphistemologies’ and ‘undocumented disabilities,’ both of which she ties in with Showalter’s reading of contemporary ‘hysterias’ to refer to those disorders, from environmental illnesses to chronic pain to depression and, yes, BPD, that are routinely hystericized—that is, treated with disdain, skepticism, or dismissal by both medical practitioners and the public (Showalter 4). The term ‘undocumented disabilities’ is meant to evoke the shame of ‘not having your papers,’ of constantly being asked to prove your legitimacy, and to prove that you are suffering adequately and thus deserving of acknowledgement of your crip identity. Often, these disorders are also feminized or associated with women or ‘the feminine,’ given the history of underestimating, dismissing, or pathologizing women’s pain and of doubting their self-narratives. Critiquing the frequent lack of attention to hysteria and its legacy within disability studies scholarship, Mollow advocates for a crippling of hysteria, “demonstrating this concept’s profound significance for disabled people and its instrumental role in our oppression” (Mollow 187). Most notably, Mollow argues for the significance of foregrounding suffering in disability ethnographies, thus critiquing the resistance of ‘the medical model’ to many scholars within disability studies. This

stalwart refusal to admit to suffering, she says, may serve to ward off pity and disdain for physically disabled individuals (who are inevitably presumed to be suffering, and suffering badly, whether they are or not), but the same refusal actively harms those with undocumented disabilities, rendering them even more invisible. If reclaiming and expressing suffering is the only means of legitimizing undocumented disabilities, Mollow argues, it's worth risking pity. Like Cahn and others, Mollow seeks to explore the question of who belongs in the disability category and who is 'allowed' to suffer legitimately (Glover 204).

If BPD—the unrepresentable—and other invisible or 'undocumented' disabilities are to be represented by disabled people themselves—to be criphystemologized rather than rehysericized—what medium will accomplish this most effectively? The closely linked practices of performative writing and autoethnography are one possible answer; drama therapy/performative autoethnography are another. The aforementioned *Girl in Need of a Tourniquet* serves an example of performative writing as scholarship and disability autoethnography/life writing, and the musical *Borderline*, as an example of what can go awry when psychiatrically disabled individuals are not foregrounded in attempts to represent their narratives in performance.

Johnson's memoir is an instance of performative writing as articulated by Ronald J. Pelias in "Performative Writing as Scholarship." According to Pelias, performative writing "expands the notions of what constitutes disciplinary knowledge" (Pelias 417); "features lived experience, telling, iconic moments that call forth the

complexities of human life” (418); “rests on the belief that the world is not given but constructed, composed of multiple realities” (418); “often evokes identification and empathic responses” (419); “takes as its goal to dwell within multiple perspectives, to celebrate an interplay of voices” (419); “turns the personal into the political and the political into the personal” (420); and “participates in relational and scholarly contexts” (420). In addition, if Mollow seeks to crip hysteria by invoking criphistemologies in her work, Johnson’s performative writing seeks to crip borderline personality (she leaves off ‘disorder’ in the title as a response to its pathologization and stigma). Her account of borderline personality is a prototypical attempt to, as Mollow suggests, foreground suffering as a necessary and even radical act in the process of ‘uncloseting’ an undocumented disability.

Writes Pelias, “Although often written in the first person, [performative writing] presents what Trinh Minh-ha calls a ‘plural I,’ an ‘O’ that has the potential to stand in for many ‘I’s” (419). This is certainly true of Johnson’s work: with her style that repeatedly speeds up and slows down, existing outside of normative autobiographical structure, the personal becomes collective. As in much of disability life writing, the deeply individualized nature of her narrative of a life-deemed-liminal is precisely what opens it up to serving as a point of connection for other lives lived ‘in the border,’ allowing others to recognize themselves amongst the plurality of I’s. On the significance of personal disability narrative and the continued crippling of the autobiography genre, G. Thomas Couser writes in “Disability, Life Narrative, and Representation”: “...disabled people have been hyper-represented in mainstream

culture; they have not been disregarded so much as they have been subjected to objectifying notice in the form of mediated staring” (Couser 456). The borderline, indeed, has been hyper-represented: She, like the Freudian hysteric, and like those with many other disabilities, has certainly known no lack of interest, having served as a siren for many lovers who have subsequently cried ignorance, a muse for filmmakers who have tried to pin her down like a (madame) butterfly, the hot-button subject line in more than a few message boards and MRA blogs about tortured love affairs and messy divorces, and the subject of a great deal of debates and the alleged cause of a lot of hand-wringing in the psychological community. The disorder and its definition have been excruciatingly overworked: probed, prodded, refashioned and redefined as much as one of the bodies of Charcot’s girls. BPD has been described as a dumping-ground and a catchall for our fears about women’s and girls’ bodies—and even worse, their minds—as well as a convenient way to obscure uncomfortable truths about male sexuality, such as its own tendency towards masochism and the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse perpetrated against boys (now estimated as nearly equal to rates of sexual abuse against girls). Borderlines have, however, only rarely represented themselves on a large scale; like other people with disabilities, then, they have often been narratively reduced to tragedy or metaphor.

BPD is especially ripe for analysis and exposure through performative writing, and lends itself inherently to its major traits as Pelias describes them. The interplay of voices that Pelias describes evokes the non-cohesive ‘self’/ ‘selves’ of the borderline, who has often been perceived as shifty, caught in a permanent state of identity

diffusion, of the kind of ‘trying on of masks’ normally associated with adolescence and young adulthood. For an autoethnographic and performative account of the borderline, the multiplicity and multivocality that characterize performative writing may arise from disparate ‘voices’ within the borderline herself, from reflections of/on the discourses (scholarly, scientific, psychological, cultural, social) that have created her by giving her a name by which to identify herself, and/or from the ‘others’ that she is presumed to mimic, to mirror, or to take within herself in the hope of becoming one.

Johnson’s account of her disorder and the style she employs to narrativize it mimic the embodied experience of the disorder itself, as well as the stigma of harboring the borderline label. *Girl in Need of a Tourniquet* is characterized by intertextuality and multivocality, peppered throughout with interruptions, contradictions, asides, and allusions. In a passage near the memoir’s opening, Johnson describes the purpose of the book and her writing process:

It was a book about heartbreak. IT WAS A BOOK ABOUT OBSESSION. It was a book about a woman who drove me crazy. THE WOMAN WAS MY LOVER. The woman was my mother. The woman was ME.

No.

It was a book about vicious introjects, implicit memories, and relentless reenactments of trauma and recovery. IT WAS A BOOK ABOUT GENDER, POWER, AND NARRATIVE, ABOUT PERSONALITY, PAIR-BONDS, AND THE POLITICS OF DIAGNOSIS. It was a book about Zen mindfulness, neural pathways, and family mysteries. IT WAS A BOOK ABOUT SOUL-WRENCHING BLUES, BRIGHT RED SCREAMS, LOVE DOGS, GRIEF WORK, AND HAPPINESS FILLING THE LUNGS LIKE THE HOT WHITE RIOT OF GARDENIAS.

The book was not a book but a symptom.

My words came out in the wrong dis/order. I couldn’t make it write. (Johnson 21-22)

Like the protagonists of many of film's BPD women, Johnson can't write/make it right: So instead, she deliberately writes in a way that's dis/ordered (echoing Cixous' *écriture féminine*), claiming the ruptured and fractured nature of her form of meaning-making rather than attempting to force it into a linear narrative structure. Particularly in passages like this one, that are meant to narrativize some aspect of the self or to generalize about the 'who' behind Johnson's memoir, Johnson makes use of multiple character styles (varying from bold to italic to underlined within the span of a single thought process, and shifting between fully capitalized or not at all), font styles, and sizes, emphasizing that her personal insights are demonstrably nonlinear, contradicting themselves and interrupted with various forms of discourse: psychiatric texts and self-help books that define her diagnosis and who 'she' should be ("neural pathways," "vicious introjects"), unabashed romanticizations of the disorder, and poetic metaphors and similes ("happiness filling the lungs like the hot white riot of gardenias") that are often more truthful than the most straightforward and coherent depictions of the borderline. Simply, form mimics content, even performs content. In this way, Johnson's 'self' becomes legible as it really is, rather than either masquerading as falsely coherent or remaining the mystery that BPD selves are presumed to be. Johnson, far from empty, is full of selves, and all of them have a voice here.

Also like her cinematic predecessors, Johnson has a female lover/antagonist/mother figure/abuser/victim: a fellow professor, a bisexual colleague named Emily who cheats on her wife with Johnson in a clumsy, too-much-can't-

breathe affair over the course of two years. Emily doesn't have BPD, nor is it clear what her motivations are, as she's seen primarily through the lens of Johnson's suffering, but Johnson's account neither eviscerates Emily nor absolves her of being responsible for her own agency in their long-term, destructive affair.

Here, the two-woman model is a reflection of a queer, material reality rather than a narrative prosthetic. Moreover, it is Johnson's suffering to which we are privy, rather than the suffering of her partners; resisting both the BPD abuser/innocent victim trope and the BPD-as-fragile, Johnson is able to shed some light on the darkest corners of codependence and toxicity without implicating her disorder as the sole source of that toxicity. For her part, though Emily isn't demonized by Johnson's account, we do get a window into the cracks in her own story: She occasionally cheats on both her wife and Johnson with a male colleague as well, and emerges repeatedly out of the wreckage of the latest conflict to coax Johnson out of bed and into her own, out of motivations that are difficult to parse. Ultimately, in a twist that both reifies and defies the usual narrative arc of 'the BPD affair' (siren seduction followed by one-sided destruction), Emily does leave her wife for Johnson; it's only then that Johnson can cut the cord, leave Emily herself, and begin to carve out a path for herself that isn't so overwhelmingly focused on the latest inappropriate love-object. Both are temporarily destroyed, but neither is the enemy; the affair was a symptom of multiple forms of dis/order, not BPD alone. Moreover, in another memoirist, such a focus on personal suffering might appear solipsistic. Instead, Johnson's self-focus in the face of the overwhelming 'clinical evidence against her' as a borderline operates less as

selfishness or self-aggrandizement than as a necessary form of reclamation of the disorder from the clutches of experts alone, thus functioning as an example of the purpose Couser posits for effective disability autoethnography; that is, for “disabled people [to] counter their historical subjection by occupying the subject position” (Couser 458).

Johnson’s experience of her ultimate BPD diagnosis, moreover, resists the usual narrative that the labeling of BPD is wholly negative, enacting violence on its object: While she is affected by the stigma associated with BPD and other Axis II disorders, Johnson chooses to learn about herself first through the lens of BPD and its sordid history of depictions and controversy as an intellectual exercise rather than a painful one. Viewed through a crip lens, and echoing Mollow’s argument that claiming suffering is an integral aspect of affirming undocumented disabilities as valid, it is precisely Johnson’s recognition and acknowledgement of herself ‘as’ borderline that allows her to own her pain as valid. The label of BPD ‘gives her her papers,’ gives her a narrative arc, and gives her a clothesline on which to clip various parts of herself that previously seemed disjointed and nonsensical. Far from denying the abject within herself or locating it in the body of a love-object, Johnson incorporates it into her writing, integrating rather than attempting to purge.

Building on and playing off of Berger’s notion of the perpetually self-surveying woman (Johnson-as-borderline characterizing borderline-as-herself), Johnson personifies borderline personality itself, making her into a character with a great deal of aplomb. Of her diagnosis, Johnson writes:

Some people believe borderline personality disorder should be renamed to shift the focus from a spoiled identity to a constellation of symptoms. Borderline personality wears a red miniskirt and smokes magic cigarettes with boys who dream of being wild and wake with cold sweats. She is a WET WILD SEED...Unstable, mercurial, self-injurious, contradictory, seductive, clingy, the term BORDERLINE PERSONALITY has borderline personality. It is in crisis. It is poised to self-destruct.” (196)

Be the perpetually self-surveying woman, Johnson personifies borderline personality itself; she emphasize ‘her’ (borderline’s) alleged sexually seductive power (“boys who dream of being wild and wake with cold sweats” (196) and evokes the familiar image of the borderline femme fatale, cigarettes, red miniskirt and all. In doing this and in listing many of the negative traits commonly associated with BPD (“unstable,” “self-injurious,” and “clingy”), Johnson holds her disability at arm’s length—noting both the slippages and the gaps between BPD and its representations, the slipperiness of the term itself rather than the disorder characterized as “in crisis” and “poised to self-destruct”—rather than to examine it critically, while owning the pain it causes her. In this way, her work adheres to Couser’s definition of disability autobiography as “a form of autoethnography, as Mary Louise Pratt has defined it: ‘instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with [read: contest] the colonizer’s own terms’” (Couser 458). Johnson engages with her assigned ‘spoiled identity,’ picking out the parts of it she likes, owning the suffering causes by those she doesn’t, and critiquing the parts she doesn’t identify with or finds problematic. In other words, her ‘I’ is a starting point, not a stigmatized destination: “The ‘I’ of performative writing might best be seen as a geographical marker, a ‘here’ rather than a ‘self.’ In short, the self becomes a positional possibility” (Pelias 419).

Girl in Need of a Tourniquet can be read as a response to the aforementioned filmic representations of BPD as well as the clinical and cultural rhetoric that have historically surrounded the diagnosis. Delving into the primary critiques of the BPD diagnosis by feminist critics and the mad movement, Johnson lends all of them credence but espouses none of them wholesale (just like a borderline). She concludes for herself that her own BPD diagnosis can be a source of meaning and purpose, a sort of platform for her own creativity and healing—a starting point rather than a destination, but a useful one nonetheless (again, calling to mind Mollow’s discussion of undocumented disabilities). Unlike Kaysen at the close of her memoir, Johnson will never be a ‘recovered borderline,’ but she is, she says, a self-identified borderline who accepts both the positives and negatives of her disability. This conclusion itself appears contradictory, as Johnson takes time to examine and validate each of the criticisms so frequently leveled at the category of borderline as an effective one to begin with; in embracing the discursive contradictions that complicate her diagnosis, she again enacts a ‘borderline’ way of being and knowing that echoes Lennard Davis’ and David Morris’ notion of the “terrain of the biocultural” (“the intersection among the cultural, social, political, technological, medical, and biological” (Davis, *The End of Normal 2*), especially as it pertains to disability) and Davis’ concept of dismodernism (“a view of identity that remains within the orbit of postmodernism but eschews the fantasy of power and agency associated with the supposedly transgressive body” (Davis, *The End of Normal 16*). It is Johnson’s informed acknowledgement of, but not submission to, her disorder and its political and gendered underpinnings that,

rather than lending coherence to her ‘self,’ allows her to accept the incomplete and the ‘not whole’ as typical and natural, a position that elides both the social and medical models to rest more comfortably within the biocultural perspective of disability.

Performance, the Borderline, and *Borderline*

Other recent representations of borderline personality disorder have been undertaken under the umbrella of drama therapy. One such project, produced by drama therapist, playwright and professor Robert Landry (head of the drama therapy department at NYU), culminated in a production of a new musical, *Borderline*, at NYU’s Steinhardt School in 2014. The musical spawned an unlikely mini-media frenzy of disparate opinions on the unorthodox nature of its fruition: the media coverage of the event and its process of creation is telling as a snapshot of the ongoing discomfort (within the medical community and society at large) with psychosocially disabled individuals’ ability to represent themselves, as well as how many cultural conversations around BPD still manage to miss the mark.

Borderline made use of the mirroring, two-woman trope so common as to be virtually inextricable from representations of BPD. Herein lies the primary controversy: The ‘other woman’ in *Borderline* was neither a lover herself or a lover’s spurned wife, but the real-life therapist for over a decade of the play’s resident borderline, Jill Powell. Despite this difference, coverage of the production adheres to many of the two-woman template’s tropes, such as dividing the two female leads into dichotomies (virgin/whore, classy/trashy, demure/unhinged) common to representations of womanhood in general and oversimplified associations of BPD with

concepts like splitting and black-and-white thinking: “It was not easily recognizable as therapy, these two women screaming at each other, their faces inches apart, during a rehearsal in a basement space in Greenwich Village” (Kilgannon 2014). Critic Corey Kilgannon continues in *The New York Times*, “The patient, a blond woman with spiky hair and spiky heels: Jill Powell, 49, an actress who had fallen on hard times” (Kilgannon 2014). By contrast, “The other woman, more reserved in dress and demeanor, was Cecilia Dintino, 56, a clinical psychologist” (Kilgannon 2014). Separated into pat, binaristic class-, sexuality-, comportment-, and appearance-based categorizations, Powell and Dintino form the classic borderline matrix, with Powell as ‘other’ and spectacle to Dintino’s representation of the biomedical model of psychosocial disability, along with the appropriate performance of womanhood. Unable to attend the performance, I became aware of *Borderline* through media coverage and had the opportunity to interview Jill Powell via Skype.

Billed as unconventional therapy necessary to treat the likes of such an uncontainable and explosive patient as Powell, criticism in defense of the work cast Powell as messy and wayward and Dintino as the patient combination of mother, medicine cabinet, and bosom buddy: “Ms. Powell’s treatment has hardly been conventional, and can range from actions like hugging to screaming profanities. With roles that have included friend, big sister and lifeline, Dr. Dintino has fielded numerous late-night phone calls from Ms. Powell in suicidal situations” (Kilgannon 2014). Continuing in this vein, “Dr. Landy said, ‘With certain forms of mental illness that do not respond to conventional treatment, we need a more radical approach, which

therapeutic theater can provide” (Kilgannon 2014). Other media outlets criticized the approach, calling the process irresponsible and unethical on the part of the therapist and selfish on the part of the producer and playwright, due to the usual protocol discouraging outside socialization between patient and therapist.

Powell, for her part, tells a radically different story: she felt (and, if her claims are true, was) exploited by the process. Publicly criticizing the ‘therapeutic’ aspect of the production as well as the production itself on a blog post, her complaints echo many of the criticisms leveled by patients, feminist scholars, and trauma therapists at stigmatization by the mental health community, disparaging language in the DSM, and sexism, ableism and misunderstanding in film representations of ‘the borderline.’ She begins her critique of the rehearsal process and the production itself with a critique of what she read as the hypersexualization of her character by Landy, who, she claims, “...wrote a script that leaned far too much in the direction of sexuality and gender fluidity. I’m guessing he thought it would bring a level of sensual heat to the show and he enjoyed writing about it” (Powell). Echoing the fraught, push-and-pull relationship between clinician and borderline patient so often evoked in earlier representations, Powell also claims to have been involved in a power struggle with Landy over what she read as an unproductive focus on her sexuality and its ‘deviance’ (as lesbian). She’s gay, she writes, and that is frankly irrelevant:

My singing a lyric like one gem Dr. Landy wrote, ‘My manhood is like a tree in the forest,’ all the while doing a Tango with my therapist, was incorrect, inappropriate and flat out, had nothing to do with being Borderline...THE BORDERLINE SPOKE UP! Well it did not go over well and there was a bit of a pissing contest if you will. His writing and My story. My truth. (Powell)

Unlike in Johnson's narrative, Powell's queerness here (according to her) is plumbed for its titillating implications, erotic currency, and its associations with sexual 'deviance' or 'confusion.' Her sexuality is not here a material reality, but a metaphor for her overall non-normativity and her tendency (as evaluated by Landy) towards excess and hedonism. Though the current DSM definition of BPD doesn't include sexual behavior, interests, or orientation as a diagnostic criterion, the legacy of those associations lives on, even in clinical diagnoses and analysis, and certainly in performance.

In addition, Powell writes about her intense emotional reaction to the process of exposing her 'self' in performance; due in part to her disorder, she was homeless at the time, and vulnerable due to a family death and the return of the shadow of an unstable relationship, but still expected to perform at her best at all rehearsals for no pay while her therapist and the professor were paid for their efforts and went home to comfortable settings (she alleges they never tried to locate resources for her, though the rehearsal process was intense, demanding, and lengthy).

Powell also alleges that she participated in a lecture about BPD at NYU with Landy and Dintino where she was the primary speaker, but was not paid, while they were, due to her tenuous position as the object of analysis rather than the subject of education and their position as her therapeutic team. Thus, she was unable even to parlay her disability into currency as, say, a freakshow performer might (a situation in which the exchange is clearer: your freakery for my money), as the performance and its surrounding process were concealed under the veil of 'drama therapy' and

‘therapeutic theatre,’ as well as higher education. This was good, she was told, for *her*; her representation on stage was part of her rehabilitation, a service provided to her rather than rendered by her. Accusing Landy and Dintino of recklessness, Powell shares, “I ended up in the hospital and they were going to call off the play. I begged them no. They then realized, oh wow, our actor whose real story this is and is being told in real time as she lives it, is a REAL FUCKING BORDERLINE. Holy crap” (Powell). Powell’s story raises many ethical questions about, certainly, representations of BPD, but also about the right of psychosocially disabled populations to represent themselves narratively, and about the role and purpose of therapeutic theatre/drama therapy under capitalism (a question arguably raised by the necessarily capitalist enterprise of therapy to begin with, as the two-person ‘theatre’ of therapy requires the ongoing performance of psychosocial disability and of gradual, linear healing by one of its actors in order to justify its continued run).

Powell complains about her mischaracterization at the hands of those posturing as her healers, as well as within the *Times* articles about her. From Kilgannon’s perspective, “In rehearsals Ms. Powell crackles with manic energy, playing herself. Her emotions have run so high that some rehearsals have stalled, or even been canceled, ‘so people could recover and pull themselves together,’” the show’s director, Dave Mowers, said’ (Kilgannon). Here, ironically, the dramatic realities of psychic distress—a hospitalization and homelessness, for starters, according to Powell—are obscured by Kilgannon, the show’s creators, or both. Though their musical and its reception as therapeutically productive rely on Powell’s disability and its persistent

shadow of ‘drama’ or its possibility, the actual dramas associated with a life with BPD are less savory and less in line with their marketing campaign. These are the kind of dramas that are more difficult to sensationalize, eroticize, or stage, and they also deviate from the positive narrative of cutting-edge forms of healing that the creators (and, seemingly, the critic) were trying to present. Better to keep the realities vague and save the best for the staged performance, in a controlled environment, in which audience and other can face one another through the mediator-middleman of the therapist/doctor (unlike in disability autoethnographies or performances curated/written/produced by disabled artists themselves) rather than risk being caught up too unsettlingly with the *borderline*.

For her part, Powell retorts that during the interview, “Both Cecilia and Robert were pushing their agenda of ‘Therapeutic Theatre’ so hard that I couldn’t get a word in. I got up because Cecilia kept cutting me off and paced and unfortunately Corey took that as ‘manic energy’ which actually is not me at all. That was me using my skills as to not cut Cecilia off as she so rudely did me, and say what I really wanted to say which I now have” (Powell). Powell’s account of her experience working on the production evokes the familiar sense of her disabled mind/body being ‘used’ (only to be discarded and its resulting material realities, such as financial need, a lack of housing security, and extreme stress, ignored) that is described by Mitchell and Snyder in their work on narrative prosthesis; while the play depends entirely on that same disability as its source of a narrative arc and passionate emotionality, Powell herself is silenced. The crux of the problem, indeed, with *Borderline* and many other

representations within the BPD genre, seems to be that the borderline (with all of her affective baggage, yearnings and ‘drama’ that make for a damn good story) is necessary for the ‘show’ to go on, but is excluded and obscured in both process and product. This is exemplified at one point, meant to be darkly humorous, in Landy’s musical, in which Powell and her therapist discuss the possibility of her suicide: “Ms. Powell promises Dr. Dintino in the show that she will not kill herself, even though she adds, ‘I want to die.’ ‘But if you die,’ Dr. Dintino answers, ‘we’ll have no play’” (Kilgannon).

Representations of BPD, and how we read them and have read them historically, can serve as snapshots of how we ‘read’ sexuality, womanhood, girlhood, and how they should be seen. Its ongoing relevance is historically bound up in discursive tangles concerning trauma, gender, subjectivity, and the self. The cast-off girl of BPD film imagery draws us in by appealing to our desire to care; but, she sits in an abject space—her abjectness makes her an object in need of care while at the same time cautions us to turn away. She is sexualized, coddled, and reviled at once. She is cast-off and we wonder (alongside her) if we or someone can save her. So it is interesting to see more recent theatrical productions that have shown a willingness on the part of theatre makers to reconsider former conceptions of this much-maligned psychiatric disability. *Delay Detach*, a 2015 production at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival written by Joanna Alpern, for example, used the two-woman BPD genre ‘template’ to explore the boundaries of adolescent female friendship, the impact of disability on long-term intimacy (including how it can create a sense of *communitas* or

shared loyalty), our collective fears about being vulnerable to disability as we age, and women's shifting roles over a lifetime. Rather than cast-off girls serving as a repository for audience desires and fears, these recent productions seem to point toward expression and intimacy. Alpern's play, along with Johnson's memoir and several other recent examples of autoethnographic explorations of BPD (girded by a growing interest in psychiatric/psychosocial disability within the umbrella of disability theory), are beginning to press against the stigmatizing cultural boundaries that BPD has, untrue to form, never been able to cross or at least to comfortably inhabit.

Chapter Four

Trauma in Emilie Autumn's Neo-Victorian Performances

Just as the conceptualization of memory and forgetting were at the core of writings on hysteria in the late nineteenth century, so recent writings continue to debate the ways we are to remember hysteria, those who supposedly suffered from it, and those who supposedly tried to understand or alleviate that suffering. The focus on maladies of memory forced nineteenth century physicians to consider what it meant to have a healthy memory and a normal relation to the past. What does it mean to suffer from the past, to be pained by memory? How is it that some people manage not to suffer from the past, to orient themselves properly in relation to the loss of the present?

— Michael S. Roth, *Memory, Trauma, and History: Essays on Living with the Past*

“Emilie Autumn is an American singer-songwriter known for a couple of unusual things besides her music,” music journalist Joe Marvilli writes in a 2009 edition of *The Consequence of Sound*. “First off, she eschews the typical rock devices of guitar and piano for an electric violin and a harpsichord. Secondly, she appears to be legitimately psychotic” (Marvilli). Marvilli quickly qualifies his earlier assessment of Autumn’s psychological state by softening his depiction: “Alright, maybe legitimately isn’t the right word. But if Autumn’s stage presence is just an act, it’s pretty damn effective” (Marvilli).

Six years later, in 2015, Lilian Min spoke to pop star Melanie Martinez for *HelloGiggles*; this journalist’s discomfort, too, was readily apparent: “With boldly contrasting split-dyed hair, dark lipstick, and a penchant for pastel-hued clothes, the 20-year-old Martinez feels like she’s in costume, and she partly is, though this is her off-duty look as well” (Min). She rationalizes Martinez’s unconventional look by pinning it as something of a publicity stunt. Min elaborates that Martinez’s

“fascination with toy sounds has her committing (for now) to an unsettlingly infantile aesthetic; she sucks pacifiers and plays with dolls in promotional images and videos” (Min). But Min quickly changes course again, warning readers not to be “fooled into thinking that she’s merely recycling or bastardizing girlish imagery” (Min). And though Martinez says explicitly that her Cry-Baby preadolescent alter ego is here to stay throughout her music career, at least as a secondary character in each album, Min paints Martinez’s self-girlification primarily as a temporary shtick or farce.

Autumn and Martinez hail from very different backgrounds, yet often receive similar treatments from music journalists. In countless other interviews with both artists, journalists similarly rewrite both artists’ stories, even actively contradicting quotes that readers can see for themselves. Autumn is a classically trained violinist with a cult following who eventually created the steampunk/dark cabaret/glam rock mashup microgenre of Victoriaindustrial music; Martinez is a mainstream indie pop star who got her start on *The Voice* and went on to helm every aspect of her successful but controversial concept album, *Cry Baby*, including serving as art director for all 13 music videos. Both artists’ girlsonas are rooted in a lived experience and deeply held aesthetic which I will explore in my next two chapters; yet, both musicians’ girlsonas are often dismissed as performative affectations.

In particular, Autumn’s professed history of psychiatric hospitalization and suicide attempts, as well as her performative inhabitation of stigmatized girls, both real and fictional, throughout history—Ophelia, Charcot’s hysterics, and Alice among them—is generally portrayed by journalists as just one example of her performative

hodgepodge of Gothic Lolita, steampunk, and neo-Victorian burlesque antics. And while Martinez repeatedly states that her apartment is decked out like a human-sized dollhouse with stuffed animals everywhere, sports necklaces made of doll parts to casual interviews, and is open about her anxiety (“A lot of artists feel nervous before a performance, but you said you feel anxious after as well. Why is that?” she was asked in a 2016 *Vogue* interview), journalists regularly preemptively justify her Lolita persona and her music videos’ haunting portrayals of sexual trauma and Oedipal psychodramas within a girlified dreamscape. Most often, they portray them as marketing ploys for her album or straightforward critiques of gender norms, situating it more comfortably for their tastes within a conventional feminist framework for readers.

These trends of journalistic rationalization and erasure are intriguing in that they are aimed at artists whose work falls under the wide umbrella of the burgeoning superculture that encompasses Japanese Lolita, neo-Victorian, and steampunk subcultures, all of which regularly collide with, overlap with, draw from, and speak to each other. Moreover, both artists style themselves, not as girls, but as anachronistic, retrofuturistic girlified or dollified women, and both use their girlsonas to address trauma and mental illness. Women-as-girls (or women participating in Judith Butler’s girl-as-verb, “girling” themselves through repeated stylized acts [25]), particularly those who publicly address themes of psychological distress and psychiatric disability, often invoke anxiety and spark controversy among listeners, viewers, and critics. To unpack why psychological distress and girling are so often intertwined, it may be

useful to turn our attention to another set of performers who are often misread, disdained, or dismissed by critics.

Adolescent Drag and Queer Temporality

The girlsonas that are foregrounded in the performances that this dissertation looks at can be understood through the lenses of adolescent drag and queer temporality. Citing Ann Liv Young, Kate Gilmore, and Amber Hawk Swanson as examples, Anna Watkins Fisher refers to the performative, campy reimagining of adolescence by adult female artists as “adolescent drag.” Characterized by “irony, awkwardness, and equivocality” (55), Fisher argues, adolescent drag is a means of sidestepping, subverting and exploding the limited options on offer within Western feminism. Fisher reads adolescent drag as a response to feminist foremothers, particularly fellow performance artists and activists, who shunned girlhood or regarded it with suspicion: “In the self-conscious performance of adolescence, the once paternalistic and demeaning appellation ‘girl’ has increasingly become a recognizable queer resignification of compulsory constructions of ‘womanliness’ presented in the mainstream media and certain strands of feminism...adolescent drag [is] a parasitical operation that redirects notions of kitsch and regression to critique the limited identificatory positions available to a generation of young women said to be the heirs of Western feminism” (Fisher 50).

Adolescent drag, she posits, is a “tactical negotiation with [the artists’] cultural inheritance from 1960s and ’70s feminist art and from second-wave feminism more broadly” (Fisher 50). The notion of woman-performing-girlhood is particularly

intriguing as an exercise in adolescent drag and Munozian “disidentification,” as girls are simultaneously symbols of progress and the blank canvases onto which all of our cultural anxieties are pinned, just as they are simultaneously idealized as the consummate innocents and thrust into the public’s wary, watchful eye as particularly vulnerable to dangerous societal trends.

While the artists analyzed by Fisher seem to be reimagining, campifying, and “acting out” their own fairly recent adolescences, Autumn and Martinez add multiple complicating layers in their own practices of adolescent (and preadolescent) drag. Namely, both artists inhabit multiple adolescences and childhoods, across a wider range of historical moments, in order to evoke key historical “times of the girl.” The wider temporal range of the girlhoods they perform is in accordance with participation in neo-Victorian, steampunk, and Lolita subcultures, all of which influence one another and draw inspiration from over 80 years across the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Moreover, the “girls” imagined in the performances that Fisher defines as prime examples of adolescent drag are overwhelmingly white, Western, and middle-class. In this vein, Fisher writes, “The adolescent figure is inextricable from the white, Western privilege that affords the time and space to be a child, the luxury that laboring or forgotten children are not afforded, the ‘development’ withheld from racialized or colonized subjects” (6). Meanwhile, Martinez, who is of Puerto Rican and Dominican descent, uses her lyrics and imagery to critique beauty standards that uphold white supremacy, particularly those that are brought to bear on young girls.

Autumn, in contrast, calls forth the ghosts of lost girls—those who have been abandoned to medical trauma, abuse, poverty, incarceration, or the asylum.

Fisher's definition of adolescent drag and my readings of it here are heavily indebted to theoretical work on queer temporalities, particularly Elizabeth Freeman's notion of "temporal drag" as elaborated in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Temporal drag "highlights drag's associations with 'retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present'" (Musser 62), writes Amber Jamilla Musser in her review of Freeman's text. Further, Musser continues, "Temporal drag illuminates that which is often left ignored in the future-oriented time of performativity; it is the excess of historical signification" (62)—that is, what is left behind or cast off.

Accordingly, the figure of the campified adolescent in adolescent drag is crafted from the "found objects" left over after feminism and its accordant possible trajectories have taken their toll, the remnants cast off after girls are presumed to have progressed linearly towards conscious adult agency and the adoption of neoliberal subjectivity and rational, productive individualism.

Most significantly, however, temporal drag is about "the tactility of our relationship to the past" (Musser 62). At its core, it's not about phantasm, theory, or dreamed-up alternatives, but lived realities and materiality—histories lived through the body, felt bodily, known bodily. Of adolescent drag as a derivative or example of temporal drag, Fisher explains,

"Drag" has been a key term wielded within the broader campaign of lesbian and gay studies, and subsequently queer theory and increasingly performance studies, to unhinge identification from what some have perceived as its psychoanalytic orthodoxies and to understand it as a more fluid and transitive

performative site for social contestation in staging and improvisation...As the identificatory possibilities of drag have become ever more elastic within performance discourse over the last decade, the adolescent is mobilized as a site of performance exemplary of what Elizabeth Freeman has called “temporal drag.” (Fisher 53)

In a similar conceptual vein, Elizabeth Freeman juxtaposes chrononormativity—that is, the normalization of the temporal regulation of bodies and minds so as to maximize productivity and promote linear growth and upward mobility—with queer temporalities, which she defines as “points of resistance to [the normative] temporal order that, in turn, propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others: that is, of living historically” (Freeman xxii). These points of resistance include interruption and what Jack Halberstam refers to as “queer failure”: failure to progress through the normative life stages in the appropriate order and according to the presumed timeline; failure to move forward rather than backward, with no hiccups or interruption; and failure to proceed, to “get on with it,” to put away childish things and to adhere to heteropatriarchal and capitalist timelines for “achieving” family life and productivity. Failure in this sense, Halberstam argues, can be a “potent form of critique, a repudiation of capitalism and profit margins, a refusal of the norm, an indifference to assimilation and a route to other ways of being in the world” (“Embrace Queer Failure”).

Similarly, Fisher describes “the adolescent as an allegorical figure for a state of becoming that is profoundly queer” (54), taking on failure, interruption, fractalization, fluctuation, and identity diffusion as its performative keystones. Adolescent drag, accordingly, is characterized by improvisation, interruption, movement (here, between

girl and woman, between different modes of girling, and between different ways of being/ “doing” the girl), clutter and excess (representative of the variety of performative identities to select from) and a poetics of amateurism, all of which indicate a refusal to adopt the norms or standards of societal gatekeepers.

Meanwhile, Clementine Morrigan, in *Somatechnics*, cripes Lee Edelman’s critique of the ideology of reproductive futurism (in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*) by introducing the concept of “trauma time” as a maddening antidote to both queer time and “crip time,” defined by Margaret Price as a “flexible approach to normative time frames” (62) by disabled people, whether by necessity or choice. Morrigan notes that she, as a survivor of long-term trauma, experiences time nonnormatively, in a way that doesn’t map onto capitalist expectations of scheduled productivity, but which also functions as a mode of time traveling. “Time, for me, does not function as a matter-of-fact linear procession. It is more like a complex, dynamic web of information and experience in which I can move in any direction, and, in which I am frequently lost” (50), she explains.

For Morrigan, memory morphs into the present as she is immersed in flashbacks; a single word or phrase can leave her slogging through years of sticky psychological muck thought to be forgotten, while futuristic dreamscapes incorporate elements of her past and allow her to transcend them or transmute them into pleasurable artifacts. She notes that Edelman “proposes a queer anti-futurity which critiques a straight temporality grounded in the future of the symbolic Child. Edelman proclaims ‘Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively

terrorized” (2004: 29)” (Morrigan 52). The notion of reproductive futurism, Morrigan argues, leaves the actual child behind in its scorched-earth wake, and ignores the unavoidable reality of child abuse, particularly that experienced by queer and disabled children. Citing Jose Munoz’s recognition of “the fact that the symbolic child Edelman writes about is implicitly a white child” (Morrigan 52) and thus presumed to be an innocent worth protecting for the purposes of imagined white supremacist heterosexual futures and Alison Kafer’s acknowledgement that “the always already white Child is also always already healthy and nondisabled; disabled children are not part of this privileged imaginary except as the abject other” (Kafer 32-33), Morrigan argues for the reintroduction of the real, traumatized child into retrofuturistic imaginings of the symbolic Child, writing, “Along with my discomfort with Edelman’s lack of acknowledgment of actual children, and of child abuse as a producer of queer temporalities, is a general awareness of the lack of engagement with disability and madness in the work of Edelman, as well as other theorists of queer temporalities.” (58) Though it’s often dismissed as a private psychological problem or an inscrutable force, trauma queers time, she says, and should be validated as another node of intersectionality alongside crip and queer time, particularly because, as Morrigan argues, trauma time “opens up time as a space that can be moved through in any direction, affirming the pain of violent pasts, and dreaming of just futures” (58).

In accordance with the materialist underpinnings of temporal drag, Morrigan claims that trauma is primarily remembered, reimagined, reconfigured, and forgotten—whether accidentally or deliberately and productively—through the body.

“Trauma can be remembered and forgotten simultaneously, through body memories and also through structural dissociation” (53), she elaborates, and the memories might not tell the linear stories we want them to: “In the case of body memories, pain, an intense reaction to a particular type of touch, and other embodied experiences, can take the place of narrative memories” (53). This nonlinearity causes her to experience “the past as present, amnesia, the present as future as past, and ongoing disorientation in time” (Morrigan 53), and she calls for us to read “the queer time travel of trauma as a means of queer, mad, world-making” (54), insisting that “the queer temporalities of [her] traumatized mind are not a problem, a tragedy, or an unfortunate condition requiring a cure. Instead, they are a different way of being in the world, a creative, flexible, and nonlinear way of relating to time” (58).

I am not as concerned with the unfortunateness or fortunateness of the temporalities that populate and drive a traumatized mind, here; nor am I particularly interested in the question of evaluating Autumn’s and Martinez’s representations of mental illness, trauma time, and girlhood as “good” or “bad,” “helpful” or “unhelpful,” “moral” or “immoral.” Rather, I am interested in representations of trauma as lived realities that fundamentally change a subject’s relationship to time; the way that visually driven subcultures like neo-Victorianism and Lolita culture can serve as mirrors for or representations of those lived realities; the way in which those representations are frequently (mis)interpreted; and the significance of trauma time for the culturally malleable (or “plastic,” according to Heather Warren-Crow) figure of the girl.

Central to my readings of these three artists and their relationships to time and trauma are the interrelated steampunk, neo-Victorian, and Lolita subcultures, all of which reimagine nineteenth-century fashions, norms, and preoccupations, engaging in an active dialogue with the past and cobbling together alternative histories to imagine an alternative present. And while all three have complex relationships with materialism and consumer culture—particularly in terms of the associated surface aesthetics and the need to mark oneself as belonging, while remaining individualized and “set apart”—they are also sites of burgeoning performative practices, such as the adoption of subcultural languages and counterpublics organized around taboo longings. These subcultures are rapidly converging under the wider umbrella of a “superculture,” and all three regularly speak to, inform, and overlap with one another. Steampunk and neo-Victorian Lolitas, Lolita-inspired steampunks, and every possible combination therein are distinctly different, while drawing from similar wells of obsession and ambivalent nostalgia.

Neo-Victorianism and Steampunk

Autmn’s chosen girlsona is rooted in Neo-Victorianism, an aesthetic movement and genre that spans literature, pop culture, and a variety of closely related microcultures, which has its roots in mid-20th century reimaginings of 19th century fashion by young people. In the 1950s and 1960s, British and American teenagers began incorporating items from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into their everyday wardrobes. Elizabeth Ho defines neo-Victorianism thusly, emphasizing its patchwork revisionist relationship to temporality and the past: “Neo-Victorianism

is a deliberate misreading, reconstruction or staged return of the nineteenth century in and for the present across genres and media” (5). Mark Llewellyn and Ann Heilmann’s influential definition of the genre/subculture in *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century* also foregrounds the significance of the active presence of the contemporary voice in neo-Victorian cultural representations, as well as the persistence of the haunting spectre of the past: “Neo-Victorianism...must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (4). This active engagement with fashion historiography—such as corsets or chemises worn over clothing, leather paired with parasols, or high-collared dresses with short hemlines—and with everyday-objects-made-fetish (straight razors, fingerless gloves, hairpins, and lace cuffs, for example), as well as crafts and hobbies/activities (i.e., exchanging calling cards) that combine Victorian-era ornamentality with postmodern hybridity and individualism, maps contemporary anxieties, needs, and preoccupations onto 19th-century material culture. This juxtaposition allows practitioners to enter into an intimate conversation with the imagined past and perhaps even to begin to redress its wrongs, as well as our own.

“Theorists like Frederic Jameson might read neo-Victorian subcultural styles as part of postmodernity’s endless repetition of past images and styles” (Feldman-Barrett 80), Christine Feldman-Barrett explains, but, drawing from Caroline Cason Barratt’s “Time Machines: Steampunk in Contemporary Art,” she suggests that neo-Victorianism’s aims are a bit loftier than repetition alone: “However, one might

instead view this phenomenon as one that ‘compresses time to meld both old and new in a pastiche, an endeavour that seeks to redeem the past’ (Barratt 175)” (80). In this vein, she argues that part of the purpose of donning neo-Victorian clothing is to dismantle and “correct” the errors of the past (violence and discrimination, for example), thereby juxtaposing oneself and the relatively liberated present with the more repressed past. At the same time, this devotion to reinventing Victoriana represents a kind of taboo longing, a nostalgia for a ‘past that never was’ and an admission of dissatisfaction with the present. In the examples I explore in this chapter and the next, moreover, that relationship (between contemporary neo-Victorian artists and the pasts they reimagine) is more complex, illustrating not only the contrast between the past and present, but also the unsettling throughlines between then and now for particular marginalized groups, for whom certain forms of discrimination have remained stubbornly persistent.

Steampunk, a related movement with roots in 1980s science fiction, reimagines today’s technologies as if they were invented in the Victorian period, resulting in an alternative history set by turns in the mythic “Wild West” of the U.S. and 19th century Britain. Novelists H.G. Wells and Jules Verne have been important inspirations for steampunk fiction, fashion, and gadgetry, which imagines “what the Victorian era would have looked like if it had access to technology” (Combs), or, in some instances, projects an image of a future littered with Victorian technologies. Mixing DIY culture with the lure of technology, steampunk is a readily recognizable retrofuturistic aesthetic crammed with clock innards, analogue computers, airships, and steam

cannons. Bands like Abney Park and The Men That Will Not Be Blamed for Nothing, complete with fictional backstories, conjure images of contemporary goths transporting themselves to the 1890s or Dickensian street urchins who show up to wreak havoc among today's societal fringes. Jonathan Greyscale describes steampunk as an attempt to revive the aesthetic and some of the underlying values of the Victorian period with an eye towards progressivism: "[Steampunk] is the marriage of Victorian-era focus on manners, beauty and form with technology, given a fantastical twist of functionality and craftsmanship, with a firm grounding in community and environmental consciousness. It seeks to reconcile a modern industrial sensibility with optimism, beauty, imagination, sustainability, and even whimsy and humor, things often notably lacking from post-modern design" (Greyscale).

Simultaneously, underpinning steampunk values is the legacy of punk (particularly cyberpunk) and DIY culture, as well as anarchist leanings. Many steampunk enthusiasts craft their own wardrobes and accessories, placing a high premium on creativity and technical know-how. Much of steampunk's eccentric appeal is related to the notion of exposure and of unpacking the past to see how it works, which is literalized in its accompanying fashion and accessories. Corsets, as in other neo-Victorian and neo-Victorian-adjacent subcultures, are worn over the clothing, and pantaloons often become pants themselves. Cogs, pulleys, and gears are visible and open for display, just as Victoriana's innards are on display for reinterpretation and parsing. Conjuring obvious comparisons to notions of queer/ed temporalities, Feldman-Barrett writes, "There is an overt questioning of progress and

technology within the steampunk aesthetic. Linear time itself is being questioned, especially in relation to industrial time” (81). Steampunk, then, as a prime example of temporal drag, calls attention to the constructedness of time and gender norms, inviting participants to find pleasure in dismantling and reconstructing the assumptions of the past through bricolage, science fantasy, and revisionist histories.

Lolita Culture and the Identify of the Girl

If steampunk asks what could have gone differently in the areas of technology and innovation, it stands to reason that Lolita culture, particularly Gothic Lolita, steampunk Lolita, and neo-Victorian Lolita, asks what could have gone differently in the development of the cultural idea of the girl. Lolita culture, too, expresses a nostalgia for a past that never was—a girl that developed away from the encroaching responsibilities of adulthood and domesticity, and who was free to keep her pleasures close without having to trade them in for their more demanding, other-focused counterparts (i.e., dolls for babies and the plush, hyperreal, indulgent confections of Lolita fashion for clothing pointedly designed to attract a romantic partner). The Lolita subculture draws heavily from the central character in shojo manga and her accordant sensibilities (a shojo philosophy) and the related figure of the Lolita that emerged in 1970s Harajaku street fashion in Japan, which rose to prominence within the context of the kawaii ultra-cute craze and has become the central axis around which a counterpublic has subsequently formed, eventually becoming a “transnational object”—co-opted, appropriated, and commodified for the global market. The subculture reached its peak popularity in the mid-2000s amidst the global rise of

“visual Kei” bands and the widest circulation of Lolita guidebooks like *FRUiTS* and the *Gothic Lolita Bible*, but the subculture persists. In *So Pretty/Very Rotten: Comics and Essays on Lolita Fashion and Cute Culture*, Jane Mai and An Nguyen define Lolita culture straightforwardly as “a street fashion originating from Japan in the 1970s typically associated with the Harajuku neighbourhood in Tokyo” (13). The bouncy, exaggerated “cupcake” silhouette and the ruffles, bows, and cute icons favored by Lolitas are influenced by the Victorian and (less often) Edwardian periods and ubiquitous cultural and literary figures like Alice in Wonderland, as well as Victorian bisque dolls, Japanese anime, and the excess and romanticism of the late Baroque Rococo period.

Lolitas are often young women in their late teens and 20s: “Japanese Lolitas are usually young women (not girls), who dress in cute, childlike, and modest fashions” (Winge 47), explains Theresa Winge in “Undressing and Dressing Loli: A Search for the Identity of the Japanese Lolita.” “Lolitas, also known as ‘Lolis,’” she elaborates, “are young women and men who dress as anachronistic visual representations of Victorian-era dolls, covered from head to toe in lace, ruffles, and bows” (47). Lolita culture has a literary parallel in *shōjo* manga or Japanese ‘girls’ literature’ (*shojo bungaku*), which was popularized in the 1980s by authors like Takemoto Novala. The sprawling fandom has spawned “a subculture most visible as a fashion choice but which has also been instantiated in a variety of ways as a literature; as a genre of manga, anime, and pop music; as a theatrical and community-forming

social practice; and as an aesthetic choice imagined as able to infiltrate every level of one's life" (Bergstrom 21).

Indeed, while Lolita culture is often reduced in media coverage to fashion, its most ardent followers often eschew the idea that Lolita involves costuming or cosplay, arguing instead that it functions as an identity. They adopt that identity in part by gathering in groups (virtually or in person) to practice performative rituals, such as teatime, dollmaking, and crafting. For some, this becomes a lifestyle to varying degrees of integration with their self-perception; for others, it functions similarly to queer closeting, in which someone might not be out at work but slips into preferred patterns of speech and behavior when off-duty. Performances of a Lolita "character" or version of the self, however, require practice and artifice: Poses, mannerisms, soft-spokenness, and elegant turns of phrase are all key to the projection of a Lolitaized self. Writes Feldman-Barrett, "Intriguingly, Lolitas' neo-Victorian dress is complemented by their use of 'schoolgirl speech,' which is a form of Japanese developed during the Meji Restoration: a period that also spanned the mid-nineteenth century" (77). Isaac Gagne notes that this subcultural language contributes to Lolita culture's status as a distinct counterpublic, rather than an aesthetic alone: "Gothic & Lolita (hereafter, Gothic/Lolita) is a fashion-oriented subculture of young females who wear elaborate, antiquated dresses and aspire toward looking, acting, and speaking like 'princesses.' Participants and producers of this subculture have also revived and recreated joseigo, or 'women's language'...creating thereby a linguistically distinct community through a metalinguistic and counterpublic discourse in magazines and

internet forums” (131). One of the questions raised within the performances I’m considering here, then, is what it means to perform idealized “princessified” girlhood after an actual girlhood that was anything but.

Lolita culture has since been co-opted and exported for global consumption, and many adherents bemoan its reduction in many cases to surface aesthetics alone. “It is through this global appropriation and reinterpretation,” writes Winge, “that the Lolita achieves her role as a transnational object, as well as her role as an object of resistance, agency, and nostalgia” (61). While many Lolitas, particularly due to the stigmatization they’ve faced as a group, appear to want the subculture to spread—starting groups all across the world and global virtual Lolita communities, setting up shop as purveyors of the rarely-cheap coveted Lolita merchandise and garb, and offering thousands of intricate online tutorials in videos and forums on how to achieve the style—many others are wary of the sexualized interpretation and judgmental reception the look often receives. Lolita culture is stigmatized in part simply due to its status as a primarily youth-dominated counterculture, but has also been repeatedly accused of glorifying pedophilia and infantilizing women, not least because of its presumed ties to Nabokov’s notorious nymphet. Mai and Nguyen, in response to the common question “Is Lolita fashion related to the 1958 novel *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov or the film directed by Stanley Kubrick in 1962?”, claim (as do most Lolitas when asked) that the simple answer is, “No, not at all” (11). However, they subsequently confess that the relationship between the original Lolita and her subcultural counterpart is more complex than many Lolitas like to admit, although

they staunchly deny any connection to Lolita's objectification, (hyper)sexualization, or status as an actual (if fictional) minor. Instead, they claim that Lolita culture affords those who participate in it an opportunity for self-expression that is not afforded to the literary Lolita: "It is important to remember that the novel is told from the perspective of Humbert Humbert. Dolores does not have a voice—the reader does not know her thoughts or feelings...In contrast, for women 'Lolita' fashion exists as a domain removed from the sphere of cis-male influence. Lolita has agency, feelings, and power" (15).

Theorization about neo-Victorian subcultures has frequently taken on the task of discerning to what degree participants, particularly those in Lolita cultures or who reimagine the Victorian perspective through the lens of girlhood, are glorifying or reifying antiquated gender norms and unrealistic beauty standards and to what degree they can be read as empowered, empowering, or resistant. Feldman-Barrett argues that each subculture's political aims are different, each subverting a different dominant narrative: "Goths challenge the stark stratification of social class, Lolitas empower the childlike, and steampunks question the mythology and chronology of 'progress'" (73). Because these subcultures and their visual and rhetorical markers overlap and influence one another so intricately, Feldman-Barrett's take is primarily helpful in indicating some of the political interventions that these modes of performance and narrative can make. Lolitan subcultures are primarily read through the lens of queer theory as a (literally) crafty and carnivalesque means of releasing the stress of societal rigidity and eliding or delaying adulthood. Nguyen and Mai describes Lolita culture as

“A means of coping with living in a rigid and stress-filled society” (15), with Lilian Min adding that the layered, intricate modesty of Lolita fashions offers young women an opportunity to slip out the side door of both gender binaries and the plodding progression towards adulthood: “a version of femmehood that doesn't hinge on sexual maturity, or traditional notions of (straight male-centric) sexuality” (Min).

Lolitas, too, are often posited as deliberately liminal figures who position themselves as outside the demands of capitalism and ‘progress’ as defined by modernity, and can thus be understood as examples of the ‘queer failure’ so prized by Halberstam. Mai and Nguyen write, for example, “Lolita could be examined through scholar Brian McVeigh’s theory of *kawaii* as ‘resistance consumption’ in which ‘adoring or associating oneself with cuteness positions one, if only temporarily, outside the demands of the highly ordered regimes of labour’” (167). In the same vein, Feldman-Barrett writes of neo-Victorian subcultures as a whole that the political aim is a macro version of this utopian transformation: i.e., “the subversion of norms of Victorian social hierarchy and...evading the dominant notions of ‘progress’ that accompanied industrialization” (6)—to return to a time, then, when the ‘story’ of industrialization still had a chance to go differently.

The Erasure of Disability and Mental Illness

Notably, theorization about Lolita, neo-Victorian, and shojo counterpublics and performative practices, as well as about adolescent and temporal drag, largely overlooks disability and mental illness (echoing Morrigan’s critique of much of queer theory’s treatment of temporality), focusing primarily on queer readings of the Lolita

figure or the neo-Victorian girl as purposely eliding chrononormativity by delaying or sidestepping adulthood and prolonging the pleasures of childhood. Neo-Victorianism's hyperfocus on madness, the asylum, and themes of suicide and medical trauma renders queer readings that don't tend to psychiatric disability invaluable, but incomplete. Neo-Victorianism's inextricable ties to mental illness and psychological distress, particularly that of women under the thumb of patriarchal authority, are inarguable, and they are readily evident in what's widely considered the first-ever neo-Victorian text, Jean Rhys' 1966 postcolonial novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In Rhys' novel, after a traumatic childhood, Creole heiress Antoinette Cosway watches her cognitively disabled brother die in a house fire in Jamaica before enduring a violent and emotionally abusive arranged marriage to a man who rejects her in part due to her Creole background—a series of traumas that leads her to develop a debilitating mental illness, to which he responds by confining her in the attic.

Rhys' novel is a postcolonial retelling of *Jane Eyre*, partly from the perspective of the “monster” in the attic, from her own girlhood forward, rather than from the point of view of Jane, to whom the suicidal wife in the attic represents only an obstacle to her own conventional marital happiness. The novel, told from multiple perspectives, established many of the themes and motifs that would develop within neo-Victorian literature and subcultural practices over the subsequent decades, including multivocality, the centering of previously marginalized or abject figures, and analysis of mental illness within the context of the advent of the field of psychology and the era of institutionalization.

Still, many of these representations rely on madness-as-metaphor: neo-Victorian girls (who are generally insinuated to not be “mad” at all, but only to be attempting to elide their oppressive domestic duties) recast as feminist heroes who escape patriarchal repression by escaping the asylum. Meanwhile, the steampunk trope of the begoggled “mad inventor,” inspired by Jules Verne’s imperialist, nationalist boys who forge westward using self-built steam-powered vehicles between the pages of Edisonades (science fiction dime novels), connects madness to genius (a flattering linkage generally only afforded to impish boys rather than wayward girls), thus relegating it to the realm of lovable and laudable eccentricity. Lolita styles traffic in highly stigmatized and pathologized images of girlhood—with Gothic Lolitas conjuring up images of anachronistic “troubled teens” and the proliferation of cute objects that accompany Classic and Sweet Lolitas often described as “manic” or as symptomatic of a certain empty-headed vulnerability. Shojo manga, fittingly, often delves into dark psychological themes, with narratives propelled forward by the emotional triumphs and distresses of the character rather than linearly and according to plot (as is the cases in shonen manga, or boys’ comics).

Indeed, neo-Victorian representations have a fraught relationship to trauma, both personal (such as incest) and collective (such as war, genocide, and eugenics), with scholars divided on the question of whether their primary aims are to voyeuristically exploit or to productively address and correct past traumas. In “What Did the Victorians Do for Us?”, a review of Marie-Luise Kohlke & Christian Gutleben’s *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to*

Nineteenth-Century Suffering, Justin Sausman offers an incisive overview of theorists' positions on neo-Victorianism's relationship to the trauma it represents:

Neo-Victorian fiction...would seem to exemplify Freud's logic of *Nachträglichkeit*, in which, as Roger Luckhurst explains, 'an event can only be understood as traumatic after the fact, through the symptoms and flashbacks and delayed attempts at understanding that these signs of disturbance produce' (Luckhurst 2008: 5). However, whereas the traumatised subject is condemned to a repetition of the same set of pathological symptoms until released through narrativising the repressed event, neo-Victorian fiction can be read as a self-conscious investigation of these symptoms, appearing as both victim and analyst of its own traumatic traces...This casts the entire neo-Victorian enterprise as a species of trauma literature. (119-121)

Thus, neo-Victorianist cultural producers have to navigate the question of whether representations of a traumatic past exploit and further marginalize the oppressed groups they attempt to center and to what extent they traffic in sensationalism. Marie-Luise Kohlke refers to the papering-over of an allegedly repressive and sexually abusive past with contemporary sexual norms, thereby retroactively sexualizing the nineteenth century, as "sexsation" (Kohlke 1), while other neo-Victorian scholars consider the so-called "medical sensationalism" of depictions of the period's medical system as corrupt and misogynistic: "Christy Rieger," writes Helen Davies, "has coined a useful phrase—'medical sensationalism'—to discuss the neo-Victorian fascination with 'scandal, illicit sexuality, the abject body, and medical misconduct' (Rieger, 2014, pp. 153-64)" (Davies 18), and the figure of the deviant, perverse, or exploitative medical professional. To what extent do these representations diffuse and obscure the lived realities of marginalized groups rather than injecting meaning into their retelling? Moreover, do they function as a productive means of 'after-witnessing,' or do they absolve us of considering the lasting effects of these traumas,

and their contemporary manifestations? Further, all of this prompts the question that Justin Sausman asks in “What Did the Victorians Do for Us? Review of Marie-Luise Kohlke & Christian Gutleben (eds.), *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering*,” namely, “what prompts this delayed working through of the Victorian past in the present moment, that is, the ‘trigger’ event in trauma theory that releases previously repressed memories” (Sausman 121)?

One of the potential answers to this question, for Autumn, Martinez, and other neo-Victorian artists who explore themes of psychiatric disability, is that psychology began firming up as a cogent field during the Victorian era. This makes it an appropriate subcultural space to inhabit and a meaningful historical period to “return” to through fashion, literature, and performative practices, in order to revisit the temporal moment when their identities congealed. Wilhelm Wundt founded the first experimental laboratory dedicated to psychology in 1879, and the American Psychological Association, which would later come to define mental illness as a cultural category—subsequently leading to both significant abuses for many and, eventually, healing for some—was established in 1892. This timing was especially significant for young women, who were at risk of institutionalization in the Victorian era for rebelling against marriage or domesticity, as well as for a range of mental illnesses included postnatal depression and anxiety, and other disabilities such as epilepsy, work-related stress, and “moral insanity” (infidelity or promiscuity). It’s no wonder, then, that the specter of the asylum (and the violence that often took place

there), with all its attendant implications for the role of those with cognitive and/or psychiatric disabilities in history as well as contemporary society, figures prominently in neo-Victorian subcultural media. People who identify as psychiatrically disabled in the present-day, then (such as Autumn and Martinez), can be read as carrying out a kind of traumatic repetition via neo-Victorian reenactment.

Navigating Trauma through Lolita Performance

Many performers, in fact, appear to use girlification/Lolitaization as a means of traumatic repetition and attempts at mastery over their personal histories and shared girlhood histories, as well as in finding pleasure in abject and taboo aspects of youthful femininity; perhaps the use of these amalgamated practices for the purposes of navigating and managing a traumatized bodymind (echoing Margaret Price's contention in "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain" that the notion of the "bodymind" is key to a feminist materialist approach to disability studies, and to begin to address able-mindedness as rigorously as able-bodiedness) is one of the reasons for its evocation of cultural anxieties, however unconscious.

Relatedly, both Autumn's and Martinez's girlified performative references to traumatic histories and the subsequent effects on their and their alter egos' psyches are often read as a metaphor for the historical mistreatment of girls and young women in the Victorian period and today. In other words, their narratives about psychiatric disability and the aftermath of trauma are relegated to the realm of the figurative, for the purpose of straightforward feminist interpretation. This is a common trope within literature and literary criticism, as disability narratives are often elided in favor of how

they can be plumbed for potential metaphorical meanings for abled readers. According to Mitchell and Snyder in *Narrative Prosthesis*, almost every culture around the world views “disability as a problem in need of a solution, and this belief establishes one of the major modes of historical address directed toward people with disabilities. The necessity for developing various kinds of cultural accommodations to handle the ‘problem’ of corporeal difference situates people with disabilities in a profoundly ambivalent relationship to the cultures and stories they inhabit” (222). They assert that literary narrative leans upon disability as a stock feature of characterization and a metaphorical device; “solving” the “problem” of disability within a narrative propels the story forward and allows the narrative to deal with the perceived crisis. (Mitchell and Snyder). I contend that when the subjects in question are women in adolescent drag, or women-as-girls, this phenomenon is exacerbated by the ingrained cultural tendency to pathologize women, and to doubly pathologize young women and women who engage in practices associated with girls or girlification, as they are perceived as delaying or sidestepping their appropriate progression towards an adult female subjectivity (a woman who “forgets” or “puts behind” the girl and transmutes all associated practices into the nurturing of others, such as the exchange of the doll for the human baby, rather than pleasure).

Anna Mollow’s term “criphystemology” forms the basis for my primary theoretical intervention into readings of Autumn’s and Martinez’s Lolita-adjacent, neo-Victorian performances. A riff on “cripistemology,” the term coined by Robert McRuer and Merri Lisa Johnson to refer to what Aly Patasavas describes “as a mode

of thought that ‘combines the process of ‘cripping,’ which ‘spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions,’ [Sandahl] with a philosophical commitment to ‘standpoint epistemology,’ which acknowledges that the subject positions from which we produce knowledge matter” (Mills 349), cripistemology “crips hysteria” (Mollow 185) and, in my opinion, also hystericizes disability, by “knowing disability as suffering” (Mollow 186), refusing to ignore or rhetorically erase pain, and “nam[ing] and validat[ing] the social and embodied experiences of individuals with undocumented disabilities, whom our culture often interpellates as hysterical subjects” (Mollow 186).

The erasure to which she refers occurs within disability studies (particularly when the social model¹⁰ is applied to its furthest possible extent), but also within society at large, as undocumented disabilities (i.e., mental illness, chronic pain, and conditions that are not readily visible and obvious) are largely feminized and thus pathologized, dismissed, or doubted as verifiable and valid. I posit, too, that some of this invalidation is due to the widespread erasure of trauma from disability narratives and its relegation to feminist studies alone, as a “women’s issue.” This erasure is evident in critical and theoretical readings of Autumn and Martinez that primarily posit them as either pursuing Lolitan and neo-Victorian aesthetics for the purposes of spectacle and shock value, or as using anachronism and psychological metaphors (suicide, mania, and melancholy, for example) in order to critique patriarchal systems.

¹⁰ The social model of disability distinguishes between disability (a social construction) and impairment (a bodily state) and recognizes social discrimination as the most significant problem experienced by persons with disabilities and as the cause of many of the problems that are regarded as intrinsic to the impairment.

The recurrent symbol of the asylum and its cultural legacy, as well as both Martinez's and Autumn's depictions of trauma and psychiatric disability, thus constitute the primary focus of my readings of both artists' performances. In particular, I will examine their music and accompanying visuals (in the form of live performances, graphic memoirs, and music videos) through a cripistemological lens, with an eye towards "trauma time," in order to, as Ann Cvetkovich contends (Cvetkovich 4), recover and recognize accounts of trauma for the disabled and queer archives. The cultural notion of the girl as simultaneous symbol of progress and crisis makes the becoming-girl or girlified woman an ideal prism through which to reflect, slant, and collapse notions of queer, crip, and trauma time.

Though Autumn's and Martinez's relationships to girlification (and dollification, a tangential form of girlification involving the practice of dressing up as a human doll) are quite different, several shared themes and motifs in their music videos, transmedia performances, and public personas solidify them as examples of a girl-grotesque aesthetic that traffics in girlified excess and the uncanny, as well as representations of trauma time. As Mary Russo terms it, the female grotesque is tied to the uncanny, the carnivalesque, and "making a spectacle of oneself" (Russo 1), which is quite literally what Martinez and Autumn do with the disjointed, disordered aspects of their bodyminds for politics, profit, and pleasure. These similarities also provide a foundation for reading both artists through a cripistemological lens that regards trauma and its aftermath as material realities worthy of representation in and of themselves. Tactics employed by both artists to this end include anachronistic and

retrofuturistic pastiche, bricolage, and images of the abject. Autumn, moreover, deploys a spectacle of “freakery,” as defined by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and medical sensationalism as defined by Christy Reiger, in her live performances, thus bringing hysteria and its contemporary iterations into disability discourse. Martinez, in particular, draws heavily from maximalist and pop surrealist movements (in visual art, design, and literature), both of which have key traits—such as multiplicity, contradiction, redundancy, and ambivalent nostalgia—that map neatly onto the figure of the postmodernist neo-Victorian girl and intervene in romanticized notions of Victorian era “bedroom culture,” slicing into the myths of the private/public divide with a dull knife and subjecting the domestic sphere to spectacularization.

A classically trained violinist, Emilie Autumn Fritzges attended Indiana University as a music student at 15 before being kicked out, in part due to her outrageous outfits and behavior. She released two classical albums and played violin for Courtney Love’s live band before turning in her traditional instrument for an electric violin and her already neo-Victorian-adjacent persona for a fully realized alter ego, often appearing as a steampunk princess, a painted bisque doll with signature painted tears, and a Gothic Lolita in her photo spreads (she has rarely been seen publicly in contemporary clothing). Her next four albums—*Laced/Unlaced*, which marked her transition from classical to dark cabaret music; *Enchant*, which served up darker reimaginings of fairy tales and girl-focused myths; *Opheliac*, a concept album on the Ophelian archetype—and *Fight Like a Girl*, a musical accompaniment to her bestselling autobiographical neo-Victorian graphic novel, *The Asylum for Wayward*

Victorian Girls—solidified “Victoriaindustrial” music, the microgenre she has come to represent alongside other melancholic cult favorites like Hannah Fury of Mellowtraumatic Recordings, compared by one critic to a “parasol-wielding OutKast,” who has built an online fandom of hundreds of thousands while never performing in public. Pairing synthesizers, drum machines, and electric violin with the harpischord, “Victoriaindustrial” music has steampunk roots and has been described as a patchwork of “new age chamber music, trip hop baroque, and experimental space pop” (Spano). Autumn’s live performances are similarly eclectic, incorporating a campy, full-fledged, corseted burlesque troupe (the Bloody Crumpets) with glittered glam-rock stylings and high-energy circusry, such as fire tricks and acrobatics.

Autumn has been open about her diagnosis of bipolar disorder and her extended stays in psychiatric hospitals in the mid-2000s after multiple suicide attempts and bouts of self-harm. She has also alluded to a history of childhood molestation, which is frequently referenced in her songs. This troubled history is a key aspect of Emelie Autumn’s public persona, which manifests in a variety of girl-centered media and formats: neo-Victorian and steampunk fashion with some Lolita crossover, diary-writing, handwritten notes and doodles, burlesque, cabaret noir, songwriting, and Instagram poetry. She self-consciously styles herself as a girl, conjuring the image of a dollified Dickensian street urchin, which Eckart Voigts notes in “Victoriana’s Secret: Emilie Autumn’s Burlesque Performance of Subcultural Neo-Victorianism” as a point of possible contention and pushback to her identity as a feminist artist:

The very fact that Autumn persistently adopts the term “girl,” reviled by 1970s feminism and revived by the 1990s riot grrrls, for self-fashioning purposes, not

least in the title of her novel *An Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls*, would rouse the suspicion of contemporary feminist critics (see Neely 2012: 113).
(22)

She has developed a cult following and an avid fandom, primarily of teens and young women, who call themselves the Muffins or the Plague Rats. For her stage persona, Autumn has assumed the name “Emilie Autumn Liddell,” invoking the prepubescent female object of Lewis Carroll’s attentions, who inspired Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865). Her on- and offstage antics have invited criticism; though her multiple hospitalizations and suicide attempts have been verified, the rest of her backstory is vague, and some of her more outrageous claims—such as that her family died in a fire—have been proven false. Some fans, drawn to Autumn due to their connection to her personal history of mental illness and trauma, have seen this claim as a betrayal, while others have always believed her public persona to be a contradictory patchwork of truth and reality, Victorian and contemporary, particularly given the musical steampunk tradition from which she draws of obligatory fictional backstories. Autumn’s girlsona, true to steampunk tradition, invokes character creation, in this case a tragic orphan.

Catherine Siemann notes in the *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* that reimaginings of Lewis Carroll’s Alice, due in part to later rumors that circulated about his supposed pedophilic tendencies, have significantly darkened, turning Wonderland into the site of psychological horror and Alice into a troubled young woman. In video games like the wildly successful *American McGee’s Alice* and its sequel, *Alice: Madness Returns*, which posit Wonderland as a delusional realm of escape and

hallucination for a traumatized teenage knife-wielding Alice, the titular heroine is reimagined as a young woman (albeit one still styled in a Lolita-esque Alice getup), in a testament to our growing sense of girls' "loss of innocence," widespread panic about hypersexualization, and media narratives that agonize over girls in crisis. In tandem with the rise of the girl-in-crisis, Alice has become a psych ward patient or a hunted potential sex slave, taunted by her personal demons and tempted by the sinister undertow of hallucination and exploitation.

I would add that this widespread "darkening" of fictional girls from the past in neo-Victorian representations responds in part to the spread of psychology and its accompanying revelations about teen girls, who have been the subject of much psychological attention and make up a disproportionate number of the mental health consumer population. Autumn's songs adhere to this trend, giving voice to darkened, underbelly-up versions of fictional girls from fairy tales, 19th century literature, Shakespeare, children's nursery rhymes, girls' clapping games, and legends. Autumn's reworkings of girl icons like Ophelia from the perspective of her own well-known personal trauma can be read as examples of what Elizabeth Freeman describes as "erotohistoriography," or a re-membering of history through the body.

Freeman describes erotohistoriography, or "tactile historicism," as "distinct from the desire for a fully present past, a restoration of bygone times. Erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present" (95). This means of approaching history, she elaborates, "uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter" and

“sees the body as a method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporeal sensations” (96). Erotohistoriography, or, as would be more appropriate here, embodied historiography, is a particularly useful way to understand Autumn’s invocation of childhood memories and integration of literary allusions into her lyrics and performances: She uses multivocality and a poetics of dissociation, via the inhabitation of historical archetypes, to feel their histories of pain in her own body and to convey them as parts of her own story through a neo-Victorian lens.

Addressing the concept of erotohistoriography in the context of sadomasochism, Freeman claims that embodied practices that involve doling out or receiving pain “encode and transmit the bodily knowledge of personal and collective trauma” (163). Similarly, Autumn’s lyrical inhabitations of dead, harmed, or ‘lost’ girls—Lolita in “Gothic Lolita,” Ophelia in *Opheliac*, the docile “Rose” in “Rose, Rose, Rose Red,” and the Lady of Shalott in “Shalott”—use archetypes of traumatized and “mad” girls to whom Autumn feels a transhistorical connection to convey her personal traumas as well as to cement herself in the cultural tradition of girls who have been traumatized, institutionalized, or otherwise wronged due to or in anticipation of their psychiatric disabilities.

Autumn’s hyperfocus on traumas, both collective and individual, in her work has led to accusations of romanticization of mental illness and of “traumatophilia”: “Kohlke and Gutleben draw on Luckhurst’s definition of traumatophilia as ‘taking a kind of perverse delight in the repetition or abject assumption of a collapsed trauma subjectivity’” (Voigts 21), Voigts writes. Her rebuttal to this accusation is that she is

critiquing the longstanding romanticization of mental illness in young women, and its misrepresentation and relegation to sensationalism, within literature and medicine alike. She chose Ophelia as the central character in her first concept album, *Opheliac*, for example, because of the way (in Autumn's view) that Ophelia's psychic pain has been co-opted and mined for its cultural capital: "Ophelia was the archetypal "mad girl", the poster girl for glamorized insanity, the patron saint of girls on Zoloff" (Ohanesian), she told one interviewer, noting the long tradition of Ophelia-mid-suicide iconography: "In the 1800s, there were so many paintings of Ophelia drowning and it was this obsession with death, female suicide. I mean, Ophelia is the original Suicide Girl" (Ohanesian). By speaking from the abject position of characters like Lolita and Ophelia, then, and by styling herself in their image, Autumn affectively links herself to their legacies—a girlhood that is raw, interrupted, mad, dismissed, and exploited. She recovers their narratives for the purposes of "after-witness," an aspect of the neo-Victorian representation of traumas that claims distance is necessary in order to avoid subsumption or overidentification with a given historical figure or fictional character. The role of fiction in this instance," Sausman argues, "is to give voice to precisely that which has been excluded from the historical record, to perform a necessary act of identification or appropriation in which historical others are retrospectively spoken for because they were unable to speak themselves" (Sausman 120), thus "providing a space in which, in the absence of direct testimony, witnesses can be made to speak within a fictional world" (Sausman 120). Of after-witness specifically, Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben write that "neo-Victorian fiction enacts the role of

‘after-witness’ that ‘testifies to and stands in for inadequate, missing, or impossible acts of primary witness-bearing to historical trauma’” (7).

In “Gothic Lolita,” for example, Autumn addresses her personal Humbert Humbert(s) directly, returning the voice to the already-harmed Lolita herself, thus participating in a kind of revisionist fictional history that puts the girl back in the text. “Gothic Lolita,” then, is not just her external misunderstood-teen fashion, but her post-trauma afterlife—one she wants us all to witness: “How old are you?/I’m older than you’ll ever be/I’ve been dead a thousand years/And lived only two or three” (“Gothic Lolita”), she croons, presumably to her abuser, over tinkering toy sounds. Setting up an analogy between child molestation and death (here, of the soul; of the innocence she is expected to display; and of her linear progression towards adulthood), she lets the perpetrators know that they have killed her by interrupting her procession towards maturity and rational consciousness: “I don’t mind telling you/My life was ended by your hand/The kind of murder where nobody dies” (“Gothic Lolita”), she sings.

Lolita culture and neo-Victorianism collide, as they often do, in “Gothic Lolita,” in which Autumn speaks from the abject position of death or death-by-dissociation, the nowhere place of the numb and void. By speaking from the point of view of a “dead” girl, even if metaphorically, Autumn is participating in a trend that Fiona Nelson claims to be ubiquitous in contemporary young adult literature: that of the narrator-as-already-dead-girl. Death and near-death, as it did for mad Ophelia with her snippets of song prior to her suicidal immersion, and as it does for in Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones* and Jay Asher’s controversial *Thirteen Reasons Why*,

affords girls with the liberty to speak and act freely—something they never knew in life. Though Nelson warns readers against labeling this trend as one of “empowerment” or progress, it can certainly be read as an attempt (if misguided) to queer time and to elide the usual constraints on youthful feminine voice, agency, and sexuality. To this end, Nelson writes, “Girlhood itself is not free, but people who return to girlhood can revisit it without the constraints on their sexuality” (50). Moreover, she continues, “Being dead, or dying, becomes a viable subject position for girls who have no safe opportunities in life to realize their own sexuality” (Nelson 51).

Within the context of trauma time, too, Autumn’s positionality as song-speaker is nothing but realistic; trauma, in fact, does often interrupt the normative flow of time and contribute to a dulled consciousness and a profound sense of loss, a lessening of the presence that manifests as dissociation and that many trauma survivors have compared to living as a ghost or zombie. In this vein, Morrigan explains:

A major component of trauma is a re-experiencing of the past with the visceral intensity of the present. Flashbacks can include any combination of the senses, including intense visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile recreations of a traumatic experience. Flashbacks are different from regular memories because the body experiences them as if they are happening in the present, producing a stress response intended for emergencies. The emergency happened in the past, but the response is happening in the present. In “Trauma and Temporality” Robert Stolorow writes “[e]xperiences of trauma become freeze-framed into an eternal present in which one remains forever trapped, or to which one is condemned to be perpetually returned... (2016: 160).” (Morrigan 50)

Moreover, just as Humbert Humbert names Lolita (as Mai and Nguyen suggest in their analysis of Lolita culture), Autumn names her abuser here, stating that if she is to be defined by him (as she claims she has been against her will): “Thank you, kind sirs/You've made me what I am today/A bundle of broken nerves/A mouthful of

words/I'm still afraid to say" ("Gothic Lolita")), he is by necessity also defined by her: "If I am Lolita/Then you are a criminal/And you should be killed/By an army of little girls" ("Gothic Lolita"). And though she sings of "ruffles and laces/and candy sweet faces" ("Gothic Lolita") as the death knolls that "directed [her abuser's] furtive hand" ("Gothic Lolita") and catalyzed her molestation and subsequent figurative death, she continues to identify herself as a "Gothic Lolita" throughout the song, suggesting that she has not yet and will not give up on her Lolita identity or, alternatively (or in addition), that she cannot—her growth having been stalled by her trauma—and thus has been trapped in her Lolitan self and has had her identity turned sinister, like Alice's, not by her own actions but by the harmful gaze of another.

Autumn incorporates into her live performances the theatrical trappings of the Victorian era freak show, which is another common neo-Victorian/steampunk trope (particularly within niche performances, such as steampunk freak show-themed burlesque acts, circuses, interactive carnivals, and vaudeville): "The asylum has...become a standard feature of neo-Victorianism, as evidenced by its regular use in the steampunk movement" (Voigts 20), Voigts notes. Autumn uses this theatrical setting to performatively illustrate the aftermath of trauma and to stage an encounter between the Foucauldian medical gaze and the girls it analyzes, as well as between the Victorian clinical setting and its contemporary counterpart. In particular, in live performances of her song "Girls! Girls! Girls!" from *Fight Like a Girl*, Autumn binds the hysteric to the figure of the 19th-century "freak" through the process of what D

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson refers to as “enfreakment” (in short, the creation or making of a freak).

“Freak,” within the parameters of the definitions set forth by Garland-Thomson, doesn’t simply refer to someone who is disabled, marginalized, or extraordinary, but specifically a liminal societal figure whose difference-on-display invites both ridicule and a salacious, voyeuristic gaze. In particular, the freak serves as a barometer of the cultural margins and allows “typical” or “normal” citizens to participate in the pleasurable marginalia by proxy, while reifying societal norms by contrasting themselves and their “ordered” bodies to the the carnivalesque antics of the grotesque and disordered. These performances, Garland-Thompson notes, often collapsed various categories of difference, rendering the “freakish” bodies on display at once titillating and reviling, tempting and producing of horror: “The freak is an object of simultaneous horror and fascination because, in addition to whatever infirmities or abilities he or she exhibits, the freak is an ambiguous being whose existence imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life” (57).

Enfreakment, Disability, and Hysteria

Noting the parodic, high-society stage names often taken on by performers in freak shows as carnivalesque reversals of their marginal societal status, Garland-Thompson writes that “Enfreakment emerges from cultural rituals that stylize, silence, differentiate, and distance the persons whose bodies the freak-hunters or showmen colonize and commercialize. Paradoxically, however, at the same time that enfreakment elaborately foregrounds specific bodily eccentricities, it also collapses all

those differences into a “‘freakery,’ a single amorphous category of corporeal otherness” (10). The performers in Autumn’s live shows are indeed multiply “set apart” from the norms of propriety, constraint, and modesty. The troupe of clearly adult women, meant here to appear as inmates let out of the asylum to turn a profit for their exploitative clinicians, is styled garishly as maddened, girlified stereotypes of burlesque performers. Their makeup is mussed and amateurishly applied, while their outfits are revealing hodgepodes of Victorian Annie-and-the-orphans getups and old-school showgirl camp. One Bloody Crumpet wears a single ripped schoolgirl stocking, for example; another’s mascara is running, presumably from crying. Their freakishness manifests in several ways, threatening to divert them from the normative futures of womanhood and mental passivity. Their development towards their assigned ‘places’ within the limited assortment of available modes of being within Victorian womanhood has been stalled: by trauma that keeps them hovering between past and future, presumably by their own mental illnesses or pathologized behaviors, and by the asylum itself, from which they have been plucked and forced to perform for a voyeuristic audience.

Throughout the performance, they cater to stereotypes about girls, psychiatrically disabled populations, and sex workers alike, but repeatedly carry them out to near-obscene excess. A stylized girl-on-girl bit with Autumn in male drag, for example, results in a series of extended, full-on makeout sessions seemingly designed to make the audience uncomfortable; what starts off as a campy, stereotyped depiction of ‘crazy’ institutionalized women turns dark when they mime suicide by hanging

during a choreographed dance. Rather than teasing in order to titillate and keep the audience dangling, this brand of dark cabaret renders the audience culpable, forcing them to account for their own salacious and voyeuristic desires: After all, they are all there to witness the extended, musical aftermath of Autumn's widely popularized history of trauma and suffering. And in true carnivalesque fashion, Autumn uses the performance as an opportunity to reverse roles: Dressed in a campy barker getup, complete with the requisite cane, she's the ringmaster and showrunner here rather than a patient. (Still, her jaunty cap evokes her usual Dickensian street urchin image, hinting at her "true" underlying identity). Along with the Bloody Crumpets, Autumn employs "abusive language" and vulgar humor and the power of laughter—two of the keystones of the grotesque, as defined by Bakhtin—in order to fold mental illness into a bawdy pastiche of freak show aesthetics.

The enfreakment of so-called hysterics and their contemporary iterations via the staging of their pain—pain that is both due to their psychological distress and due to the medical gaze and its accompanying abuses—is an example of what Anna Mollow calls for in her work on undocumented disabilities and hysteria's significance to disability studies. In particular, people (disproportionately girls and young women) who experience disabilities and illnesses for which institutionalization would have been likely in the Victorian period and which are not always readily recognized and quantitatively measurable by Western standards, such as epilepsy, endometriosis, narcolepsy, addiction, cognitive disabilities, chronic fatigue, mental illnesses, and environmental illnesses, often struggle to have their pain legitimized and taken

seriously—interpersonally, politically (i.e., within legal definitions of disability and disability assistance), and academically (within the broader field of disability studies). Physiological problems, as in the case of Dora, are frequently read as psychological, while trauma and its most common resultant comorbid conditions (both mental and physical), too, are often downplayed or ignored as inextricable aspects of disability, particularly due to the popularity of the social model of disability that in some cases attempts to disengage rhetoric of pain and suffering from cultural representations of disability. The ambivalent figure of the freak, who traffics in the grotesque and carnivalesque, at once demanding attention and, sometimes, jealousy, for their uniqueness, is thus an apt neo-Victorian cultural text for the modern-day ‘hysteric’ to inhabit. The figure of the freak, Garland-Thompson argues, is not as powerless and vulnerable as is often posited, while the power dynamics of the freak show are not as wholly exploitative and one-sided as they are often depicted.

Accordingly, Autumn’s performances evoke freak show imagery alongside visuals and rhetoric reminiscent of Jean-Martin Charcot’s medical theatres where he showcased hysterics. The freak show/medical theatre juxtaposition is also common within neo-Victorian performance and literature, primarily in order to link the rise of the freak as a significant foil to “rational” society to the medical and pseudoscientific discourses circulating during the period; Autumn’s mapping of this template onto the legacy of hysteria is an apt one, as it references the percolation of the field of psychology as notions of the disordered mind as clinically diagnosable began to congeal. Mapping this discourse onto the bodyminds of girls, too, is a pointed move,

as they were frequently the subjects of said discourses. The neo-Victorian/Charcot template is an especially fruitful one on which to map contemporary experiences of medical trauma, psychiatric disability, and their intersections with youthful femininity and sexuality, given hysteria's prominent role in the development of both the burgeoning field of psychology and societal views of women at the time.

“By constituting the freak as an icon of generalized embodied deviance, the exhibitions also simultaneously reinscribed gender, race, sexual aberrance, ethnicity, and disability as inextricable yet particular exclusionary systems legitimated by bodily variation—all represented by the single multivalent figure of the freak (10),” writes Garland-Thompson of the freak as a representative of an intersectional constellation of “othered” identities, ready for display and public dissection. Autumn sets up the collapsing of these various categories of difference (girl-not-woman, disabled-not-abled, traumatized-not-typical, sexualized-not-modest) in the early lines of “Girls! Girls! Girls!”, presenting ‘her’ hysterics as meant to be looked at and used, mined voraciously for their medical and sexual usefulness alike: “Come see our girls, crazy girls/If you’re willing to be thrilled, this is a hell of a ride/Those girls, crazy girls/They’re hot/they’re nuts/they’re suicidal” (“Girls! Girls! Girls!”). She uses the term “girls” presumably to refer to their age as well as in the sense of “less-than,” and in the flippant way that sex workers such as strippers, showgirls, and escorts are often packaged for public consumption in signage and advertising verbiage. Using terms like “nuts,” “crazy,” and “suicidal” interchangeably with “hot,” she packages their alleged psychiatric disabilities as inherently salacious and as justification for the

audience's salacious gaze. These girls, then, are not only worth looking at: they were *made* to be looked at.

“Accept our hospitality, indulge in abnormality” (“Girls! Girls! Girls!”). Autumn next invites onlookers, presenting the girls' freakery as entertainment and the audience as salivating voyeurs. Her repeated requests for more money, too, point to the commodification of the disabled bodymind for public consumption. Autumn continues by describing the array of trained hysterics as “a portrait of insanity, approach with your humanity”; thus, from the start, Autumn juxtaposes the ‘mad’ girls, the freaks, with the “typical” or “normal” audience members. This contradiction, Garland-Thompson argues, is key to the process of enfreakment: “The extraordinary bodies on display served as a reference point against which to construct and validate the ‘uniform abstract citizenry democracy institutes’” (10), she explains. Autumn's performers are thus othered because of their minds (as mentally ill) and bodies alike (as women-turned-girls, and as hypersexualized). Moreover, aping common Victorian freak show rhetoric, Autumn repeatedly seeks to “authenticate” the performers' disabilities (“This is the real thing, my friends, guaranteed, 100 percent, authentic, mentally ill!” (“Girls! Girls! Girls!”) and to justify the audience's voyeurism for them, rationalizing their collective “othering” via assertions of their own superiority and the freaks' obvious difference: “So point and laugh, it isn't bad/They oughtn't mind because they're mad!” (“Girls! Girls! Girls!”) she reassures them, before telling the audience that the patients are “really more like animals than people” (“Girls! Girls! Girls!”).

Later, Autumn warns the audience: “Some of them are really quite attractive as you'll see/Some are truly hideous, I'm sure that you'll agree/While others still look rather quite a lot like you and me/But you mustn't let them fool you!” (“Girls! Girls! Girls!”). These references to the girls’ simultaneous beauty and ugliness are reminiscent of Thomson’s assertions that freaks were both enticing and relegated to the realm of the grotesque, inviting both jealousy and horror as they stood in demonstrable opposition to the status quo. In terms of ‘mad girls’ in particular, given their history of being disbelieved and portrayed as deceptive and “not really” suffering (stereotypes that were likely exacerbated by some subjects’ actual histories of trauma that rendered them less trusting and more disoriented in time and relationships), these lines indicate that it’s precisely that inscrutability and “invisibility” that renders them so threatening, particularly at a time in which categorization and taxonomy were king.

Autumn’s critiques of the Victorian asylum as controlling and the nineteenth-century clinician as invasive and authoritarian are read by some neo-Victorian scholars solely as references to common neo-Victorian tropes, but they are also barely-veiled critiques of contemporary psychology and her own time in psychiatric hospitals, which she has openly claimed was abusive and traumatizing. At one point, Autumn-as-ringmaster begs the audience for help in further medicating her charges: “For a tuppence, just a tuppence, a handful of pills to feed the inmates/We’ve got pills for depression, obsession, aggression, possession, indiscretion/There’s a bloody pill for everything nowadays!” (“Girls! Girls! Girls!”). She has referenced what she considers to be a trend of overmedication, and her own experiences in being forcibly medicated,

in a variety of interviews. “This seems just a bit inhumane” (“Girls! Girls! Girls!”), one well-intentioned “observer” ventures. Autumn reassures her: “It’s just a simple little shock, it doesn’t cause her any pain” (“Girls! Girls! Girls!”), she tells the patron, in an obvious reference to electroshock therapy.

Electroshock (now “electroconvulsive”) therapy, which carries potent risks of significant memory loss and brain damage, was disproportionately used on women during the Victorian period, in part, some claim, because their minds and memories were not considered as precious, and because it could be used as a means of inducing docility and compliance. The therapy has made a resurgence in inpatient contexts in recent years and, it’s recently been discovered, is still used disproportionately on women—particularly forcibly. Thus, as many neo-Victorian scholars suggest is the ultimate aim of the genre, Autumn is demonstrating not only the contrasts between the past and the present but, for marginalized groups in particular, the striking overlaps and continued patterns. Moreover, “Girls! Girls! Girls!”, like Autumn’s other performances, takes several meta and ironic turns, as she appears to reference her own personal history and/or the fact that she and the other performers are, in fact, performing. After lyrically referencing the inferior size of girls’ brains, calling to mind nineteenth-century pseudoscience that claimed to be able to diagnose potential medical and mental conditions based on skull size and shape, Autumn’s character proclaims that “the only bits that aren’t inferior are bosom and posterior/And these are only useful in a seedy music hall” (“Girls! Girls! Girls!”), while gesturing at her own music hall.

This reference to the commodification of visible difference and the sexualization of mental illness in order to make it saleable (from which disabled performers usually profited much less than their nondisabled employers), is ironic in that Autumn herself is charging others to witness her suffering and the performative aftermath of her own trauma. She herself has been accused of sexualizing or romanticizing mental illness or of selling her traumatic past, similarly to the ways that freak show performers and sex workers are castigated for “selling their bodies.” Through lyrical and performative winks and nods, she tells the audience that she’s aware of what she’s hawking—and if not her, she implies, it would be someone else selling her story.

The initial verses and chorus are followed by a series of staged medical questions in the vein of vaudeville patter, with the girls doubling as inquisitive audience members. These serve as rundowns of medical history and ways for Autumn to “talk back” to the Victorian medical gaze by illustrating its ludicrousness through vulgarity and humor. One voyeur, for example, asks Autumn-as-ringmaster: “If insanity's primarily a femininish malady/And no one's doubting that for it's a scientific fact/Then according to the medics, are they faultier genetics?/Are they born with this disease, or is it something they contract?” (“Girls!” Girls! Girls!”) By turning dominant Victorian medical narratives into comedic rhyming singsong, she exposes them as ridiculous, while juxtaposing those patently ludicrous beliefs with the cage behind the girls, representative of the imprisonment and abuses to which those beliefs sometimes led.

In “Girls! Girls! Girls!,” in a performative move reminiscent of Kafer’s call for more attention to able-mindedness and Price’s focus on the bodymind rather than the body alone, Autumn is bringing the bodymind into the freak show setting, reviving the hysteric in order to display the legacy of suffering that institutionalization, in both its historical and contemporary forms, has often wrought—particularly for girls and other marginalized subjects. Echoing Price’s definition of the “bodymind” as a crucial feminist intervention into disability studies, Autumn adopts the freak show aesthetic in order to bring past and present girls’ minds and experiences of psychological distress to the fore. Charcot’s role in the cultural and medical history of hysteria, too, was more complex than is often indicated, as Petra Kuppers elaborates in “Bodies, Hysteria, Pain: Staging the Invisible.” “An elaborate machinery,” Kuppers writes, “was at work [in Charcot’s exhibitions] to bring the neurological, internal working of the hysteric condition into visibility, and to mark it on the body it ‘possessed’” (Kuppers 158). This kind of legitimization is precisely what Mollow references when she argues for the need to recognize “undocumented” disabilities as valid and worthy of concern and treatment. He certainly exploited young women (and occasionally, men) by putting them on display, hypnotizing them for primarily medical audiences and posing them in order to create an iconography of hysteria that was circulated in medical texts and among a range of experts. Elaine Showalter has noted that our subsequent cultural understanding of hysteria, of mentally ill women in general, and of depression and anxiety as a whole—as well as theatrical and media representations of Ophelia and other psychologically distressed female characters—have been heavily

influenced by those initial posed photographs in institutions, indicating that our medical texts, visual archives, and media representations of certain disabilities, particularly those deemed feminized/illegitimate, influence each other in turn. Koppers explains, for example, that it was the staging and theatricalization of hysterics' pain that led to more attention for the disorder and elevated it to the status of a "real" condition worthy of clinical consideration: "By proving that these people were not consciously in control, Charcot established the legitimacy of psychological conditions and their effects on the physical body—a fight that echoes with contemporary struggles to validate Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (otherwise known as chronic fatigue syndrome) and many pain-related impairments as genuine medical conditions that warrant the extension of social welfare or insurance benefits" (158).

This legitimacy-via-medical-theatre came with a price, though: Hysteria could only be "proven" by the expert hands of a male clinician, and was only brought into the realm of a pitiable condition (itself not an unproblematic perspective towards mental illness) with the help of the patriarchal medical gaze. Autumn's process of enfreakment, bringing hysteria and mental illness into the folds of freakery and disability, can be read as an attempt to legitimize this suffering and thus to contribute to the existing iconography of hysteria. Autumn stages this ambivalent encounter within the context of the Victorian-era freak show, with all its familiar trappings (carnival barkers with snappy catchphrases and the ubiquitous cane, crude posters, and cages for the 'hysterics') in order to attempt to take the lead herself, from the perspective of hysterical girl rather than medical authority. Rather than being

displayed, she is displaying histories in order for them to be prodded and unpacked:
that is, the collective history of which she is a descendant as well as her personal,
well-known history of mental illness and the trauma that catalyzed it.

Chapter Five

Welcome to Melanie Martinez's Pop Surrealist D-O-L-L-H-O-U-S-E

In September 2017, in response to a flurry of controversial reactions to her debut album, then-20-year-old indie pop star Melanie Martinez posted a blurry Polaroid selfie on Instagram. In it, she wore a shiny pink babydoll dress that contrasted with her exposed full tattoo sleeves and septum ring, her hair arranged in her customary split-dyed long pigtails. Against the wall behind her were an array of shelves crammed with vintage porcelain dolls and creepy bug-eyed toys, including disheveled stuffed animals and an ominous blue-eyed pig. Accompanying the photo was the following manifesto of sorts:

If you don't like pop surrealism you probably won't like me. If you can't understand that visual art has a deeper meaning and you only look at it for face value you probably won't get my work. If you can't understand that crybaby is a character, that the first record is representative of her childhood, and if you sexualize female pop artists on the daily you'll say I "sexualize babies." If you can't understand why someone would bring up mental health, growing pains from childhood to adolescence, family issues, and other uncomfortable topics we never hear about in pop music, you will probably just throw my music and art away as something that "glamorizes mental health issues" even though most of the people that resonate with my work deal with these things on a day to day and someone needs to be there for them. So here I am. If you have issues with my music and art and judge it so harshly to the point of making up your own reason as to what my intentions were when making it, you should just stop watching it. Because quite frankly, you. Just. Don't. Get. It. ("Melanie Martinez Instagram Post")

Indeed, Martinez's work, while wildly popular, has left many critics and viewers baffled. One of her first music videos, for her single "Cry Baby," begins with an unholy birth ("Cry Baby"). Visions of a pregnant mother in white, with requisite curly blonde hair and large pearl necklace, are interrupted by brief glimpses of medical

horror: the buzzing of flies, bloody medical instruments on a tray, and a clinical setting somewhere between today's sterile cold hospital rooms and Victorian-era instruments that look particularly ominous and primitive to the contemporary eye. The doctor is a silent man in a rabbit mask, as if yesterday's emo kids handpicked him from the set of *Donnie Darko*¹¹; the hospital walls are outfitted with a cat clock and other kitschy-retro gestures towards a 1960s aesthetic. The mother screams in agony as a pinata full of candy bursts out of her vagina. There is no father.

"It's a girl," a nurse with no whites in her eyes whispers, as a little boy (presumably the baby's brother) in a bright orange late 19th-century getup lights up his mom's smokes with a pink lighter. The mother's face contorts in horror: "Oh no, she's a crybaby," she laments in slow motion over the baby's sobs. The nurse removes the baby from her mother's judgmental sight, and her brother scrawls her birthright, "crybaby," onto a makeshift birth certificate.

From this surreal scene bursts Cry Baby—Martinez, now a young woman in full-blown temporal adolescent drag—who is born fully-fledged and already angsty, sitting up in her crib fully tatted and pierced, boasting candy-colored curls and braids along with a series of alternating quintessential Lolitaesque getups with neo-Victorian accents and a full face of meticulous Lolita/dolly makeup. Emilie Autumn's girlsona is rooted in the Neo-Victorian, leather, and metallic, and Martinez contrasts this with a girlsona stuck in a hellscape of Ozzie and Harriet, sugar, and plastic. Yellow ducks

¹¹ *Donnie Darko* is a 2001 film that has since found a cult following; the title character is a confused, suicidal, disillusioned, teenaged, outsider who has visions of a prophetic giant anthropomorphized bunny.

smile against the blue sheens of ruffled dresses, and Peter Pan collars and bows contrast with pop art prints amid oversized pink aprons and pinafores. Her nightmarish dreamscape launches out of nowhere in a timeless girl's bedroom, cluttered with the remnants of every major period of girlhood: Dolls, a wooden dollhouse, and teddy bears, reflecting the burgeoning focus on the girl at the end of the 19th century, are scattered next to the mass-produced brightly colored plastic toys ushered in during the mid-20th century, another key moment in the development of the figure of the culturally consumptive girl.

Martinez, as Cry Baby, is baby, doll, girl, teen, and woman at once, with the accoutrements of a child, the wooden high chair of an infant, and the expressive, aware, melancholic face of an adolescent or young woman. Still, her demeanor is affected rather than realistic, reflecting Theresa Winge's description of a Lolita's performance of her subcultural identity: "A Lolita's dress modestly conceals her mature body beneath ornately elaborate garments adorned with lace, ribbons, ruffles, and bows; she poses and conducts herself in order to create a surreal and fantastic childlike appearance; and she communicates kawaii characteristics—hypercute and hyperfeminine—with her dress, poses, and mannerisms" (50). This hypercute act, accompanied by the kind of pouty lips and doe-eyed blinking demonstrated in hundreds of Lolita lifestyle how-to videos, is contrasted both with Martinez's mother, who presents as a veritable caricature of abusive behaviors (drinking straight out of a wine bottle, for example), and with Martinez's own colorful language and eyebrow-raising antics, which foreshadow her later unraveling. Jane Mai and An Nguyen. in

their contribution to *So Pretty/Very Rotten: Comics and Essays on Lolita Fashion and Cute Culture*, list common motifs found in Lolita fashion:

A partial list: Alice in Wonderland, fairy tales (Cinderella, Snow White, Little Mermaid), cakes, candy, doughnuts, macarons, ice cream, cathedrals, famous paintings, ribbons, roses, violets, daisies, gingham checks, high-quality lace, pintucks, crosses, crowns, tartan, stripes, velveteen, peter-pan collars, heroines from Ghibli films, straw hats, maximum poofiness, A-line skirts, cherries, strawberries, rabbits, cats, poodles, angels, coffins, hearts, Mary Janes, Vivienne Westwood rocking horse ballerina shoes, skirts swaying with every step, armor.

Martinez draws from this list and beyond, mixing in images typically associated with horror and the grotesque, but rendered in a cute, pastel, and innocent aesthetic. She sports tattoos of ice cream, cake, and gumballs; her music videos feature cookies laced with poison; doughnuts that bleed when bitten; and dismembered bodies preserved in formaldehyde and lace. Asked during an interview if she played with a lot of these toys growing up, or if her music was a way of living a life she never had, Martinez replied:

I had a lot of Barbies growing up, and a lot of porcelain dolls, but I was scared of them. I was so scared of them, I would try to turn their head away and would make my mom take them out of my room. I couldn't look at them. I feel like, me now, I'm trying to cope with that fear I had as a child. Now, I just love them and make necklaces out of them. (NYLON).

Her music and imagery blurs lines between horror film, Saturday morning cartoons, and young adult novels like *The Babysitters' Club* book series.

“You seem to replace/Your brain with your heart,” she sings in a far lower-than-expected voice at the start of the song, pulling out a real brain and heart from the bowels of her twisted little girl’s paradise of a bedroom. Singing hauntingly about her tendency to wear her heart on her sleeve, Cry Baby confesses lyrically, “Someone’s

turning the handle/To the faucet in your eyes/They're pouring out where everyone can see/Your heart's too big for your body/That's why you won't fit inside." Meanwhile, Martinez spells out "FUCK" with alphabet blocks and angrily refuses the baby food offered by her drunken, hovering mother. She continues, "They call me Cry Baby, Cry Baby/But I don't fucking care/Cry Baby, Cry Baby/I laugh through my tears/Cry Baby, Cry Baby/'Cause I don't fucking care/Tears fall to the ground/I just let them drop," as animatronic toys team up to pull her hair and torment her. Finally, she gives in to "the faucet in her eyes" and sobs alone until she's drowned in her own fantasy of a bedroom, her blocks floating in a pool of her own tears.

"Cry Baby" is the first song off of Martinez's debut concept album of the same name; it's also the name of the titular character Martinez plays throughout, which she describes in various interviews as a "fairy tale" version of her "darker side." The album was released to mixed reviews, and though the album became an instant hit—debuting at #6 on Billboard charts, selling 40,000 copies in its first week, and shortly thereafter going certified Platinum—it also generated a great deal of controversy. Some critics accused Martinez of promoting ephebophilia or pedophilia with her girlified look. Reactions from self-avowed Lolitas were also mixed, with some praising Martinez as proof that the subculture was gaining mainstream attention and others uncomfortable with Martinez's mixing of Lolitan fashion with outside-the-box signifiers of a more 'adult' identity, like tattoos and piercings. Other critics often thought the girlhood metaphors were too heavy-handed and the imagery too in-your-face or cast Martinez as the inept little sister of Lana Del Rey, Alanis Morissette,

Fiona Apple, or Lorde—similarly beset by misery, but not yet sophisticated enough in her sad-girl presentation. Jason Lipshutz wrote in *Billboard*, for example, “Martinez is clearly cribbing from the dimly lit pop stylings of Lorde and Lana Del Rey, but while her wispy delivery strikes the same femme fatale poses, she lacks the subtlety of her influences” (Lipshutz).

Media perplexity, too, swirled around Martinez’s own distance from her persona, with some critics appearing unsettled by Martinez’s participation in the Gothic Lolita subculture in all aspects of her public life, as well as by her admissions of struggling with anxiety and psychological distress. One *Vogue* writer notes she’s wearing a “necklace made of doll parts” (Rosenzweig) at the interview, for example, before quickly writing off her getup as a promotional tactic or marketing ploy. Lilian Min wrote in *HelloGiggles*, “The blurry divide between her and her uncanny art alter ego (*Cry Baby*, whose journey defines the titular album) isn’t an accident: Like so many great pop artists before her, Martinez leans on a more exaggerated public persona to help define her space in the pop world.”

Still, all signs pointed to the fact that this persona was much more heavily integrated into Martinez’s identity than was comfortable for many viewers. When asked by a *Valfre* reporter about her need-to-have items when on tour, Martinez responded, “Stuffed animals to cuddle in my hotel room, my band, candy and snacks; especially chocolate chip cookies” (“*Girl Crush: Melanie Martinez*”). Asked to describe her style in six words, she responded: “Fluffy, Childlike, Whimsical, Pastel, Japanese Lolita” (“*Girl Crush: Melanie Martinez*”), indicating that if her adolescent

drag was indeed a performance, it was certainly an immersive one. Here Martinez, acting as the girl-grotesque, stands off against her cast-off girl persona. She is a girl who refuses linear progression through the Freudian stages and rejects her own ascension into the symbolic law of the Father, through deliberate delays (i.e. mixing babydoll dresses and tattoos), and through an overzealous embrace of the trappings of girlhood (through “adolescent drag,” the ruffles of a dollified Lolita adorned with dismembered doll parts). Yet, she is seemingly cast-off from both the Lolita subculture and the pop mainstream. Although commercially successful, Martinez’s concept album is too familiar to be art and too grotesque to be mainstream. She is cast off no matter which way she turns.

Indeed, every song on *Cry Baby* is steeped in twisted takes on girlhood artifacts and childlike mainstays, from nursery rhymes and fairy tale archetypes to tinkering toy sounds and girl-centered hobbies (i.e., playing with dolls and attending carnivals). Each of these nostalgic throwbacks is turned around to expose its more sinister underbelly and to explore a more ominous, adult take on the theme. The Wonderlandian journey through girlhood memories proceeds in order, with the songs telling a chronological story about an ageless girl, an Alice in Lolita garb and stuck in a whitewashed, traumatizing suburban dystopia. “Cry Baby” and “Dollhouse” provide an overview of Cry Baby’s life: Raised in a picture-perfect nuclear family, her reality is far more painful than its ornate trappings would suggest. Cry Baby’s mother is an abusive alcoholic who drinks to forget her husband’s infidelity, while her brother is an addict. In “Sippy Cup,” her mother kills her husband in a drunken rage and drugs Cry

Baby to keep her quiet. “Carousel,” like Autumn’s “Girls! Girls! Girls!,” draws from neo-Victorian freak show imagery, along with midcentury state fair visuals, to compare a toxic or abusive relationship to a carousel ride that Cry Baby can’t escape from. In “Alphabet Boy,” Martinez chastises the same boy for attempting to lord his degree and mastery of language over her; in “Soap” and “Training Wheels,” Cry Baby finds a more suitable love interest amid analogies to childhood mouthsoaping punishments and, of course, bicycle training wheels. “Pity Party” samples Lesley Gore’s 1963 hit “It’s My Party” as a musical backdrop for Cry Baby’s solo birthday party, to which no one shows up, including the boy she thought would be loyal. Abandoned by her parents and lover, a vulnerable Cry Baby undertakes an ill-fated game of tag and takes a misguided trip to an ice cream truck to comfort herself. “Tag, You’re It” and an ode to “Milk and Cookies” follow Cry Baby through a kidnapping and an attempted molestation, as well as her ultimate poisoning of and escape from her abuser. “Pacify Her” marks Cry Baby’s internal shift; destroyed by her abandonment and abuse, she steals a potential lover’s partner out of spite. “Mrs. Potato Head” explores Cry Baby’s relationship to her body image when faced with media representations of harmful beauty standards aimed at girls. And in “Mad Hatter,” in which Cry Baby channels Lewis Carroll, she finds kindred spirits in psychedelic visions of anthropomorphized toys and decides to stay firmly in the realm of Wonderland, ostensibly retaining her Lolitan identity and refusing to progress linearly to womanhood. Moreover, she declares that she’s “crazy” and now embraces it rather

than trying to elide it, in reference to the trauma she's faced and its inevitable aftermath.

Every song on *Cry Baby* is accompanied by a music video, each directed by Martinez herself. Each video is set in the same timeless suburban dreamscape/hellscape hybrid, populated by black-eyed cashiers and nurses, blue-faced boys, costumed doctors, kidnappers in wolf masks, humanoid oversized toys, and not much other life besides Cry Baby herself. The album was sold along with an illustrated storybook to complete the cohesive narrative. Rhyming couplets further the darkening of girlhood stereotypes and cultural artifacts and paint a picture of trauma and its aftermath: The "Dollhouse" poem, "And in her picture perfect home/Mommy's drunk while daddy moans/Her brother always comes home stoned/She watches in her room alone," is accompanied by an image of a stilted dollhouse, complete with Daddy and his mistress in one room, a passed-out Mommy in the other (bottle in hand), and Cry Baby with her requisite single tear. Moreover, the story hints at underlying pain and a trajectory of trauma and its consequences that even the music itself doesn't fully delve into: "She escaped and was never the same," declares the poem that accompanies the "Milk and Cookies" image, as an explanation for Cry Baby's newly self-destructive behavior.

Martinez's turn in *Cry Baby* is a prototypical example of the ways that temporal/adolescent drag and participation in neo-Victorian and Lolita subcultures can serve to interrupt and trouble dominant patriarchal narratives, as well as the usual narrative trajectories within mainstream feminism. For example, Winge writes that

“the [Lolita] subculture provides its members with a safe space to escape everyday life, but this may constitute either a positive form of resistance and agency, or a nostalgic and anachronistic evasion (or perhaps both)” (63). Martinez’s aesthetic evokes precisely this political ambivalence. Her visuals and lyrics are intentionally provoking and disturbing—evoking cultural anxieties and the mix of revulsion and enticement that are often characteristic of the grotesque—in the tradition of maximalist and pop surrealist art movements. She uses this aesthetic language and her own in-character temporal drag to turn Angela McRobbie’s notion of “bedroom culture” inside out, breaking down and parsing out the Freudian Oedipal family from the much-overlooked perspective of the girl. Additionally, Martinez’s work draws from the visual well of the uncanny (through, in part, dolls and dollification) as they relate to the grotesque, in ways that complicate and queer dominant media representations of traumatized and/or mentally ill girls. That Martinez works with parts, pieces, and pastiche to construct her complex and fractured, yet surprisingly cohesive, identity plays upon our fear of the cast-off girl and what she might bring back to us when we see her again.

Maximalism and Girlhood

Maximalism, a movement within design, visual art, and literature, is the aesthetic “language” of Martinez’s performances (and of many girl-centered, girl-driven subcultures). Often described as a reaction against the tyranny of minimalism, with its clean lines and ample white space, interior designer Sasha Bikoff says that the maximalist philosophy is “more is more” (Bikoff). A guide to “knowing you’re a

maximalist” in interior design digital mecca *Apartment Therapy* claims that two of the ways you can tell you want no part of the minimalist utopian craze are that you have a “collection of collections” and “your favorite color is everything” (Mitchell).

Characterized by redundancy (in Martinez’s case, bows upon bows, patterns upon patterns, pastels upon pastels), excess, and the intermingling and uneasy juxtaposition of light and dark (girl and wolf, children’s rhymes and trauma) and “high” and “low” cultures, the choice of a maximalist aesthetic for Martinez’s concept album cements its postmodern roots and its ambivalent approach to both the cultural figure of the girl and the trajectories of trauma and mental illness.

Maximalism is a particularly salient performative lens through which to explore the underbelly of girlhood through adolescent drag and the inscrutability of signs upon signs, accompanied by no clear attendant signifier. Writes Anna Watkins Fisher, “Adolescent drag draws upon the adolescent figure as a chain of significations, a network of reflections that bounce off of each other... She is always multiple, always overloaded, both allegorical and caricatural” (73). In media representations, girlhood is often defined by what it is not: not-mother, not-boy, not-woman. Moreover, it is often relegated to the realm of the insignificant or trivial; the color, whimsy, and playfulness of a maximalist aesthetic calls that triviality into question by draping it on the bodies and problems of an adult woman. Finally, the maximalist aesthetic speaks to a simultaneous questioning and reifying of the reductive definitions that peg girls as “too much” or “not enough.” These polarities condemn or condone, pathologize or normalize, ignore or glamorize, girls. As Valerie Walkerdine notes, the “girl” is

always accused of being “too something and not something enough” (“Girlhood” 15). “The “girl” is talked about as either excess or lack, good or bad, nice or mean, chaste or slutty, aggressive or passive, fat or thin, healthy or unhealthy, powerful or submissive, a real go-getter or completely out of control” (15), she argues. Locating girlhood outside of a binary, then (by, for example, leaning into the excess proffered by an aesthetic like maximalism), provides a chance at freedom, even if that freedom is only an illusion gained by inscrutability and the reductiveness of a gaze that sees only surface.

The literary critic James Wood gave a rather telling name in 2000 to a certain breed of postmodern literature that later became known as “maximalist”: “hysterical realism,” thus connecting books like David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, and Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* inextricably to the spectre of the traumatized girl (theoretically, at least) and to the perpetual whirring motion of young femininity and its alleged neuroticism. Writing for *The New Republic* about Zadie Smith’s massive postcolonial novel *White Teeth*, a nearly 500-page tome that covers over a century of history, Wood calls it a prototypical example of maximalist literature (which, by the way, he certainly does not mean as a compliment): “This is not magical realism,” he clarifies. “It is hysterical realism” (Wood). Within hysterical realism, Wood claims, plots are secondary; narratives are driven more by internal emotion and affect than by external events; descriptions and sidetracks are king; characters are always proliferating, spawning more and more as they make connections and feel ever more intensely; and talk is

cheap, intense, and most of all, frequent: “The big contemporary novel,” a “perpetual motion-machine,” “seems to want to abolish stillness, as if ashamed of silence” (Wood), explains Wood. But this is the stuff of carnivorous vitality, not life, he claims.

Expressing dubiousness that anyone could feel anything as intensely as Smith’s multiple narrators feel, well, everything, Wood skewers the ambivalence, multivocality, nonlinearity, and inscrutability of this breed of too-big-for-their-britches books. Moreover, to give a sense of the genre, he repeatedly pairs pathologizing language with the kind of disparaging epithets often aimed at young women in order to trivialize or criticize their behavior. Echoing common complaints about young women’s superficiality, vanity, and ultimate hollowness, he writes, “An excess of storytelling has become the contemporary way of shrouding, in majesty, a lack” (Wood). Later, he claims that books that fall under the umbrella of hysterical realism “have a showy liveliness, a theatricality, that almost succeeds in hiding the fact that they are without life: liveliness hangs off them like jewelry” (Wood). Like the girl of popular cultural imagination, who is at once vapid, concerned only with trivialities, and in mortal peril, both “too much” and not enough, adorning herself to excess in order to conceal her lack, maximalism is, in Wood’s estimation, all appearance and no substance, trafficking in everything and nothing at once: a gilded cage with no bird inside.

Wood’s description bears a striking similarity to critics’ takes on shojo manga, which proceed not as shonen manga do—i.e., plodding ever forward in a clean narrative arc—but which are instead driven by layered patterns that signify complex

webs of emotions. The reader is more like an emotional cartographer than a passenger of the plot, following along as the girl-heroine is gripped by flights of fancy that flit across the page and gets sidetracked into visceral fantasies, both dark and whimsical. “These characters emerge upon an ever-changing abstract background, sometimes called ‘wallpaper,’” Frenchy Lunning explains, “that surrounds and suspends them in a cloying miasma of roses of symbolic love, flower petals for happiness, and puffs of delicate feelings. These wallpapers act as an emotional chorus, overcoding the narrative with an effusion of emotion and signification” (11). Wood’s depiction of the sprawling postmodern novel at its most hysterically realist is startlingly reminiscent of Lunning’s descriptions of the emotional rabbit holes into which shojo heroines often plunge themselves: “An endless web,” writes Wood, “is all they need for meaning. Each of these novels is excessively centripetal. The different stories all intertwine, and double and triple on themselves. Characters are forever seeing connections and links and plots, and paranoid parallels. (There is something essentially paranoid about the belief that everything is connected to everything else)” (Wood).

Martinez’s music video imagery in *Cry Baby* draws from this artistic and philosophical legacy, one that links the very notion of girlhood to emotional and aesthetic excess. The bubbly lushness of her suburban paradise and her girltopia of a bedroom, paired with the sinister goings-on that take place inside it and her own hyperembellished getups, complicate and girlify notions of the grotesque. Each key aspect of maximalism is employed to toy with stereotypical depictions of the girl, whether by exposing the traumas often left unsaid or swept away for the purposes of

the cultural construction of girlish innocence; finding unexpected pleasure in carrying “girly” beauty standards and hobbies to their illogical ends; or juxtaposing the girl-in-crisis with her girl-power counterpart in a single Lolitan-Alice character. The characteristics of maximalism map well onto the figure of the mentally ill girl, as both mental illness and girlhood are associated with diversions, trivialities, and being/wanting/expressing “too much,” all of which are reflected in a maximalist aesthetic that embraces visual interruptions, clashing, layering, and redundancy.

Adolescent drag, as discussed in the previous chapter, in general can be read as a maximalist performative practice, given to mashups and forever mixing the vulgar with the serious; children’s games, fairytales, and nostalgic objects with the obscenities and pornography of adults; and mass-produced plastics with masterpieces. Fisher explains, “In these artworks, the mature/immature developmental binary gets mapped onto the highbrow/lowbrow taste divide, as amateur aesthetics emerge as the condition of possibility for a queering of the adolescent figure that transverses and troubles such normative binaries” (52). One of the ways in which this elision of binary traps is accomplished in adolescent drag like Martinez’s is through bricolage, or the productive collision of found objects, a commonly cited trait of maximalist art and design. Martinez’s bricolage reminds us that cast-off items can be rework and incorporated into a new and dangerous whole. The girl we ourselves may have cast off can be reincorporated and reborn in ways that threaten to expose our own culpability, related to Kristevan abjection, which festers at the site of the cast-off mother and bubbles into fruition in the muck of the presymbolic realm, where mother and child

were one, the semiotic chora where the boundary between subject and object is blurred and language is not yet articulable. Our fear of the cast-off girl comes from our knowledge that we are both titillated and ashamed of our own act of casting her off. Martinez confronts us with the border between desire and revulsion in her unblinking revelation of the adult under the adolescent drag. She embraces, rather than traveling through, the grotesque.

Bricolage is also characterized by a DIY approach to artmaking, improvisation, and the postmodern technique of polystylism. In visual art and architecture, bricolage often refers to the mixing of various styles from different periods. Martinez employs bricolage in her art design and costuming throughout *Cry Baby*, creating a collage of sorts that invokes nostalgia for various key moments in the historicultural life of the girl. “Pity Party,” for example, casts Martinez as a teenybopper at the cultural moment in which teenagerdom emerged as a phenomenon and the notion of adolescence began to coalesce. “Mad Hatter” alludes heavily to (of course) Alice and the prototypical neo-Victorian girl, while “Mrs. Potato Head” draws from the well of girl-crisis imagery that has dominated the media landscape since the 1980s. The choice to layer fetish objects from these key eras in the cultural development of the girl on top of one another is in line with the aesthetic of maximalism and is also consistent with Martinez’s evocation of a “traumatized timeline,” a historiography that—like the traumatized mind—proceeds by skips and starts, lingering first in this memory, then in another, never settling on a singular, distinct chronology.

Martinez's work is also heavily indebted to pop surrealism, which itself can be understood as a maximalist approach to visual art. Pop surrealism exploded out of an unholy union between pop art and the Lowbrow movement. Lowbrow was born in Los Angeles in the 1970s and influenced by zine culture, underground comix, tattoo art, and the punk scene. Following the rise of *Juxtapoz Magazine*, as well as another seminal publication called *Hi-Fructose*, a number of individuals within the Lowbrow art movement began breaking away from the raw, gritty representation of cartoons and counterculture. "Despite their master painter techniques," Angie Kordic writes in *Widewalls*, "these creatives did not reach the realms of the 'snobbish' Highbrow – nor was this their intention – but they nevertheless managed to blur the line between low and high art, giving way to a new subclass of pieces that could be defined as Pop Surrealism" (Kordic).

Cry Baby's pop surrealist connection is notable due to the movement's recurring images of both girls and mental illness. Pop surrealist art is distinctly populated by pathologized and abject youthful femininities. Doe-eyed ageless girls with massive heads on cartoonish miniature bodies are the antiheroines of pop surrealism. The "girls" are often hybridized and/or in various stages of temporal drag, enticing the viewer with sad sweetheart eyes and candy-colored spilled-out skirts before "spoiling" the viewer's voyeuristic gaze with disturbing details that unfold and sprawl across the psyche, infecting the sickeningly sweet image more and more the longer one looks. The girls, or girlified women, of pop surrealism are not passive objects, but rather knowing sirens, whose overwhelmingly large eyes cry out for your

attention before it's averted, interrupted, and diverted for more sinister purposes. Debra J. Byrne writes of pop surrealism's evocation of the carnivalesque, "While drawing from the aesthetics of street art and graffiti, pop surrealism is more sinister. Carnavalesque art...is not so lighthearted because it ultimately refuses escapism. Its aim is to confront. The would-be reveler is transformed into a captive spectator who is shown his or her mortality and that all is not quite right with the world. Laughter is invoked, but not for distraction—rather to trigger anxiety" (Byrne).

This anxiety is often triggered by visual cues that suggest non-normative bodies or that gesture towards abnormal psyches, often via Jungian archetypes¹² or disconcerting signifiers that often populate nightmarish dreamscapes and the unconscious. In pop surrealist Ray Caesar's work, for example, babies smoke pipes and sport fish tails, and girls' arms end in sinewy, snakelike branches rather than graspable hands. In his painting "Ecstasy," a Victorian girl, a vision of pink with piled-high dark hair, is fed a jar of blood or strawberry jam (we can't tell which) by an otherworldly force, seemingly out of thin air. The layering over of childlike themes with unnerving implications is a pop surrealist mainstay, and Martinez uses the trick herself in the music video for "Alphabet Boy," appearing at first to lick a butcher knife coated in blood with abandon before the viewer has a reasonable amount of time to register that it's jelly. Pop surrealist art frequently draws from the remnants of old

¹² Archetypes are what Carl Jung called "primordial images" and the "fundamental units of the human mind." Jung wrote in *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, "Archetypes are the living system of reactions and aptitudes that determine the individual's life in invisible ways."

masterpieces and sacred imagery and mixes them with cartoon and comics aesthetics, the unnerving details of horror, and the rawness of street art.

Most notably, Mark Ryden's "The Gay 90s" series skewers and honors the "earnest kitsch" of the late 19th century; Martinez's music videos can be read as performative manifestations of the series. In Ryden's "The Magic Circus," a red-haired Cry Baby lookalike invites the viewer with a confronting, melancholy stare to what appears to be her personal nightmare: a kaleidoscope of off-kilter kitsch that evokes both nostalgia and historical trauma in imagery reminiscent of freak shows, 19th century pseudoscience, and children's traveling circuses at once. Twin girls reminiscent of the famous miniature ghosts in *The Shining* play among an oversized long-necked cotton-candy-pink bunny, whose Disneyfied puppet hand empties blood into a toy monkey's goblet. Aborted fetuses, shrunken-headed demons, and body parts both human and animal, which are reminiscent of Victorian-era scientific drawings, lurk among lollipops, dolls, a Jesus toy holding unsettlingly expressive balloons, and a dancing octopus. As in all of Martinez's videos, the line between human and animal, human and object, and 'typical' and 'atypical' is blurred, leaving the door to the skitter-skatter corners of the psyche deliberately ajar. The girl-heroine of the painting, meanwhile, serves as something of a ringmaster, with a brightly colored puzzle as her clipboard and a peppermint stick as her baton. Stuffed into a box labeled "Meat Show," she appears resigned to her role as central archetype.

Martinez-as-Cry-Baby exhibits the same reluctant attitude towards her role as narrator/leader of an unlikely band of kitschy-creepy symbols and signifiers. Forced

into her role as postmodernism's and pop surrealism's unwitting poster child, she wields her power by framing it ironically and gesturing towards it with ambivalent tolerance, at once world-weary and resigned to her powerlessness in terms of what she's asked to represent. In fact, Martinez's world of characters and her own persona appear to be lifted directly from a Ryden or Caesar painting, in a performative take on pop surrealism that breathes human life into their painted sad-eyed girls. In Caesar's "Tea with Me and He," a Little Miss Muffet lookalike in a white wide-brimmed hat and pristine cupcake dress serves tea to a wolf with a man's body, nearly identical to Martinez's kidnapper and, potentially, sexual predator in "Tag, You're It." Moreover, his girls, like Martinez, often look directly at the viewer smirkingly—in defiance no matter what harm is coming to them (bee swarms, birds pecking their backs raw, or otherwise). If they are going to be consumed, they won't be easily washed down in a single gulp. By mapping her own youthful feminine persona and her own girl-read body onto their girl archetypes, however, Martinez risks being read (and has been read) as glorifying ephebophilia or as hypersexualizing herself, similar to the criticisms that have plagued Lolita subcultures for decades.

Often taking on neo-Victorian themes as well as creepifying 1960s pop art, the girls of pop surrealism pose in dresses layered with raw meat, are lost at carnivals amid animal-human hybrids, and gaze melancholically alongside pop art reimaginations of Abraham Lincoln, Mary, and Jesus. Asked about his choice to foreground the girl in his work, Caesar claims that the girls are alternative versions of himself, citing a

traumatic and abusive childhood from which he escaped by secretly dressing up as a girl. Of the girls in his paintings, he tells one interviewer,

They are a reflection of me and the way I see and define myself. They are completely movable digital dolls wrapped in my skin and with physical aspects of myself as an expression of my memory through my life...They inhabit spaces that are rich with the nostalgia, texture and odor of my own past.
(Gordon)

Likewise, Amanda Erlanson explains Mark Ryden's own identification with the girls in his paintings in *Juxtapoz Magazine*:

Languid girls who exude both a doll-like innocence and a knowing sensuality appear in nearly every painting...Within Mark's conceptual landscape, these porcelain waifs represent the anima, the Jungian archetype that mediates the feminine aspects of the unconscious in the male's emotional development. Indeed, Marion believes that each of the girls Mark paints is in one sense a self-portrait...Asked about his close identification with the feminine, Mark said, "I believe that beyond the arena of art, the world would be a much better place if centered around a feminine perspective." (Erlanson)

The girls in his paintings also, Caesar says, allow him to indulge a lifetime of dissociation, flashbacks, and the development of traumatized otherselves through visual sidetracks into nostalgia and feminine alter egos. Martinez's transformation into Lolitaized versions of the creepy, meat-draped girls that figure prominently in pop surrealist paintings, and her use of those performative forays into girl-adjacent alternative selves to explore the darker sides of her psyche and to revisit traumas, tells these stories from the perspective of the embodied, traumatized girl herself behind the archetype.

Moreover, while, for male pop surrealist artists like Ryden and Caesar, the girl can serve an imaginary point of freedom, a line of flight through which to take refuge and to experience as a romanticized safe haven (if a playful and boundless one) from

the grueling demands of performing normative adult masculinity, the women and girls expected to simultaneously uphold and resist the trappings of socially normative girlhood have to navigate a more complex cultural pathway. Moreover, their choice to use the girl as the appropriate prism through which to reflect upon their own shadow-selves, mental illnesses, and dissociative identities suggests a cultural linkage between the figure of the girl and notions of emotional and psychological instability.

Martinez's choice to embody these consummate figures of the unstable, the grotesquely cute and cutely grotesque, is thus an intriguing one: The psychiatrically disabled or otherwise non-normative girl or woman-as-girl is here, again, doubly othered, as even the visual presentation relief valves available to not-girls do not provide girls themselves with the same opportunities to elide binaries. Even Lolita scholar Moto Mastura warns that women who engage in Lolita subcultures or other forms of adolescent drag should ensure that there is a layer of division, via camp or other visual markers of disidentification, between a woman (especially a young woman) and her Lolita "self," so as to avoid the appearance of adhering to patriarchal standards, or girls-becoming-Girls.

The "D-O-L-L-H-O-U-S-E"

Like Lewis Carroll's Alice, Marina Warner writes, today's Lolitas seek "alternatives to the adult society of arbitrary laws, tyrannical rulers, and double talk" (xvii). While Alice's alternative space in which to explore the pleasures and truths girlhood can offer her is Wonderland, Cry Baby has only her home and the domestic sphere, to which she is firmly relegated. All of her outings prior to the final song—to

an ice cream truck, the local market, a bike ride, and a carousel—are centered around men, whether in the form of lovers who break her heart or of her kidnapper. Several music videos take place in her hyperreal pop art explosion of a home. In “Soap,” Cry Baby bathes in a clawfoot bathtub. In “Sippy Cup,” she watches her mother commit murder in the kitchen. In “Pity Party,” she celebrates her birthday alone in an elaborately decorated living room. Most of them, however, are in her dollhouse-themed bedroom. The *Cry Baby* bedroom setting, which is unnerving in its timelessness across eras both in cultural history and in the life of a girl (with the room functioning simultaneously as a little girl’s haven, a nursery, and a teen enclave), echoes McRobbie’s assertion that girl culture is bedroom culture, both by choice and by design. Youth cultures that require adolescents in particular to convene in public, she argues, have primarily been geared towards the interests and leadership of boys, while girls’ participation is overlooked or denigrated, with female punks (for example) painted as fangirls, hangers-on, or groupies. In other words, they are presented, particularly in media coverage of youth subcultures, as consumers of culture and recipients of male attention in those subcultures, rather than cultural producers themselves.

Cry Baby complicates and plays on this notion in several ways, most notably by her turning inside-out of the “bedroom culture” trope. While the bedroom was historically often presented as the safest place for a girl, due to her vulnerability to both the designs of men and her own fanciful whims if allowed into the public sphere, Cry Baby’s bedroom is just as unsafe as the outside, its boundaries permeable and

consistently transgressed or violated. Her family, first and foremost, is unsafe, with a monstrous mother and a barely-mentioned, neglectful father; the doors and locks, curtains and frames within her conventional suburban home are means of secret-keeping and the concealment of taboos and abuse (and, later, of her own escape) rather than self-preservation. She escapes her bedroom to the kitchen only to be drugged by her mother and returned promptly to her room, the site of alienation and aloneness rather than a chosen retreat. Moreover, her boundaries are consistently invaded, no barrier strong enough to protect her: Spoons of baby food are forced into her mouth; even toys come alive to haunt her (before she joins their sinister forces, of course). The flickering 1950s-era television brings in harmful media representations of beauty and white supremacy, encroaching upon the protective barriers around her psyche. When Cry Baby is kidnapped, moreover, she's brought to yet another bedroom almost identical to her own at home, indicating that the bedroom is far from an idealized oasis for the girl.

Sonya Sawyer Fritz argues in "A Room of Her Very Own: Privacy and Leisure in the Victorian Girl's Bedroom" that this (in part) neo-Victorian reconception of the girl's bedroom as permeable and open for public viewing, rather than as private haven of leisure and rest, is not wholly historically inaccurate. Fritz makes note of a 1935 autobiography, *I Have Been Young*, in which Helena Swanwick offers an unappealing description of her home life as a middle-class girl in Victorian England: "To 'be there' was supposed to be adequate occupation; I was a sort of eternal girl-in-waiting, always ready to be called upon... for the social amenities which I found exceedingly dull"

(57–58). And although privacy is perceived as paramount in many readings of Victorian life and values, the story was often different, Fritz claims, for girls:

Swanwick provides a telling image of a public persona that Victorian girls were often required to maintain in order to fulfill their domestic obligations in the home; as the notion of a ‘girl-in-waiting, always ready’ suggests, pressures placed upon Victorian girls...often inscribed duty over personal interests and publicity over privacy in girls’ experience of domestic space. (39)

Thus, the middle-class girl’s ostensible privacy (and modesty, and relegation to the domestic sphere) was, in many cases, a performance for the benefit of others, a decorative addition to the domestic tableau, and the provision of a silent but productive backdrop to visitors’ and family members’ lives.

Martinez’s illustration of this idea—that others’ public lives in many cases rely/relied on the concealment of girls’ lived, deliberately othered realities—can be read as a critique of the repressive-projective-obsessive Freudian Oedipal family and as a feminist Marxist analysis of the workings of reproductive labor. The work of reproducing such a family, and particularly the work of secret-keeping and serving as a silent repository for familial troubles and trauma, often falls on the shoulders of the silenced and shunted aside girl. This phenomenon is particularly conjured in the music video for the album’s second song, “Dollhouse,” in which Martinez appears as a literal doll, complete with painted freckles, trapped eternally in a heavy-handed metaphor of a 19th-century dollhouse. As the only “living doll” or doll-made-flesh in her otherwise entirely plastic family, the gilded-caged Martinez can only warn her real-life counterpart, played by an actual girl, of her apparent fate if she, like Martinez, continues to play the role ascribed to her. It’s heavily implied that Martinez is an older

version of the girl, now traumatized and thus sealed into her fate after the Oedipal family has robbed her of a potential self. As the family daughter (and thus, it seems, the scapegoat), she is asked to participate in a representational theatre of the Freudian unconscious in which she wants no part. As doll, rather than daughter, however, Cry Baby is able to escape out the “side door” of the Oedipal family and to reject the tyranny of triangulation, even if only because she is already wounded.

The video opens with an establishing shot of a little girl, Martinez’s presumed flesh-and-blood alter ego, playing with a doll version of her. Martinez, as Cry Baby, as doll, is decked out in full neo-Victorian Lolita mode with a baby pink pinafore and a contemporary twist (pink and purple curls, garishly painted lips, and caked-on eye makeup). Over haunting, tinkering toy sounds and the distorted gasp of a twisted Jack-in-the-box, Cry Baby-as-doll haunts the girl who owns the dollhouse by mimicking the demands of their respective family roles: “Hey girl, open the walls, play with your dolls/We’ll be a perfect family.” Her promise is undercut with a consistently sardonic gaze—Cry Baby has been here too long and is far past jaded—and the self-consciously robotic movements of a doll who is all too aware of her predetermined role. She quickly reveals the truth behind the plastic exterior, however, and consistently laments her silencing within the nuclear family configuration, which leaves her unheard and lost: “No one ever listens, this wallpaper glistens/Don’t let them see what goes down in their kitchen,” she sarcastically instructs her younger, human self, indicating that their role in the Freudian/patriarchal family is to serve as productive emptiness, the lack against which all other selves are measured.

Playing further on the notion of the unconscious as representational theatre, stuffed with symbols that all point back to desperate attempts to recover what has been lost (through castration, the mother wound, or otherwise), Cry Baby next directs the family to a series of Oedipal tableaux in which she always looks out of place next to their pasty plastic caricature of perfection; notably, she's also the only nonwhite member of her family. As the family poses for photographs, she reiterates the fact that each family member is meant to play out a particular psychic drama in a prescribed chronological order: "Places, places, get in your places/Put on your dress and throw on your doll faces." Repeatedly painting a contrast between the performance each member of the family is expected to perform to robotic perfection and the underlying, neurotic reality (no one makes it through the Oedipal complex unscathed, after all), she tells the girl, "Everyone thinks that we're perfect/Please don't let them look through the curtains," and, in another tongue-in-cheek implosion of middle-class respectability politics and the Freudian family-gone-nuclear alike, she explains further: "When you walk away, it's when we really play/You don't hear me when I say/Mom, please wake up/Dad's with a slut/And your son is smoking cannabis." Subsequently, she exclaims (referring to her mother), "Uh oh, she's coming to the attic! Plastic/Go back to being plastic," thereby connecting her own transformation into a doll—her own constructed mask layered atop the Freudian mask of repression—to an emotionally protective layer against familial trauma, as well as her own sideways form of freedom.

As the second song in the album, just after “Cry Baby,” which establishes the character of Cry Baby as a girlified version of Martinez in temporal drag, “Doll House” has expositional work to do (establishing, for example, Cry Baby’s mother’s alcoholism and her father’s wandering eye with lyrics like “When you turn your back, she pulls out a flask/And forgets his infidelity”), but it also moves beyond the aforementioned representations of the Freudian feminine-as-lack and feminist Marxist readings of invisible labor into a more complex vision of what girls can represent theoretically.

The Figuring of the Girl

Deleuze, unlike many of his critical predecessors, used the girl as an ideological prism through which to reflect and process his ideas, particularly his critique of psychoanalysis in *Anti-Oedipus*. In “The Woman in Process: Deleuze, Kristeva and Feminism,” girl studies theorist Catherine Driscoll compares the approaches of Kristeva and Deleuze with respect to subject formation in late modernity and its relationship to psychoanalysis, thus “considering how they place the girl as a pivotally difficult figure for the process of constituting the subject” (65). For both Kristeva and Deleuze, Driscoll notes, the girl occupies a particularly ambivalent, “lost” space within the Oedipal configuration; in fact, “the daughter does not belong to this triangle” (73) at all. Further, Driscoll argues “that in their accounts of body, desire and subjectivity both Deleuze and Kristeva produce ‘the girl’ as an impossible figure of anticipation and escape within the Oedipal framework” (64).

This figuring of the girl as at once theoretically inscrutable under psychoanalysis and thus as offering a potential productive site of creativity, freedom, release, and play is reminiscent of Luce Irigaray's assertion that "the daughter can become neither the father nor the mother, given that the mother is not a subject" (73-74), since femininity, including fully mature femininity, is constituted primarily as a lack or a symbol of castration. Excluded from the realm of the symbolic and paternal law, and disconnected from the mother, the girl is the 'other's other' and has nowhere to move within the available linear pathways of the Oedipal maturation process. The son, deprived of his initial love-object (his mother) by his father's incitement of castration fear, ultimately identifies with his father, while his desire for his mother is repressed and channeled into more appropriate libidinal drives. The girl's role is less clear, as she, too, apparently wants to possess the mother, then her father, and is ultimately doomed to re-identify with her mother primarily through their mutual lack (penis envy). Deleuze claims that within the psychoanalytic model, the "girl's becoming is stolen first" in order that she may become a proper object of desire for the boy, representing the possibility of reclaiming or recovering what he feels he has lost. Because she must, from the start, serve as a compensatory "victim" (of the loss of self), "example" (of what could happen to him—castration—if he does not comply with the patriarchal order), and "trap" (as an appropriate object of desire onto which the boy can project his lack and longing in order to resolve that loss), she has both nowhere and everywhere to go. "Becoming-woman," then, Driscoll concludes—drawing on Deleuze's assertions that 'the girl...is an abstract line, or a line of flight,'

that ‘girls do not belong to an age, group, sex, order or kingdom, but rather ‘slip in everywhere,’ and that ‘it is becoming-woman that produces the universal girl’”—“is a way of understanding transformative possibilities- the ways in which identity might escape from the codes which constitute the subject” (75). Indeed, while Freud presented the unconscious as a “representational theatre” with clear symbols and signifiers, Deleuze posits desire as a productive force, a desiring-machine connected to other desiring-machines that produces a flow of desire from itself (a series of flows which, one imagines, would be best represented by a maximalist aesthetic). Cry Baby’s fantasy world of girlled signifiers with no clear meanings certainly fits the bill; she is at once Lolita, girl, doll, and dollhouse, and anything but daughter, sister, or woman-to-be.

The notion of Cry Baby as a Deleuzian girl is furthered by her multiple slippages in identity, the permeable boundaries that shimmer around her shoulders and shoot her into the interstitial spaces between herself and Martinez, herself and a doll, herself and her little-girl counterpart, and the dollhouse and the family. Cry Baby, as doll, is surrounded by signifiers that point to the spectre of the Good Daughter, from giant bows to ice cream, teddy bears to training wheels. In her ghostly hands, they lose their socially normative meanings. Moreover, she, desiring everything at once from a place of potential rather than lack, asks the girl she’s counseling (and thereby us) to productively “forget” their implications. In this alternate universe where desire builds on itself, teddy bear becomes lover, girl becomes doll becomes the nonmonstrous mother she never had a hope of becoming, and her endless adornments, rather than

keeping her docile and presentable, allow her to escape the notice of the invasive Freudian eye, to shrink herself into the dollhouse and thus delay her descent into her feminine-as-lack of a destiny. As the song proceeds, she whispers conspiratorially into the ear of the Oedipal girl, who is struggling to proceed through the appropriate Oedipal stages, and pulls her into her world as a warning: *don't go there; don't do it. You will only lose if you try to move upward, but from where I stand, there's nowhere to go but sideways.* The know-it-all siren snake to her younger self's Eve, Cry Baby feeds her the red pill and tells her it's better to stay conscious and wanting, gathering, collecting, desired and desiring, than repressed. From this position, as forever-girl, she still experiences melancholy, but at least she knows everything, having achieved a kind of resigned omniscience, as she repeats consistently in the chorus: "D-O-L-L-H-O-U-S-E/I see things that nobody else sees/D-O-L-L-H-O-U-S-E/I see things that nobody else sees."

"Mrs. Potato Head" and the Grotesque

"The doll," writes Mari Kotani in "Doll Beauties and Cosplay," "is just another metaphor for death," making it an apt vehicle for reflections on the uncanny and the grotesque. Lolita fashion is heavily influenced by the ornate tradition of Victorian bisque dolls; Momo Matsura, discussing the relationship between Lolitas and dolls, writes of this connection:

Looking at porcelain or bisque dolls...ties Lolitas' fascination with death for a mental and physical state that will allow them to freeze time and create a sense of stillness and suspension...This death-like nostalgic state can be connected to the idea of being, remembering, and protecting the 'eternal.' It is not something that exists in a linear, forward-moving timeline, stretching forever into the future, but is something that lies outside an orientation towards the

future. It involves remembering and protecting certain aspects of the past and suspending them in time. (21)

Meanwhile, G. Stanley Hall, Victorian-era psychologist and the founder of the child-study movement, saw dolls as the keys to forward progression from girlhood to womanhood. In “Interrogating the Meanings of Dolls: New Directions in Doll Studies,” doll studies scholar Miriam Forman-Brunell writes that “G. Stanley Hall...argued that doll play taught girls key lessons in femininity and maternity” (Forman-Brunell 11). In 1896, Hall, a professor of psychology and president of Clark University, co-authored with A.C. Ellis “A Study of Dolls,” which posited that dolls represented a key socially appropriate means for girls to “practice” their future roles as women, wives, and mothers. Hall and Ellis argued that dolls allowed girls to practice appropriate, normative feminine futures and “ladylike propriety, beauty, and domesticity” (64). This view was largely accepted by feminist scholars for years, but was complicated by counter-cultural activists like the riot grrrls of the ‘80s and ‘90s, who sometimes dressed as “broken dolls” or campily dollified themselves for their music videos and performances in ways that often baffled critics, who associated dolls with passivity and propriety (allegedly the antithesis of the riot grrrl ideology). In “The ‘Dollification’ of Riot Grrrls: Self-Fashioning Alternative Identities,” Meghan Chandler and Diana Anselmo-Sequeira, for example, note that in the 1990 music video for “He’s My Thing” by riot grrrl mainstay Babes in Toyland, the performers “celebrated...grotesquely reconstructed doll figures by mimicking their scabs, scratches, and sutures. As a result of this perceptual twist, girls ceased to long for dolls that mirrored a beautified notion of self. Instead, dolls became the externalized

reflection of girls' hidden selves, personal obsessions, and coming-of-age nightmares" (64-65). Thus, Chandler and Anselmo-Sequeira elaborate, "Riot Grrrls found a voice in the otherwise historically silent figure of the doll, and became 'dollified' spokespersons for new feminist ideals" (65).

It was around this time that girl studies scholars and other thinkers and activists began to reconsider the culturally productive possibilities of the doll or of dollifying oneself as an act of resistance or pleasure. Indeed, "it was not until the 1980s," claims Brunell, "that...a new generation of scholars (baby boomers raised on postwar children's culture) [began] to question the patriarchal imperative of dolls and the presumed passivity of girl players. The new interpretive frameworks, historical contexts, and methods of analysis revealed that dolls were not uniform, static artifacts of a single dominant culture" (4).

Dolls appear in every *Cry Baby* video, as does the process of dollification or becoming-doll. Parents become Stepford Wife dolls with a robotic sheen; dolls litter the bedroom floors and spring to life, turning either comrade or menace; Cry Baby herself, of course, dresses in exaggerated doll camp for "D-O-L-L-H-O-U-S-E" and, to a certain degree, in her everyday wardrobe. Most notably, in the album's second-to-last song, "Mrs. Potato Head," the symbol of the doll is at its most versatile: at once a childhood source of pleasure, a means of mimicking normative femininity, and a vehicle for achieving the ultimate in objectification. Martinez's persona itself can be seen as the result of some degree of dollification, as she adopts a Lolitan alter ego as a bodily canvas, a revolving kaleidoscopic fleshly time-travel machine onto which she

maps various chronological ages, historical periods, and cultural iterations of the ideal girl. *Cry Baby*'s attitude towards dolls and dollification, then, is not a wholesale negative one. Resisting the too-easy reduction of any dollification process or dollish look to a representation of the patriarchy's demands on the girl, *Cry Baby* seems instead to take the stance that a mutable, flexible doll—one with the chance for agency, creativity, and productive nostalgia, like *Cry Baby* herself—can even be a tool of subversion, while a form of dollhood selected for you by an outside influence functions as a trap.

It's the latter process of dollification that comes to play in "Mrs. Potato Head," which uses the familiar mix-and-match movable-parts and constructable-face of the notorious plastic children's toy as an extended metaphor for women who undergo plastic surgery and other extreme procedures to meet the demands of men. The video for "Mrs. Potato Head" opens in the living room, the only video in the album to take place there. *Cry Baby* is fixated on the perennial consumer-culture centerpiece, the television, while brushing her doll's blonde hair. A 1950s-styled ad flickers on the TV, transmitting cultural messages to a preteen-styled *Cry Baby* via a commercial for blonde wigs. "All beautiful, all blonde," a smarmy spokesperson promises impressionable viewers. Propped up precariously on the heads of women of every race, the blonde wigs are indicative of the white supremacy that permeates virtually all conventional Western beauty standards, even if unspoken. *Cry Baby* knows, or at least is learning now, it's heavily implied, that her "ideal" form would be both white and womanly. Instead, she is Latina (unlike the rest of her family) as well as seemingly

permanently “girl,” far more Lolita than femme fatale. Seduced by the advertisement’s promises of superiority and beauty, Cry Baby shuts herself into the bathroom and coats herself with makeup, donning a blonde wig in direct imitation of the steps to attaining beauty that have been visually outlined for her. Weeping, she realizes she’s failed; nothing but something more drastic could transform her into the image she sees reflected back to her. In a now-familiar reversal of common childhood roles, she asks for advice from her toys, rather than directing their behavior, as she implores, “Oh, Mrs. Potato Head, tell me/Is it true that pain is beauty? / Does a new face come with a warranty?” Sucked into the television’s immersive promises of womanhood-as-future, she imagines herself as the show’s star, and we watch as a grown-up siliconified Cry Baby undergoes an extreme series of plastic surgery procedures to please her male counterpart. The surgeries are ultimately botched, and her partner leaves her for another identical model.

The symbolism of the mask and its connection to the grotesque, as Mikhail Bakhtin elaborates in *Rabelais and His World*, is particularly useful here, as the “mask” functions as the necessary layering-over of social norms that allows the girl to proceed to womanhood in true Butlerian fashion (learned, repeated, and punished when transgressed). “The mask,” he writes, “is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames” (40). In “Dead Meat: Horror, Disability, and Eating Rituals,” Julia Gruson-Wood notes that the monster-villain in horror texts (films, theatre, literature) is often wearing a mask in order to denote or emphasize their aid in the transition of his victims from health to

illness, whether physical, psychological, or societal (Gruson-Wood). But as a girl, Cry Baby visually and lyrically suggests, she is expected to already wear a mask; her very skin is a gendered performance, her body a decoration for the domestic interior. This inherent “maskedness” renders the adult female body pliable, having been subjected to one required cultural mask after another as she grew.

This suggestion is grotesquely realized in the video’s central scene, in which we’re asked to watch a gruesome cosmetic surgery conducted by the rabbit-headed doctor, in which he peels off grown-up-Cry-Baby’s Barbified “skin” and inserts breast implants on a distinctly doll-like body (albeit with human-like insides). In this vein, Martinez’s scalding lyrics reflect the connections between dollification and DIY art, and between objectification and death, as she sings: “It’s such a waste/When little girls grow into their mother’s face/But little girls are learning how to cut and paste/And pucker up their lips until they suffocate”; in the chorus, she gets more explicit about the necessary rigidity and “plasticness” of womanhood (as opposed to the flexibility and plasticity of girlhood): “Kids forever, kids forever/Baby soft skin turns into leather/Don’t be dramatic, it’s only some plastic/No one will love you if you’re unattractive.”

As Anna Watkins Fisher details in her work on adolescent drag and David J. Getsy elaborates on in “Queer Exercises: Amber Hawk Swanson’s Performances of Self-Realization,” Amber Hawk Swanson’s performance art traffics in precisely these kinds of visuals and themes; in her infamous The Amber Doll Project, she commissioned an exact replica of herself in silicone RealDoll (a humanoid flesh-

colored sex doll), created to her precise bodily proportions and sculpted to match her every curve. In her various projects on livestreaming platforms, Amber deconstructs the Amber Doll and other sex dolls, recreating them in true bricolage fashion into other creatures (a white whale, for example) in order to raise questions about agency, women's bodies as public property, the ways we figuratively "dollify" women on an everyday basis by reducing them to their parts, and the thin line between the human and the doll, separated only by the uncanny valley and our internal projections. In others, she allows strangers to use and, often, abuse the Amber Doll as much as they like, even abandoning her to said abuse, both to evoke an unsettling empathy from viewers for an inanimate object and to illustrate how little we often have for the female body (and, frankly, how much we apparently would like to do to it when left to our own, mob-mentality devices). Martinez's deconstruction of a projected version of Cry Baby's body accomplishes many of the same performative goals, both by alarming viewers by confronting us with our own penchant for exploitation and voyeurism and by forcing us beyond that alarm to experience perhaps an even more uncanny empathy for a nonhuman being.

At the video's close, Cry Baby, seeing her future's foreshadowing, removes the wig and presumably embraces a degree of self-acceptance, returning to her body, herself, and the now. And while Cry Baby's hypergirlish Lolita look raises some eyebrows as to its potential relationship to fetish, it's thrown into relief here against the meant-to-be-modified body of the contemporary woman, and is presented as Cry Baby's "real" self—that is, before outside influence is able to claim it. Cry Baby's

symbolic “return,” here, to girlhood thematically precipitates the movement into the following song, which sends her deeper into that rabbit hole of radical self-acceptance.

“Mad Hatter” and the Girl in Wonderland

If the doll is, indeed, a metaphor for death, Martinez’s message in “Mad Hatter,” is rather on the nose, as Cry Baby escapes a future of dollhood by fully indulging the fractalizing effects of trauma and dissociation. “Mad Hatter,” the last video on the *Cry Baby* concept album and the chronological end to Cry Baby’s story, opens with a shot of a slightly-older Martinez, her hair arranged in blue bows reminiscent of Alice’s iconic dress, smoking a bowl on her bed. Confronted in her bedroom by the nurse and the cashier from earlier videos—the only adults in the series besides her own parents, and most notable for their knowing smiles and irisless black eyes—she quickly succumbs to temptation, drinking from the “Drink Me”-labeled shrinking potion that allowed the first Alice to go anywhere she liked.

Next, a robotic doll-girl (perhaps what Cry Baby would have become, had she proceeded through the linear maturatory phases expected of her) launches Cry Baby into a full-fledged psychedelic Wonderland, a brain-oozing remix of her cluttered childhood bedroom. The explosion of “bedroom culture” comes to its full fruition here, as the bedroom becomes the world, and the world littered with the candy-colored remains of Cry Baby’s destroyed girlhood.

From the start, however, this is no “ordinary” Alice as we’ve ever seen her. Blowing heart rings from her bong, she zigzags into an imitation of the Cheshire Cat. Later in the video, her hair piled atop her head in dramatic Renaissance fashion, she is

more Queen of Hearts than Alice. Accompanied by a gang of giant Rushton “rubber face” toys who defend her at all costs, this Alice is the spinning axis around which Wonderland whirls, but not its singular identifiable heroine. Rather than merely portraying a darker, older Alice, Martinez disrupts our tendency as viewers to map the Alice narrative onto her; instead, like the Deleuzian girl who willfully takes on the shape of anything that strikes her fancy, she transforms into every shape and signifier, spilling sideways into every manner of Wonderland character.

She is at once the rabbit and its hole, Alice and the Mad Hatter, the Queen of Hearts and the Cheshire Cat, the consumed and consumer, meat (as in Ryden’s paintings, with the girl stuck in the meat display) and carnivore. The girl, she seems to imply—the traumatized Alice—is not merely herself, but expansive enough to embody all of Wonderland, and difficult to pin down or package, label, and commodify for an easy sale. Her dizzying array of alternative identities is suggestive of the dissociation common after childhood trauma like what Cry Baby has experienced, and evokes in vivid detail that Clementine Morrigan describes as “trauma time” or a traumatized, fractured relationship to temporality.

Launched into a Wonderland that doesn’t know whether it wants to be utopian or dystopian and that purports itself as a living graveyard of a lost girlhood (populated by psychedelic visions, giant doll-puppets, melting faces, donuts that sprout legs and bleed jelly and pop surrealist absurdities), Cry Baby confronts “adults” in various nonhuman forms while lyrically riffing on and sinisterizing Alice references with lines like, “Skinny dipping in a rabbit hole for fun,” “We paint white roses red/Each shade

from a different person's head," and "Getting drunk with a blue caterpillar." She peels the rubber off her own face when confronted by two robotic alter egos of her parents, in effect rebelling against their judgment of her by embracing and throwing back the accusations leveled against her (neuroticism, hypersensitivity, and overemotionality, for example), the objects of her girlhood now weaponized as tools of defense (perhaps in a nod to regression or defense mechanisms). She parrots back collective expectations of her as "crazy," "psycho," "mad," and "nuts," lyrically mocking and ironizing terms often leveled at mentally ill girls in particular for her own usage. "Over the bend, entirely bonkers/You like me best when I'm off my rocker," she slyly accuses the listener, mocking media stereotypes of mental illness and reversing the aim of the derogatory terms used to describe her, thereby implicating the collective public in "making her this way." She declares herself as finally belonging where she never did before, if only outside the bounds of nuclear family or any form of symbolic logic to begin with, singing, "The normals, they make me afraid/The crazies, they make me feel sane."

After she frightens off her parents, an "adult" version of Cry Baby encounters the "White Rabbit"—that is, the doctor who delivered her as a baby—now as a psychiatrist (thus representing the sole "point of logic" within the chaos of Wonderland, a throwback to the patriarchal origins of hysteria, and Alice/Cry Baby's initial introduction into the world), peddling mood-altering drugs and sporting a blank, sinister stare. Buoyed by the support of her toy-gang and the trappings of her girlhood-gone-bad, she lyrically references the legacy of hysteria, citing a medical system that

often dismisses women's claims: "Where is my prescription?/Doctor, doctor please listen," she pleads snarkily before continuing, "My brain is scattered/You can be Alice, I'll be the Mad Hatter," again subversively reversing their expected roles and dissipating the myths of the possibility of a coherent sense of narrative or identity within the chaotic realm of "trauma time." Next, as the chorus explodes into a series of rebellious declarations of her status as "crazy"— "I'm nuts, baby, I'm mad/The craziest friend that you've ever had/You think I'm psycho, you think I'm gone/Tell the psychiatrist something is wrong"— her Rushton dolls similarly explode through the floor and surround her protectively. She jumps on a chair to confront the rabbit-doctor, defeating him once and for all and declaring victory over her brain's chaos as her plush minions back her up. Later, she transforms into a colorful dish of ice cream, but her ragtag troupe of lost toys stabs the four robot-adults leaning in with spoons to death before Cry Baby can be consumed.

Thus, rather than "growing into" the woman she is expected to become, Cry Baby has "grown" her girlhood companions, the accoutrements of her past, up to her current size to serve her changing needs. And if this is her fate, Cry Baby seems to suggest—trauma time, that is—then she might as well make the most of it, surrounded by her girlhood sources of comfort. Moreover, Cry Baby's rebellious stance concerning her history of trauma mirrors what Brian Bergstrom refers to as the divine "criminality" of the Lolita/shojo character in girl-centered manga:

The elaborate costuming, ostentatious use of outdated verb forms, and cloyingly hyperfeminine mannerisms of the Lolita subculture function as a way to reimagine the very aspects of girlishness that render them a "crime" against sociality and productivity. The implication is that these are strategies

whereby the disciplinary machine of normative embodiment is preempted through covering the body in exaggerated signs of its inability ever to be anything but what girlhood has made of it. (30)

The iconography of girlhood and tattoos, Bergstrom suggests, are appropriate bedfellows, if only because their relationship to time and trauma is similarly chaotic. Rather than throwing away girlhood wholesale or becoming the mother she feared as a child, Cry Baby instead clings to what gave her pleasure, giving them due space in the complex sprawl of her fractured psyche.

In “Mad Hatter,” as elsewhere in the Cry Baby universe, Martinez plays on the visual and allusory canon (here, Alice) historically associated with the girl, drawing deeply from its well of cultural and literary signifiers while deviating from and mixing them to produce affective disturbance, disruption, and disorientation in the viewer. In “‘But I’m grown up now’: Alice in the Twenty-First Century,” Catherine Siemann notes that, in the reinvented Alice of contemporary video games, graphic novels, and films, the Victorian/neo-Victorian heroine navigates a significantly more sinister landscape, in part due to posthumous allegations of pedophilia against Carroll, but also likely due to the cultural narrative that casts today’s girls as “growing up too fast” and as perpetually subject to hypersexualization that prematurely ages them. Siemann writes, “The re-envisioning of Alice dates back to Carroll’s day, as Carolyn Sigler’s *Alternative Alices* shows us, but in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the controlled menace of the original is transformed into outright violence, insanity, and sexual threat. In order to negotiate this darkening terrain, Alice is portrayed as a young woman in her teens or early twenties” (175). And if, as Catherine Driscoll argues in

Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory, “like Antigone Alice has also continually appeared in theoretical texts—from literary formalism to poststructuralist philosophy—implicitly elaborating the significance of the girl to late modernity” (44)—then Martinez’s turn in “Mad Hatter” represents Alice’s debut as a postmodern girl.

The Girl Begins to Shout

Attempts to represent mental illness by girls are often read as cries for help, glamorization, or commodification. Martinez was particularly accused of “glorifying” or pedestalizing mental illness, as she noted in her response to critics on her personal Instagram. Though those accusations shouldn’t be taken lightly, the carnivalesque embrace of “insanity” in neo-Victorian reimaginings of girlhood, particularly in light of the pop surrealist canon and iconography from which she draws, is more complex than a mere wholesale reversal of mental health stigma. Rather, as Kathryn Bond Stockton suggests of Lolita’s displays of agency, desire, and rebellion in her analysis of the survivor-victim-heroine’s “queer childhood” in Nabokov’s novel, and as Watkins Fisher describes in the “adolescent drag” of artists like Amber Hawk Swanson, Martinez’s attitude towards trauma, identity, and mental illness in the final moments of *Cry Baby* collapses the definitions of victim and victimizer and denies easy reductions of her persona to hypersexualization and objectification. Rather than championing the aftermath of trauma or reveling in the traumatized psychological landscape, *Cry Baby* manages her traumatized reality by populating the world she’s been thrust into with objects of girlhood pleasure and comfort. Rather than

disappearing into the psychological ether, they return with a vengeance for comfort or revenge whenever Cry Baby is again beset by distress.

At the song's close, she is awakened by the Nurse and Cashier from prior songs—those who served as her only, and unlikely, allies in moments of crisis, when conventional sources of comfort (mothers, fathers, love interests, food, parties) failed her. Like them, Cry Baby now has irisless jet-black eyes, suggesting that she has been “inducted” into a strange sorority she never pledged—one inhabited only by women whose sisterhood is tethered to their mutual pain and distress, but who have chosen (or been chosen for) the whirlpool of “trauma time” rather than their expected linear progression towards motherhood.

By vacillating between child and adult, between woman-turned-girl and girl-turned-woman, Martinez builds a compelling example, via pop surrealist iconography, of the “adolescent drag” Fisher describes and what Morrigan calls “trauma time,” in their performative, pop cultural iterations. Often, work like hers (popular, sexualized) is read shallowly—as an easy pandering to hypersexualization of girls, or an unfiltered glorification of mental illness, for example. These readings and critiques are not entirely invalid and deserve consideration, but they do miss out on a crucial materialist reading of Cry Baby as mentally ill, and as an example of the real traumatized girl behind media sensationalism and pearl-clutching.

In some ways, in pop surrealist tradition, Martinez represents the individual character of Cry Baby via a plastic, ever-transforming amalgamation of cultural images of the girl over time. The “lost daughter” of the Freudian family, about whom

little is said until she becomes a hysteric or neurotic (and by then it's too late), and the dutiful media representative of every cultural crisis from selfies to sexual predation (as either victim or naive perpetrator, but never agential actor), she represents the theoretical scraps of societal ideas about gender, the family, and maturity: the leftovers of rhetoric gone stale. Like the girls in Ryden's and Caesar's paintings, she is everything and nothing, a kaleidoscopic sponge for societal woes and the axis around which a revolving galaxy of unmoored signifiers spins.

However, Martinez's turn in *Cry Baby* also has significant implications in terms of answering the question of how psychosocial disability might be effectively represented in performance. There is a growing body of evidence that, after trauma, conventional talk therapy is not helpful for everyone, particularly for those with chronic PTSD after childhood abuse, molestation, or sexual assault. Regurgitating the past "exactly as it was," some psychologists postulate—that is, conventional modes of talk therapy—can actually exacerbate the aftermath of trauma and cement the memories for certain individuals. Modes of performative, deliberate, and tactical forgetting—of "emptying out," as it were, and of actively engaging with the past via temporal drag and visualization rather than literally recounting traumatic events—it logically follows, could thus present potentially productive ways of performing/staging invisible disability (particularly psychosocial), and of representing the fractured relationship to time and reality that is so common in the aftermath of trauma.

Cry Baby's madness/ "sickness," moreover, occupies the dubious position of representing both an actual psychosocial disability and the collective hysterias that often come to bear on the Everygirl. Much of the concern about Martinez's performance seems to stem from the cultural fear of the girl as a spectacle with nothing at her center, all show and no tell, an ultimately empty decorative object. Thus, she is either pegged as "too much," given to excess, or "not enough." In a reading of the Lolita figure that looks to the reasons for the widespread ambivalence towards and confusion regarding the subculture, Lunning writes, "If we look deep under the ruffles, within the swirl of constellated objects and the myriad signs of this hyperbolic feminine character, we find a dark space of paradox, ambiguity, and loss" (19). Kotani similarly warns would-be Lolitas and admirers of the shojo heroine of the dangers of taking on a Lolita identity too literally: "A gap between girls and their shojo-ness must be inscribed somewhere," she argues. "Otherwise we will be drawn into a hegemonic structure that simply makes girls into girls" (50). (However, that seems to be exactly what Martinez is doing—quite deliberately). The neo-Victorian Lolita's willful adoption of the labels assigned to her (commodified, overdone, "girly," and excessive, for example), Lunning also argues, is key to the potential power of the neo-Victorian/Lolitan counterpublic; in this vein she writes,

The profile of a sweet, endearing, but utterly disposable commodity form allows for a denial of value and meaning, at the same time it allows her to monopolize commercial constructions and advertising. She is a Trojan horse: she has appeared at the gates of the patriarchal fortress not as the grown and terrifying Amazon of the women's movement but as a guileless and powerless little girl of popular culture. We are ensorcelled, and we have let her in. (18)

Indeed, by reducing the girl to a collection of signs divorced from their meanings, pop surrealist artists have demonstrated the frequent reduction of the girl to a piece of double-sided sticky tape littered with signs herself, more symbol than sign and more signifier than signified, but a magnet for every collective affect (and a symbol with massive cultural appeal and power) nonetheless. And by embodying that forever-disembodied girl, Martinez draws from and builds on pop surrealist traditions and calls attention to the personal traumas often leveled against girls—ones that often get subsumed under the category of “cultural crises” or “trends” and are only rarely broken down into their human, lived-reality parts.

In his initial takedown of the poststructuralist novel and what he termed “hysterical realism”—of which Martinez’s work is certainly an example—Wood ended his ambivalent critique of the burgeoning genre by asking, “Which way will the ambitious contemporary novel go? Will it dare a picture of life, or just shout a spectacle?” In *Cry Baby*, if nothing else, Martinez presents us with a sustained image of what it looks like when the perennial spectacle of culture, the girl, begins to shout.

Conclusions

The concept of a “bedroom culture” was first introduced to youth cultural studies in the 1970s by Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber (1975). They sought to account for gender in studies of youth culture that primarily documented the subcultural activities of young white males using the concept of social class. McRobbie and Garber outlined the reasons why teenage girls were absent in these accounts and what they were doing as an alternative. Girls were frequently considered as “hangers-on,” associated to subcultures only through their boyfriends. However, McRobbie and Garber surmised that teenage girls’ invisibility in these accounts did not mean that they were not participating, but rather that their subcultural lives were being lived out in an alternative domain: the bedroom. The subculture of girls was different from the subculture of boys. In their bedrooms, girls have enacted and represented alternative possibilities in this immediate life space. But the performance once considered private is now was also turned outward and even captured by the girls themselves webcams and social media. Although girls’ bedrooms have been considered somewhat ordinary, the practices that take place in this experiential space are complex, highly nuanced, and far from trivial. This has allowed traumatic experiences and previously hidden or private identities to be shared. The cast-off girl is now accessible, not only to others of her kind, but also to anyone with social media. At this point, it’s difficult to say whether the cast-off girl is becoming socially legitimated through societal exposure or further ostracized. But what becomes apparent is that bedroom culture is no longer the secluded space it once was and must

be re-examined.

It's hard not to be struck by the awareness that what you might call the 20th-century idea of a youth subculture is now just outdated. If we consider bedroom culture the counterculture of the teenage girl from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, then the changing landscape of the hidden nature of the bedroom calls for re-examination in the internet age. Social media has allowed the girl not only to connect bedroom-to-bedroom with other girls, but also to become part of the driving force of society at large: If teens of all genders spend the vast majority of their time online, then the demarcation between bedroom culture and boys' culture outside of the home becomes less clear. In this dissertation, I have hoped to look at the proliferation of girlsonas in the new modes of communication, but it is clear that the spaces occupied by girls are in a period of extreme transition. The changing technological, media, and performance landscape calls for further examination of the construction of girlhood in our age.

Previous depictions of the cast-off girl only found large markets through best-selling books such as *Reviving Ophelia* and Hollywood films such as *Girl*, *Interrupted*, or top-down-oriented stage musicals such as *Borderline*. Changing technologies and modes of performance have enabled the cast-off girl to depict herself as she is. Girls such as Emilie Autumn and Melanie Martinez have taken charge of their own madness and trauma in order to construct girlsonas over which they have primary control. Proceeding from my conception that the cast-off girl exceeds the boundaries of girlhood, embodying the perceived aspects of girlhood that are deemed inappropriate for public display, there is clearly more work to be done regarding

whether this folds into or changes the nature of the abject. The quickly changing nature of current media, and how much agency the cast-off girl has in regards to its production, will determine whether the cast-off girl is rendered more abject or accepted as part of the norm.

Nonetheless, the benefit of this turning outward of bedroom culture is that, through the use of girlsonas, the cast-off girl can depict herself on her own terms and from within the confines of her comfortable environment. Seeing Melanie Martinez's videos for the first time, and knowing the creative control that she had over the creation, young girls may not be tempted to focus on the confines of the home in the bedroom, but rather on the creative possibilities of performance. A great deal of Internet culture and new performances is focused around the creation of new material, rather than on the consumption of products. For example, in an interview with *The Guardian*, one teen girl explains why teenage girls make YouTube videos about recent shopping purchases as such: "It's not just about showing what you've got. It's a whole creative process behind the videos as well, which is what I enjoy about it. Choosing the right music, going from the filming to the editing. Sometimes I even storyboard things, because I want certain shots, how I can present different items and things like that" (Petridis). Going forward, it seems that the concerns of the teen girl might have a platform through which to gain legitimacy equal to that of teen boys and adult women. Now that girls and boys use the internet in relatively equal numbers, there is more inquiry to be done on how the respective genders will be affected.

Of course, one area in which this dissertation has admittedly lacked is in

attending to how racial difference affects the cast-off girl's interaction with the internet. Home life and bedroom culture are not monolithic across various demographics, so there is room to do more work on how social media can help or hinder the incorporation of mad girls of different racial backgrounds into a more public life.

Nonetheless, I have hoped to re-examine girls who are rarely seen as agential cultural actors. Since girlhood is not seen as something someone does, but instead as something of which you are a victim, it can be employed to turn a mirror to the gendered stereotypes that men adopt for the purposes of reflecting on their own imagined womanhoods or feminine sides with the added complication of women looking back retrofuturistically into the girlhoods they had, wished they had, are reclaiming, or suffered from. There are countless other representations to be exhumed from this dumping ground which is full of an assorted collection of "girl troubles." These works that dominant culture has rendered illegible/invisible as performance must be further resurrected and reframed in order to assert their artistic and performative viability. Across a wide range of media, performances of and by the girl are dismissed as existing on a continuum of silly to harmless. The concerns of girlhood are dismissed as inconsequential, but when these girls express themselves, they are often met with concern, censorship, and handwringing. And it seems this concern is not geared at the girls themselves, but at the audiences potentially exposed to their messages. The girls are cast off and cast aside. My research started by asking how it is that girls' cultural productions, such as banned Instagram hashtags, can be

simultaneously insignificant and dangerous. There seems to be a broader societal concern, while disregarding the individual. A significant portion of adult female artists and performers retain aspects of girlhood through an overzealous embrace of its trappings. Girlhood contains an allure and power prompting these artists to hold onto it in spite of its perceived illegitimacy. I aim to call more researchers to examine these neglected products of girls of all backgrounds.

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