

Madwomen Out of the Attic: The Rise of Catastrofemales in Contemporary North American Literature

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Introduction

Born at the midpoint of the 1990s, I still remember the dawning years of the twenty-first century and the first half of the 2010s, up until the moment I came of age, as a period of time in which the future was still widely imagined as an endless horizon of opportunities and possibilities. Ambitions and aspirations shifted repeatedly throughout my childhood and adolescence, yet one conviction remained the same: that happiness and personal fulfillment were not only possible but structurally guaranteed to those willing to pursue them. To be the first university graduate in my family, to travel beyond Europe, perhaps even to live abroad for a brief period of time, to even pursue professions that up until that moment seemed almost exclusively reserved for men—all these ambitions were not experienced as exceptional but as ordinary extensions of a broader cultural script that associated personal effort and sacrifices with a pre-determined successful outcome.

Embedded in a broader cultural formation that shaped millennial girlhood in the late 1990s and early 2000s, this script was articulated through a ubiquitous rhetoric of empowerment, grounded in a deep-seated belief that women were capable of becoming anything they desired if only they “put their mind” to it. Encapsulated in slogans such as *The Future is Female*, this corporate-friendly, postfeminist optimism circulated across media and popular culture as a promise of self-actualization secured through individual effort and devoted participation in a career-oriented lifestyle, offering women of every age a coherent narrative of life: one in which success, independence and personal fulfillment were positioned as both desirable *and* attainable, provided that one adhered to the rules of an ostensibly meritocratic social order.

By the first half of the 2010s, however, as this cohort entered adulthood, the material conditions that had sustained this narrative up until that moment unfortunately began to unravel. The optimism of the previous decade gradually gave way to a more ambivalent cultural register, one defined by the escalating reconfiguration of the socio-economic climate following the 2008 recession: economic stagnation, the expansion of precarious labor, rising housing costs, and the erosion of all those stable trajectories of professional and personal development that individuals had previously taken for granted. What had once been experienced as a promise of futurity suddenly turned into a deferred or obstructed possibility, one that could *still* be imagined but not so reliably inhabited. Millennial subjectivity became, in this context, the object of intensified cultural scrutiny: simultaneously hyper-visible and persistently pathologized, represented as both over-privileged *and* under-performing, both entitled *and* disadvantaged by the sudden “turn of things.”

As Rebecca Liu (2019) observed, “Being a millennial feels like being stuck in a permanent state of on-the-cusp adolescence,” as all the achievements traditionally associated with coming of age have suddenly come to appear increasingly out of reach, rendering adulthood itself a horizon indefinitely postponed into a deferred future. Across journalistic and popular discourse, however, millennials’ arrested development—their decision to remain in parental homes, to delay marriage or child-rearing, or even to adopt a minimalist lifestyle—has frequently been framed as an *individual*, albeit irrational, choice, almost a moral failing, rather than a response to structural changes, thus recasting systemic economic transformations as personal failures or deficiencies.

It is within this context that contemporary cultural production has become increasingly preoccupied with forms of female disaffection and maladjustment. Television series such as *Girls* (HBO, 2012-2017) and *Fleabag* (BBC Three, 2016-2019) stage this quintessentially millennial condition through antiheroic figures

who are at once compelling and deeply polarizing. Yet, while Hannah Horvath, the protagonist of the former, was widely perceived as an irritating and self-absorbed young woman from the moment she first appeared on the small screen, by the time *Fleabag* came around, the same repertoire of “bad” behaviors—drinking to excess, picking fights with people close to her, sleeping with strangers and even a friend’s lover—suddenly started to evade the accusations and complaints they had previously generated, producing instead praise and recognition from their audiences. The shift between these two receptions, of course, does not signal a transformation in the characters themselves, but rather a change in the cultural grammar through which female failure has come to be read, circulated, and consumed in the past decade. Emerging directly from this cultural landscape is a new investment in fictional women who do not resolve their disaffection but inhabit it as a persistent mode of being, attuned to the realities of the new millennium.

While television has played a central role in articulating this formation, contemporary literature has produced an equally significant but less systematically theorized body of work. Recent critical interventions have begun to identify a broader and loosely defined category of “millennial fiction” (Cummins 2021; Bordeau & Lloyd 2025), while in more informal contexts, cultural journalists have started to notice the emergence of a messy “millennial woman” (Bergman 2020; Batkie 2020; Rosenfeld 2021; Brousset 2023; Fletcher 2024). However, while these accounts—more or less clearly—register a recurring pattern, they do not fully articulate the conceptual stakes of this literary formation. This dissertation, thus, argues that these narratives of female disaffection collectively produce a historically specific configuration of female subjectivity that exceeds—while also drawing on—the explanatory capacity of existing feminist categories such as the antiheroine, the madwoman, or the unruly woman. To better account for this figure, I propose the concept of the

catastrofemale: a mode of literary subjectivity born at the intersection of neoliberal precarity, postfeminist disillusionment, embodied mental distress, and anti-aspirational affect.

The *catastrofemale* emerges most visibly in twenty-first-century North American fiction, particularly in narratives centered on aimless women who are simultaneously highly self-aware and structurally immobilized, and whose disaffection is neither fully pathologized nor narratively resolved. Across novels such as Alexandra Kleeman's *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* (2015), Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), Halle Butler's *The New Me* (2019), Melissa Broder's *Milk Fed* (2021), and Emily Austin's *Everyone in This Room Will Someday Be Dead* (2021), female protagonists consistently inhabit conditions of failure, exhaustion and psychic disintegration that are inseparable from the socio-economic structures that organize their lives. Rather than functioning as cautionary tales or purely nihilistic portraits, these narratives instead articulate a mode of critique that is both rooted in social structures and the characters' lived emotional experience. In doing so, they expose the limits of neoliberal logics of self-management, while simultaneously refusing the redemptive frameworks through which female suffering is often narratively contained. As a result, they portray figures whose embodied madness is neither external to subjectivity nor reducible to individual pathology but instead embedded within the material conditions of everyday life.

This dissertation, accordingly, situates the *catastrofemale* within a broader genealogy of feminist thought and feminist literary criticism, engaging critically with second-wave feminist accounts of female madness, particularly the foundational work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, while also drawing on Foucauldian understandings of madness as a historically produced discourse of regulation. At the same time, it extends these frameworks through posthuman feminist theory, particularly the materialist philosophy of Rosi Braidotti, in order

to reconceptualize madness not as an individual psychological deficit but as an embodied and relational phenomenon produced through the entanglement of bodies, systems of powers, and socio-historical forces.

Within this framework, madness is therefore employed as a critical interpretive category rather than a clinical designation: an umbrella term through which to theorize forms of feminine disaffection and opposition that exceed normative distinctions between sanity and pathology. From this perspective, psychic distress in contemporary fiction signals less a private failure than a material register of structural inequality, making visible the uneven distribution of precarity across gendered, racialized, and classed lines. Catastrophe, accordingly, is no longer merely an external condition represented within the narrative but becomes inscribed within the embodied existence of the characters themselves, rendering their (fictional) subjectivities a privileged site through which broader political, cultural, and economic processes become legible.

The dissertation is organized into four chapters. The first one establishes the conceptual and methodological framework of the study, situating the catastrofemal within ongoing debates on antiheroines, female madness, and contemporary representations of millennial disaffection across literature and television. It articulates the limitations of existing critical paradigms and proposes the catastrofemal as a necessary reconfiguration of feminist literary analysis in the context of twenty-first-century capitalism.

The second chapter examines Halle Butler's *The New Me* (2019) and Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), focusing on privileged white millennial protagonists whose attempts at self-transformation—whether through aesthetic self-discipline or radical withdrawal through sleep—ultimately expose the impossibility of resolving structural alienation through individualized practices of self-betterment. It argues that these narratives stage

madness as an embodied and embedded response to neoliberal and patriarchal demands, while also revealing how fantasies of self-renewal are unevenly distributed across axes of privilege.

The third chapter turns to Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018), analyzing how racialized unbelonging reconfigures the catastrofemal paradigm by replacing the luxury of elective withdrawal presented by the two previous narratives with the structural necessity to endure and overperform within the late-capitalist machine. It demonstrates how Candace Chen's condition of estrangement is shaped by transnational forces underpinning racial capitalism and a direct confrontation with the model minority myth. As a result, Candace is *forced* into over-productivity, which, within the economy of the novel, functions both as a survival strategy and a mode of self-erasure. In this context, urban space becomes both the site and the medium through which her unbelonging is experienced, negotiated, and intermittently reconfigured.

The fourth and final chapter examines Raven Leilani's *Luster* (2020), focusing on how black female subjectivity transforms the catastrofemal framework by foregrounding the embodied inheritance of racial and gendered violence. It argues that Leilani's novel ultimately dismantles residual redemptive scripts of motherhood and self-making, articulating instead alternative modes of relationality grounded in abjection, artistic practice, and precarious forms of care. In doing so, it reveals how visibility and belonging are continually negotiated from *within* systems that simultaneously render black female bodies hyper-visible and structurally marginalized.

Taken together, these chapters demonstrate that the catastrofemal is not a stable literary type but a dynamic interpretative category whose analytical force depends upon its capacity to register the uneven distribution of precarity across different social positions. By tracing how female madness is differently

articulated across axes of class, race, and embodiment, this dissertation ultimately argues for a reconceptualization of contemporary feminist literary criticism that understands female subjectivity not as an autonomous psychological category but as one *materially produced* through the intersecting forces of neoliberalism, late capitalism, racialization, gender and precarity. Far from offering resolution, the catastrofemaleness names a condition of ongoing instability in which failure and disintegration become the very means through which the contradictions of the present are made narratively and politically legible.



Figure 1 Frances Ha (2012), dir. Noah Baumbach.

Chapter 1. Catastrofemales of the New Millennium: The Disruptive Antiheroines of Contemporary North American Fiction

1.1 “Not a Real Person Yet:” Antiheroines, Slacker Girls, and the Precarious Women of Contemporary Television

The scene is set: a small restaurant in New York City; it is night. A man and a woman, Lev and Frances, sit at a table, their plates long cleared, while they wait to pay the bill. Frances kindly offers to cover dinner, having recently received a tax rebate, but her credit card is unexpectedly declined. She apologizes to the waitress, then turns to Lev to poignantly confess: “I’m so embarrassed. I’m not a real person yet.”

Directed by Noah Baumbach and co-written with Greta Gerwig (who also stars in the movie as the titular character), *Frances Ha* (2012) recounts the challenging and often painful transition to adulthood of Frances Halladay, a twenty-seven-year-old aspiring dancer living in New York City who, despite refuting the traditional path towards maturity (namely, securing a financially stable job, a fiancé, and a new apartment), desperately attempts to turn her artistic ambitions into her everyday life, whilst also grappling with the ever-pressing matter of becoming “a real person.” Amiable yet unpredictable and unreliable, Frances does not plan too much for the future; rather, she lives in the moment, easily guided by her instincts and whims into whatever adventure comes next. From the outset, her fate feels inevitable: as the story unfolds, the audience quickly realizes that Frances is unlikely to achieve her dreams, as the movie avoids the one-in-a-million success storyline often endorsed by Hollywood, but advocates for adjusting one’s own expectations and dreams in

the face of reality, all while maintaining a positive outlook that finds beauty and happiness in the mundanity of life.

Released in 2012, *Frances Ha* signaled the impending shift in the depiction of womanhood that would unfold in contemporary media representations over the course of the next fourteen years, anticipating some of the character-traits that would become recurrent, and often exacerbated, in later portrayals: a desultory career trajectory and the financial instability that usually comes with it; the complete absence of the marriage plot from the storyline, with platonic relationships—primarily between women—usually favored over romantic ones (which on the other hand, more often than not, end in failure); the protagonist’s presentism and in-the-moment mentality which often lead, consciously or not, to her own self-sabotage; the ever-present sensation, underlying in all these representations, of not being “a real person” yet, with the coming-of-age process toward adulthood still in motion and, perhaps, never-ending.

Indeed, the number of female characters conforming to the “Frances Ha” mold has significantly increased over the past decade, transcending genres (comedies and dramas alike) and even crossing international boundaries:¹ Issa Dee from the American comedy-drama series *Insecure* (HBO, 2016-2021), Julie, the critically acclaimed lead of the Norwegian movie *The Worst Person in The World* (*Verdens Verste Menneske*, 2021), Arabella Essiedu, the protagonist of the British drama *I May Destroy You* (BBC One, 2020-2020), or even the highly-awarded eponymous lead of the British comedy-drama *Fleabag* (BBC Three, 2016-2019) are just few notable examples from a much broader and ever-growing list of unruly women. Yet, while Frances and Julie’s personal growth is tied, within the narrative arcs of the movies, to their eventual settling into a career-path that,

¹ It is perhaps needless to say, but the international boundaries referenced here primarily concern the interactions and thematic correspondences in the Western world, meaning between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe. However, due to the scope of this research, the following discussion will particularly focus on US programming and American literature.

though unexpected at the outset of the story, ultimately leads them to a sense of self-realization—thereby reinforcing the neoliberal idea that a woman’s happiness and fulfillment are achieved through work or career ambitions—the characters featuring in contemporary TV series break away completely from this narrative. Unconditionally anti-aspirational and repeatedly self-sabotaging, these female characters have sometimes been labeled “slacker girls”² (Hoby 2012; Snow 2022) but are predominantly recognized as antiheroines³ within the recent academic discourse (Bruun Vaage 2016; Talley 2016; Brost 2020). Antisocial, nonconformist, and self-involved, the disruptive women of twenty-first-century television refute, in Sarah Hagelin and Gillian Silverman’s (2022) words, “the myth of the modern-day superwoman—she who ‘has it all’” (xiii), as they revolt against the status quo and the policing expectations women are daily subjected to. Rejecting discipline, personal decorum, middle-class respectability, career ambitions, beauty norms, and sometimes even motherhood—the very ideals American society imposes on women—these fictional antiheroines present a far more nuanced portrayal of the contemporary female experience, and consequently challenge the narratives that past representations would have us believe.

² First emerging in the 1990s, the character of the slacker has come to embody the stereotypically cynical, apathetic, and aimless young man, representative of Generation X’s disillusionment and oppositional stance towards mainstream society. Also described as Gen-X’s equivalent of hippies (Hanson 2002), slackers lack the radicalism and revolutionary spirit that characterized the previous generation’s countercultural movement. Instead, their ethos revolves around the belief that “work [is] worthless, depressing, and unredemptive” (Lutz 2006, 8). Examples of this traditionally male character appear, for instance, in *Slacker* (1991), *Reality Bites* (1994), and *Clerks* (1994). For further information, see Lutz (2006). Despite being historically tied to male experiences, the term “slacker” has more recently been employed to describe certain antiheroic female figures whose narratives similarly reflect disaffection, stagnation, and a rejection of ambition and conventional adulthood. In this sense, the “slacker girl” contributes to a reimagining and updating of the staple character type that defined much of the 1990s and early 2000s media through a female-centered perspective (see Hoby 2012; Snow 2022).

³ While the Merriam-Webster dictionary uses the expression “female antihero,” scholars traditionally prefer either “antiheroine” (Friedman 1987; Tzikas 2011; Buonanno 2017; Haas, Pierce & Busl 2020) or the hyphenated variant “anti-heroine” (Talley 2016; Jager 2017; Kramer 2019; Brost 2020; Gardner 2024).

As a matter of fact, over the past decade, television has been populated by a host of female characters “the likes of which,” Hagelin and Silverman asserted in their recent study *The New Female Antihero* (2022), “we have never seen before” (ix). This circumstance is, however, hardly surprising considering that, as Amanda Lotz (2006) observed, complex female characters—whether heroines or antiheroines—struggled to gain narrative prominence on network television at least up until the second half of the 1990s, as women have traditionally been relegated either to situation comedies or cast as isolated token figures in male-dominated dramatic settings. Indeed, from the outset, prime time “domestic” sitcoms promoted an ideal of femininity that centered exclusively on marriage, motherhood, and selfless devotion to the household, being firmly rooted in traditional family dynamics and gender roles. Sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-1957), *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (ABC, 1952-1966), *Leave it to Beaver* (CBS and ABC, 1957-1963), *The Donna Reed Show* (ABC, 1958-1966) epitomized this ethos, offering sanitized portrayals of white, middle-class life in which women existed almost exclusively within the confines of the private, domestic sphere. Though dramatic television occasionally featured more active or adventurous female characters, their presence was typically limited to isolated roles that still complied with patriarchal expectations, spotlighting sexually appealing women who operated under the protection or supervision of male partners—as in the case of *Honey West* (ABC, 1965-1966).

Beginning in the 1970s, however, a gradual yet significant shift began to take place: influenced by the social transformations brought about by second-wave feminism and changing cultural attitudes toward rigid gender norms, a new generation of refreshing television heroines finally started to emerge—funny, daring, career-driven, and occasionally transgressive women. One of the most enduring formats to appear during this period was the single-girl sitcom, inaugurated by *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977), which departed

from earlier domestic narratives to portray an independent, unmarried working woman pursuing personal success and self-realization in the big city, reflecting the growing participation of upper- and middle-class women in the workforce. From the 1970s onwards, this formula gained increasing popularity, shaping the narrative structure of iconic television shows such as *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-1998), *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2002), and *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), whose protagonists embodied various iterations of liberal feminist ideals—ambitious, stylish, sexually liberated, and professionally driven. The mainstream success of *Ally McBeal*, in particular, signaled a cultural watershed moment, establishing female-centered dramas as viable, even desirable options for network programming (Lotz 2006).⁴

Yet, what was once regarded as either unconventional or nonconformist now appears, from the vantage point of the present, remarkably traditional and comfortably orthodox. Wonder Woman's (*Wonder Woman*, ABC and CBS, 1975-1979) unprecedented physical strength—needless to say, a trait typically coded as masculine—was offset by Lynda Carter's attractive physique, which, in addition to earning her the title of Miss World USA in 1972, fully encapsulated the beauty standards of that era. Murphy Brown's controversial pregnancy out of wedlock was mitigated by her strong work ethic and integrity. Carrie Bradshaw's promiscuous sex life was tempered by her romantic aspirations of marriage and happy-ever-after in her chic New York City co-op apartment, the highbrow equivalent of the suburban house with the white picket fence. Indeed,

⁴ The development within television that ultimately led to the proliferation of dramatic series centered on women between the late 1990s and early 2000s was, of course, not simply driven by an impromptu desire to foreground female voices. This transformation was closely tied to socio-cultural and, most importantly, economic shifts, as advertisers—and consequently television networks—started to recognize women as a desirable, targetable demographic due to their growing financial autonomy and consumer power. As a result, both broadcast and cable networks expanded their programming for women, diversifying their products and providing multiple platforms (such as the cable networks Oxygen and Women's Entertainment, or Lifetime, which was rebranded as "Television for Women" in 1994) to support a broader range of female-centered narratives. For a more detailed account of the rise of female-targeted networks and the concomitant shifts in advertising strategies, see Lotz (2006).

as Hagelin and Silverman contend, this generation of female characters stood out for their pluck—their boldness to ask for raises, to sleep with men out of wedlock, to take down villains and bad guys; in short, for their resolution to go where their fictional predecessors of the 1950s and 1960s had never dared to. But their transgressions, still constrained by the gender norms of Western society and played by the rules of late capitalism, ultimately pale in comparison to the actions and behaviors of twenty-first-century antiheroines. Marked “not by [their] pluck but by [their] punch and pathos” (Hagelin & Silverman 2022, x), the antiheroines of the new millennium are brutal, ambitious, and cunning in dramas, self-centered, aimless, and destructive in “slacker” comedies—unquestionably, the true outcasts and outlaws of contemporary television.

While such portrayals may be unprecedented for fictional women, audiences have become accustomed to similar controversial representations at least since the 1990s, when antiheroes first began to prevail even in small-screen entertainment. Indeed, character traits such as an unrelenting desire for power and domination—as exemplified by male leads such as Tony Soprano (*The Sopranos*, HBO, 1999-2007), Walter White (*Breaking Bad*, AMC, 2008-2013), Dexter Morgan (*Dexter*, Showtime, 2006-2013)—or, in comedic contexts, an unabashed indulgence for squalor, childishness, and uncleanness—as demonstrated, for instance, by Larry David in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (HBO, 2000-ongoing)—have long been culturally coded as stereotypically masculine. At the same time, the glorification of the transgression of rules and adherence to an independent moral code within these antiheroic narratives has been traditionally understood as standing in stark opposition to all those societal ideals and values, associated with morality, propriety and domesticity, that have been historically gendered as feminine.⁵ Informed by the lingering influence of the separate spheres

⁵ These gendered dynamics—equating morality, propriety, and family life with femininity, and associating power, domination, autonomy, and self-determination with masculinity—reflect the enduring influence of the separate spheres. Rooted in Victorian gender ideology, this doctrine

ideology, this conservative gender dynamic—in which the embodiment of “masculine” traits is valorized through the rejection of feminine-coded aspects of society—helps explain why antiheroic arcs, both in literature and on screen, have primarily been dominated by men, rather than women. The antihero’s repudiation of domestic conventions, customarily aligned with the feminine sphere, paradoxically serves to reaffirm patriarchal conventions, rendering his transgressions not as acts of subversion, but as means of consolidating his own masculinity. Yet, when women lay claim to similar narratives, the dynamics unsurprisingly shift significantly. Female characters who assert power and control, embrace their libido, exhibit narcissism or selfishness, or even engage in physical abjection—features that characterize many twenty-first-century antiheroines—inevitably clash with longstanding Western cultural expectations, which have historically positioned women as “a standard of civilization”⁶ (Towns 2009, 682), entrusted with preserving and transmitting the moral and cultural values of polite society.⁷ Antiheroines’ appropriation of traits

posited an essentialist and hierarchical division between men and women: men, regarded as physically strong, independent, and driven by sexual desires, belonged to the public spheres of society, politics, paid labor, and authority; women, considered physically weaker, morally superior, and primarily devoted to children, were, on the other hand, confined to the private sphere of domesticity, childrearing, and religious piety. While this ideal was most strictly embodied by middle- and upper-class white families, it exerted cultural influence across all classes, even when economic realities—such as those among working class families, both white and non-white—rendered its full enactment impossible. Feminist critiques, most notably Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), exposed this model as a socially constructed paradigm that limited women’s identities to dependence on men and domestic roles. Contemporary phenomena such as the insurgence of “trad wives” represent a rearticulation of this dichotomy, often disguised as a feminist choice but effectively re-embracing a patriarchal model that confines women to domesticity under the guise of female empowerment. For discussion of the separate sphere ideology, see Friedan (1963), Welter (1966), Rosaldo, Lamphere & Bamberger (1974), Kerber (1988), Tétreault (2001); for its resurgence in “trad wives” rhetoric, see Cappelle (2023).

⁶ This idea originates in women’s central role in historically upholding the social fabric, whereby their (unpaid) reproductive labor has entailed several duties and obligations such as childbearing, childrearing, housekeeping, the transmission of ethical and moral values, and the provision of emotional care within the nuclear family. Yet, over time, this role has also come to include forms of paid employment in professions traditionally coded as feminine—such as teaching, nursing, and caregiving—which have often been understood as public expressions of the values and responsibilities associated with the private, domestic sphere.

⁷ Though this statement is framed in universal terms, it is fundamental to bear in mind that women’s moral standing was, especially in past centuries, determined by race and class, and thus primarily reserved to white women—specifically, the wives and daughters of those with the power to define societal norms and values. It is, therefore, not surprising that in media depictions,

traditionally marked as masculine not only signals a deliberate rejection of the prescribed feminine sphere in which they have been discursively inscribed and confined, but also disrupts the presumed stability of the masculine sphere itself, undermining the binary structures through which female subjectivity and agency have been conventionally constructed. Rather than reinforcing their femininity, antiheroines, through their downward spirals, dismantle the gendered logic underpinning their narrative arcs, thereby posing a more profound challenge to entrenched misogynistic societal norms—a dynamic that arguably accounts for the greater empathy and tolerance more frequently extended by audiences to their male counterparts (Castellano & Meimaridis 2023).⁸ It is within this framework that the women of twenty-first-century television emerge as disruptive antiheroines: their rebuttal of normative femininity and resistance to the status quo position them, in Hagelin and Silverman's (2022) words, "against the norms of civilization" altogether (2). Thriving in the newfound freedom to explore the darker, uncharted aspects of womanhood, they finally enter a realm that, until recently, has been precluded to them, namely the domain of "prestige

the female antihero who rebels against these values is often portrayed as white and middle class. See Hagelin & Silverman (2022).

⁸ As Margrethe Vaage (2016) argued, many antihero series exhibit "a tendency to cast not just the domestic sphere, but everything feminine, in a negative light," in order to ensure that the antihero's detachment from the domestic world is perceived as an exciting escape from a life that is depicted as merely boring and dull (154). However, this kind of indulgence is not extended to antiheroines, whose rejection of motherhood and traditional ideals of patriarchal domesticity is far less readily accepted. This also illuminates why, in the last decades, many female characters who are still law-abiding and morally upright have been erroneously categorized as antiheroic. Discussing Emily Nussbaum's (2018) classification of Carrie Bradshaw as "the first female antihero," Laura Bennett observed in her article "Against Antiheroes" (2013): "Carrie could be irksome as a character, but *Sex and the City* was defensive of its protagonist in a way that *Breaking Bad* and *The Sopranos* never were, permitting Carrie to be abrasive and vain only to rein her in at the last minute with a pat, chastened ending [...]. It is hard to deny that seeing 'antihero' applied to Carrie provides a quick, simple thrill of analytical recognition. But in the end, it confuses more than it reveals." Another case in point is the character of Betty Draper, who, throughout all the seasons of *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015), was extensively criticized and villainized both by critics and viewers for being a careless parent—something that her husband, Don Draper (yet another widely praised antihero), was never condemned for (see, for example, Ryan 2013; Emmons 2013; Mackie 2015). The mischaracterization of Carrie Bradshaw and Betty Draper reflects an enduring misogynistic bias that leads to criticism of women who do not conform to dominant ideals of femininity, while also revealing the gendered double standards still operative in contemporary media reception.

TV,” “peak TV,” “quality TV,” or what is often called the “third Golden Age of Television” (Levine & Newman 2012; Mittell 2015; Logan 2016), claiming a visibility that radically redefines femininity and female agency as a whole.

One might question, however, why the emergence of the female antihero is occurring at this particular moment in time rather than in earlier eras of television. The answer to this question can be partially found in the changes that reshaped TV programming over the past four decades, especially the transition from the three-network oligopoly of ABC, CBS, and NBC to a fragmented and competitive cable-dominated landscape. Up to the 1980s, the American television industry had, in fact, been dominated by major broadcast networks, channels that were transmitted freely via antenna and that prioritized mass appeal to reach the broadest possible audience. Yet, with the rise of cable television—distributed via coaxial cable directly into the homes and supported by subscription fees—this model underwent a significant transformation: cable introduced a much wider array of channels, each targeting specific, smaller audiences through a strategy known as “narrowcasting,” ranging from women (Lifetime) to children (Nickelodeon) to movie enthusiasts (Showtime and HBO), thereby initiating a process of audience fragmentation and niche marketing that was largely unprecedented within network broadcasting (Lotz 2006; Tally 2016).

This shift not only undermined the dominance of network television but also compelled it to evolve. In response to dwindling viewership, the major broadcast networks launched a new programming strategy that fused the mass-reach ambitions of traditional broadcasting with the narrowcasting model of cable, resulting in the incorporation of serialized narratives—which, up until that point, had been primarily confined to the daytime soap opera format—into prime-time television. Out of this effort emerged two distinct narrative strands: domestic dramas, such as *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-1991) or *Dynasty* (ABC, 1981-1989), and workplace dramas, such as *St. Elsewhere* (NBC, 1982-1988), or *L.A. Law* (NBC,

1986-1994), which were designed to attract the broad viewership that had been “stolen” by cable and VCRs. Inaugurating this new season of serialized dramas within network broadcasting was NBC’s *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987), a police procedural set in an unnamed American city that, unlike typical episodic television dramas, featured serialized storytelling, a large ensemble cast, overlapping plotlines, and a tonal complexity reminiscent of more artistically ambitious high-budget cinema. Unlike domestic dramas—which, still rooted in the soap-opera genre, were considered and marketed as a product primarily for women—*Hill Street Blues*, deliberately devoid of the “soapier,” more feminized features of daytime serials, not only cultivated a dedicated and diverse viewership but also quickly gained prestige through an unprecedented number of Emmy nominations, making this show emblematic of the perfect formula by which network television might once again engage a broad, discerning audience.

The comparison between these emerging strands of serialized narrative—particularly in regard to their visual sophistication and narrative complexity—inadvertently contributed to a redefinition of what constituted “serious” and “quality” television, establishing a binary logic that privileged masculinized narratives as more serious and aesthetically sophisticated, while marginalizing stories deemed too feminine or “soapy” as less deserving of critical attention or scholarly analysis (Levine & Newman 2012). These attempts at legitimizing serialized drama as a “respectable” and high-quality art form distinct from its melodramatic (and thus culturally devalued) origins pivoted around, as Elana Levine and Michael Newman (2012) observed, the defeminization of these narratives,⁹ a process that was central to the emergence

⁹ Among the various acts of defeminization, Elana Levine and Michael Newman (2012) mentioned the reduction of the narrative’s serial elements, the strong emphasis on endings, and the virilization of “soapy” content through acts of violence, profanities, and toxic masculinity (80-99). For further information on the feminization of television and its roots in soap opera, see Modleski (1979); Berlatsky (2015).

of television antiheroes. As a result, the new canon of critically acclaimed television, shaped by the aesthetics of the so-called “quality drama,” focused all its undivided attention on male protagonists and masculine-centric issues, slowly relegating both female characters and domestic concerns to the sidelines of prestige TV (Lotz 2006; Tally 2016).¹⁰ By the time *The Sopranos* premiered on HBO in 1999, the masculinization of serialized storytelling had reached its apex, ushering in an era in which the charismatic yet complex antihero became the prevailing figure of twenty-first-century television. Taken together, these transformations ultimately reshaped small-screen entertainment, inaugurating a new age of critically acclaimed masculine narratives that, while often articulating a crisis of masculinity (Susman 2015; Tally 2016), simultaneously reinforced traditional heteronormative ideals (Lotz 2014; Albrecht 2015).

It is precisely out of this male-dominated televisual landscape that the disruptive antiheroines of twenty-first-century television have emerged, gaining prominence as several canonical male-antihero-centered series have started to come to a close (Tally 2016), and only recently receiving the scholarly attention they deserve.¹¹ Often regarded merely as variants of their male counterparts, these characters, according to multiple scholars, have appeared on television, just like their male predecessors, due to industry-driven reasons (O’Keefe 2014; Talley 2016; Omar 2018). Margaret Talley’s study (2016) is a case in point: here, she attributed the new-found success of contemporary antiheroines to several factors, namely to the popularity of antiheroes in serialized media, to

¹⁰ This, of course, does not intend to downplay the role a show like *Sex and the City* has played within the landscape of contemporary media productions and our cultural Zeitgeist altogether, since, as Emily Nussbaum (2018) has rightfully observed, *Sex and the City* “was sharp, iconoclastic television [...] daring in its conception of characters.” However, while this show was pivotal in establishing the foundation for the female antihero, its adherence to formulaic narratives and focus on happy endings may have limited its ability to fully align with the conventions of prestige TV.

¹¹ In the field of Media Studies, the innovative figure of the antiheroine was first briefly investigated by Lotz (2014) and Vaage (2016), but the most comprehensive studies to date are those by Tally (2016) and Hagelin & Silverman (2022).

narrowcasting, to the unprecedented growing presence of female writers and showrunners in production teams (such as Lena Dunham, Issa Rae, Frankie Show, or Shonda Rhimes), and other technological advancements within the industry (110). Kevin O’Keefe’s (2014) and Yasmin Omar’s (2018) articles follow a similar line of reasoning: according to these critics, the fact that—in O’Keefe’s words—“women control the remote” and the writers’ room justifies the sudden appearance of female antiheroes in contemporary TV. However, a growing body of scholarship has foregone these industry-driven explanations in favor of considering the relationship these serialized narratives featuring antiheroines entertain with the broader societal and socio-economic contexts that shape and inform them. For instance, whereas Julia M. Mason (2019) read these contemporary representations as an answer to the persistent good mother rhetoric or “the new momism” (647), Jorie Lagerwey, Julia Leyda, and Diane Negra (2016) understood these female-centered narratives as a reaction to the Great Recession; then again, Jorie Lagerwey, along with Taylor Nygaard (2020), recently analyzed this new wave of female characters as reinforcing white fragility in the context of the current conservative political climate. Building on previous scholarship (Cattien 2019; Kennedy & Noble 2019; Havas & Sulimma 2020), Hagelin and Silverman (2022) similarly insisted that “industry imperatives,” albeit significant, cannot solely “account for the rise of the female antihero” (9). Rather, they frame these portrayals as a negative response to mainstream feminism and the “future girl” logic (Harris 2004; McRobbie 2009), thus attributing the popularity of this character to the gendered transformations in our socio-economic landscape.

The twenty-first century is undeniably a paradoxical era for women in the United States: while opportunities, benefits, and leadership positions are

more accessible than ever before,¹² the broader socio-cultural landscape remains extremely bleak and discouraging. Persistent gender pay gaps, pervasive workplace discrimination, femicides, and restrictions on reproductive rights (as exemplified most notably by the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in July 2022), alongside entrenched systemic inequalities, continue to undermine these advancements, while the broader conservative turn in American politics, epitomized by Donald Trump's presidencies (2017-2021; 2025-ongoing), provides the alarming backdrop to the relentless stream of regressive and dystopia-adjacent developments that remind us that the long-predicted demise of the macho culture (Salam 2009), or even of patriarchy (Rosin 2012),¹³ has yet to fully occur. The ambivalent position women hold in our contemporary society has been one of the primary issues addressed by recent feminist scholarship. In *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (2004), Anita Harris claimed that, with the advent of the new millennium, girlhood has emerged as the "vanguard of a new subjectivity," symbolizing the promise of a better future amidst a period of profound historical instability. Thanks to her perseverance, ambition, and resourcefulness, the future girl—as Harris wrote—"is imagined, and sometimes imagines herself, as best able to handle today's socioeconomic order" (1-2). Likewise, Angela McRobbie (2009) maintained that traits such as "capacity, success, attainment, enjoyment, entitlement, social mobility and participation" are predominantly ascribed to the figure of the girl or young woman (57), thereby emphasizing how present-day socio-cultural discourses increasingly tend to define girlhood through professional aptitude and economic potential. However, as both scholars aptly observed, the success storyline of the

¹² For further information on the gender differences in scholastic and professional achievements, see Voyer & Voyer (2014); Semuels (2017); Whiting (2018); Stych (2018); O'Dea, Lagisz & Nakagawa (2018).

¹³ For additional analyses that examine the current historical moment as a time of crisis for masculinity, also see Tyre (2009); Whitmire (2011); Sax (2016); Farrell & Gray (2018).

resilient future girl inevitably clashes with the lived experiences of real women and girls in contemporary society, for whom the harsh conditions of the labor market seldom provide the upward social mobility or prosperity they were promised by such narratives. The irreconcilability between ideal and lived realities, then, exacerbates the pressure both our society and the labor market itself exert on the singular individual who, in this case, is led to perceive her inability to succeed as a personal failing, rooted in her own incompetence, rather than as the result of systemic inequalities and injustices.¹⁴ Mainstream—or neoliberal—feminism plays, of course, a complicit role in perpetuating and reinforcing this logic, as its superficial rhetoric of female empowerment serves as little more than a façade for late-capitalist consumerism. Slogans such as “The Future is Female” or “Girls Can Do Anything,” often employed as fashionable marketing tools to sell items of clothing, not only feed into the consumerist ideology that equates spending money with personal agency, but also completely obscure the more troubling underlying reality that the future invoked by these statements is primarily reserved for upper-class, white women, thus leaving broader socio-economic disparities entirely unacknowledged and unaddressed. Drawing on the works of Lauren Berlant (2011) and Jack Halberstam (2011), Hagelin and Silverman read contemporary media representations featuring female antiheroes as a firm rejection—or at the very least, as a critique—of these neoliberal imperatives. As the exacting fantasy of “the good life” (Berlant 2011)—encapsulated both by the “future girl” logic and mainstream feminism—becomes increasingly elusive, sadness, failure, and shame emerge as subversive *and* empowering tools through which women can assert resistance towards this

¹⁴ On the psychological impact of mainstream feminism on girls and women, see Banet-Weiser (2015); Gill & Orgad (2017); Kanai (2017); Gill & Orgad (2018).

idealized aspirational rhetoric,¹⁵ since “not succeeding at womanhood,” as Halberstam (2011) remarked, “can offer unexpected pleasures” (4).

Indeed, the inability to fully embody this form of neoliberal womanhood constitutes the central theme of these present-day TV depictions. In dramas, tough super-women in a man’s world¹⁶ such as Carrie Mathison (*Homeland*, Showtime, 2011-2020) or Olivia Pope (*Scandal*, ABC, 2012-2018) inexorably pursue power, success, and pleasure, driven by their own greed and selfishness. Desperately striving to align with the image of the empowered woman promoted by mainstream feminist ideology—that is, of the woman capable of achieving professional success against the intimidating and opposing forces of male authority—these antiheroines inevitably follow a trajectory towards moral abjection. All their attempts to compensate for their feminine nature with “masculine” traits (namely, invulnerability or physical and mental prowess) ultimately prove futile, and as a result their narrative arcs—downward spirals into immorality and corruption, rather than triumph—read as true parodies of feminist victory. In contrast, the slacker women of comedies, rejecting the popular “you-go-girl” mentality of mainstream feminism, navigate their lives by embracing their own ineptitude and powerlessness. Guided by boredom and cynicism, they refuse to indulge in the “can-do pluck” attitude that characterized previous sitcom women, opting out completely of both the success storyline and

¹⁵ For additional analyses that interpret sadness, failure and shame as oppositional strategies against the aspirational fantasy of the “good life,” see also Ehrenreich (2009); Ahmed (2010); Watson (2015).

¹⁶ In her essay “Small-Screen Tweenage Angst” (2018), Mirjam Horn-Schott classified the four most recurring female character types of contemporary TV: besides the tough super-woman in a man’s world, she identifies the troubled postmodern madwoman of dramas, the quirky female nerd and the loser woman of comedies. While the tough super-woman category perfectly encapsulates the antiheroines of dramas discussed by Hagelin and Silverman, Horn-Schott’s broader classification appears, otherwise, imprecise. For example, her category of the troubled postmodern madwoman conflates antiheroic women in dramas, such as Annalise Keating of *How to Get Away With Murder* (ABC, 2014-2020), with antiheroines in comedies, such as the protagonists of *Girls* (HBO, 2012-2017). These depictions are markedly different and share little in common, beyond a portrayal of mental illness.

the aspirational fantasies endorsed by capitalist society. Fully dismissing consumerism and careerism as measures of a woman's worth and identity, these "precarious girl comedies" (Wanzo 2016) intrinsically celebrate uncharted and unexpected aspects of the contemporary female experience, instead reclaiming personal failure, economic insecurity and physical abjection as valid and alternative means of self-making. Thus, dramas and comedies alike, with their female-centered storylines of failure, seek to expose and "disrupt a system that at once demands women's success and strips them of the tools and the level playing field for attaining it" (Hagelin & Silverman 2022, 13).¹⁷

While Hagelin and Silverman's study equally focuses on both genres, it is evident that the most disruptive representations originate from comedies, where the rejection of traditional conceptions of femininity and normative female behaviors is more direct and effective than in dramas. Rooted in the long-standing tradition of the single-girl sitcom, the female antiheroes of what the two authors name "Shame TV" (118) emerge as unprecedented and innovative female protagonists, ones that, for the first time in the history of television, are neither motivated by the marriage plot, nor by traditional professional trajectories. Their stories, then, read as *anti-bildungsromans*—their denouements always tending towards failure and disappointment, rather than towards moral growth or

¹⁷ Hagelin and Silverman's (2022) analysis of contemporary antiheroines as a symbol of resistance and critique stands in stark contrast to the general consensus regarding the representation of women in media. Scholars such as Catherine Orenstein (2003) and Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (2007), in fact, have traditionally perceived 1990s and 2000s television as dominated by superficial female characters: besides the sex-positive consumerists à la Carrie Bradshaw, they identify two other recurring stereotypical female figures, that is the quirky thirty-something such as Jess Day from *New Girl* (Fox, 2011-2018), and domesticity-centered icons of self-care and motherhood, such as the women of *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004-2012). These analyses usually condemn the postfeminist nature of these representations, as the empowerment, contentment, and personal fulfillment these female characters exude is often framed in consumerist terms (see, for example, Orenstein 2003; Tasker & Negra 2007; Negra 2008; McRobbie 2009; McDermott 2022). Hagelin and Silverman, however, contended that the shows featuring antiheroines produced from 2011 onwards mark a significant departure from the series of the late 1990s and early 2000s, as it constitutes a "post-postfeminist" phase that actively engages and critiques the earlier depoliticized moment (21). On the concept of post-postfeminism, see Lumby (2011); Gill (2016). For additional discussions on the new era of politicized television, see Fischer (2018).

personal development. If real women living in the twenty-first century are constantly encouraged to rule the world, or to persevere and be resilient in the face of economic and global adversities, these female characters push against these narratives and rhetoric, discarding both economic progress and “self-responsibilization” (Adamson & Kelan 2018) as ways to ensure women’s empowerment and social advancement.¹⁸ Characters like Hannah Horvath (*Girls*, HBO, 2012-2017), Ilana Wexler and Abbi Abrams (*Broad City*, Comedy Central, 2014-2019), Bridgette Bird (*SMILF*, Showtime, 2017-2019), or Issa Dee (*Insecure*, HBO, 2016-2021) constitute a significant alternative to what Debora Spar (2014) has defined as the “Wonder Woman myth,” namely the belief that since women “*can* do anything, [they] feel as if [they] *have* to do everything.”¹⁹ The stories centered around these young antiheroic women, then, constitute a full-fledged counternarrative to the mainstream parable of upward mobility that neoliberal feminism imposes on twenty-first-century women: their tales—to paraphrase Hannah Horvath’s iconic quote featured in the pilot episode of *Girls*—are a sign of “at least *a* voice of *a* generation,” embodying an *alternative* and nonconformist trajectory towards identity-making that does not necessarily imply professional aptitude or economic success.

Yet, the privilege of transgressing normative imperatives of femininity in these specific terms is not equally extended across all contemporary representations of antiheroic women; rather, it remains—aside from few notable exceptions—confined almost exclusively to white women alone (Hagelin & Silverman 2022). This limited racial scope is not only traceable to enduring stereotypes of idealized femininity—which, as previously noted, have historically positioned white women as the only central figures in upholding

¹⁸ For further information on the relationship between self-reliance, resilience, and self-responsibilization in postfeminist culture, see Gill (2017); Adamson & Kelan (2018); Gill & Orgad (2018).

¹⁹ See also McRobbie (2015).

civilizing ideals and moral decorum (Towns 2009), while systematically excluding racialized women from these roles—but also reflects deeper entanglements within dominant discourses, cultural myths, and historically sedimented stereotypes that have long governed the representation of blackness, and black women in particular, within American television. Traditionally relegated to a narrow spectrum of roles—from the “mammy,” the “jezebel,” and “sapphire” to the “welfare queen,” and the “angry black woman” (Cheers 2018; Tyree & Powell 2022)—black women have frequently appeared as stock characters designed either to serve white protagonists, often as comedic foils or sidekicks, or to reaffirm racist hierarchies and ideologies by embodying deviance or excess. The seemingly empowering “black girl magic” narrative (Jones 2019), which has emerged much more recently to reframe African American femininity in positive terms, inadvertently ended up imposing another type of pressure on black women, idealizing them as endlessly competent, emotionally resilient, and morally irreproachable, thus leaving little representational room for failure or ambivalence. Even television shows such as *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-1992), or more recent examples like *Black-ish* (ABC, 2014-2022), *Grown-ish* (Freeform, 2018-2024), and *Mixed-ish* (ABC, 2019-2021), which ostensibly aim to promote positive portrayals of African American experiences to both white and non-white audiences, have been criticized for merely recoding blackness in terms more palatable to white, middle-class sensibilities, effectively endorsing a logic of inclusion through assimilation, rather than foregrounding the disruptive or politically resistant dimensions of black experiences (Hunt 2005; Tyree & Powell 2022).

Then, if within contemporary antiheroic narratives whiteness functions—much like in reality—as a form of structural privilege that enables

white female characters, regardless of class position,²⁰ to inhabit narrative arcs that accommodate moral ambiguity, messiness, and slackness as modes of feminist resistance, black women continue to be systematically denied full access to this representational realm of abjection. This exclusion is not incidental: indeed, as Darieck Scott (2010) suggested, blackness has not only been framed as a form of abjection but has, in fact, been historically constructed *through* abjection itself, rendering this subject position not a transgressive aesthetic or narrative strategy but as a pre-assigned, racialized condition of visibility and legibility for African American subjects. As a result, while white antiheroines like Hannah Horvath or Bridgette Bird may embrace abjection as a form of self-discovery or subversion—a deliberate occupation of an “ugly” space that destabilizes dominant patriarchal expectations—black women, by contrast, Rebecca Wanzo (2016) observed, are rarely afforded the narrative leeway to instrumentalize this condition in similar radical or redemptive ways. This disparity helps illuminate why, even today, the stakes for women of color who transgress dominant ideals of femininity remain significantly higher. In addition to being burdened by constant pressures to embody composure and middle-class respectability, any deviation from these norms—any indulgence in abjection, failure or disarray—risks reanimating centuries-old stereotypes that have cast black femininity as excessive, undisciplined or grotesque (Wanzo 2016).²¹

²⁰ While economic status undeniably shapes the conditions of each character’s life—for instance, the protagonists of *Girls* (HBO, 2012-2017) enjoy a markedly more financially stable position than Bridgette Bird in *SMILF* (Showtime, 2017-2019), or Ilana Wexler and Abby Abrams in *Broad City* (Comedy Central, 2014-2019), who are instead consistently portrayed as precariously attempting to making end meets—these white characters retain a greater degree of representational freedom to transgress, falter, and resist normative expectations than their non-white counterparts. On this point, see Hagelin & Silverman (2022).

²¹ Paradoxically, the nonconformist traits that characterize contemporary white antiheroines—Hagelin and Silverman (2022) contended—should be traced back to classic representations of black womanhood. The stereotypical figures of the “mammy,” the “jezebel” or the “sapphire” are, according to them, crucial antecedents to the female antihero, as their defiance of respectability and propriety paved the way for alternative conceptions of womanhood and femininity beyond the constraints of traditional society. For more on the connection between white characters and “unruly” traits typically associated with blackness, see Douglas (2010).

For example, the story of Issa Dee, the black protagonist of *Insecure*, despite its comedic and self-reflexive tone, ultimately reinforces the imperative of maintaining respectability and carefully negotiating the public/private divide, underscoring how black women must continuously navigate a terrain of self-restraint and moral judgment (Wanzo 2016; Hagelin & Silverman 2022, 160-178). Rather than being positioned as modes of transgressive resistance, Issa's romantic entanglements, financial struggles, and professional setbacks are, in fact, eventually framed within a narrative of self-correction and personal growth. Her awkwardness may be endearing or occasionally cringeworthy, but it never escalates into the extremes of grotesqueness or shamelessness that so often define the narrative arcs of white antiheroines. Characters such as Ilana Wexler and Abbi Abrams in *Broad City*, Hannah Horvath in *Girls*, or Bridgette Bird in *SMILF* are free to be as immoral, self-absorbed, and openly antiorthodox as they desire to be. Prone to failure and self-sabotage, yet mostly untroubled by their financial instability—thanks to the invisible safety net of their privilege—they do not necessarily thrive but manage, at least, to let loose without any lasting consequence within their precarious and anti-aspirational life conditions. In this context, shamelessness, unlikability, and abjection emerge not as liabilities but as transgressive feminist strategies that allow white women to access alternative forms of empowerment and self-determination. For black women, however, such strategies remain structurally inaccessible or symbolically dangerous, as dominant socio-cultural discourses continue to encode their abjection not as critical defiance but as evidence of moral deviance or social failure. This disparity, then, exposes the racialized nature of antiheroism within small-screen representations: the politics of abjection, slackness, and failure are not equally distributed, but continue to be deeply mediated by race, class, and cultural respectability.

If, as numerous scholarly studies have demonstrated, contemporary televisual antiheroines tend to emerge according to recurring patterns and logics—marked by precarity, abjection and, predominantly, whiteness—then it is my intention to argue that equal attention should be devoted to the current literary landscape, a field still significantly underexplored, where a new kind of antiheroic female character, reminiscent of the unruly women of Shame TV, has also begun to surface within recent American fiction. While confronting literary works with television may pose certain methodological challenges (Mittell 2007), such a comparison proves potentially fruitful, as it highlights the fluidity and dynamic nature of antiheroic traits—what Eleanore Gardner (2024) has defined as an “inherent transience that is unrelated to narrative framing and aesthetic” (47). If, following Gardner’s reasoning, these characteristics are indeed capable of transcending mediums, genres, texts, and historical contexts, then this dissertation contends, in the first instance, that the disruptive traits of twenty-first-century antiheroines migrate and overlap across these two media, forging connections between contemporary small-screen narratives and American novels published in the last decade. Innately in conversation with the women of Shame TV, yet capable of overturning—or at the very least complicating—the binary logics underpinning the representations of their televisual counterparts (particularly the white/non-white dichotomy), the catastrofemales of the new millennium²² at the heart of this dissertation likewise emerge from the pages of twenty-first-century North American novels as unlikeable, anti-aspirational and self-sabotaging protagonists who rarely indulge in self-pity, often engage in physical abjection, and constantly embrace their professional and relational

²² The term “catastrofemale” was first introduced by Sara Batkie in her article “2020 Is The Year of the ‘Catastrofemale’” (2020). While the term effectively encapsulates the essence of this character-type, Batkie primarily employed it to categorize and compare six novels, three of which were published in that year (*Temporary* by Hilary Leichter, *Hysteria* by Jessica Gross, and *Luster* by Raven Leilani). In her article, the author did not reflect on the antiheroic nature of these characters, nor did she attempt to position them within a literary tradition or investigate the common tropes and formal characteristics these novels share.

failures. Though thematically aligned with their television counterparts, these literary representations—through first-person narration and the deployment of a confessional tone—offer darker, more intimate explorations of apathy and mental disintegration, topics often mitigated by the levity intrinsic to the comedic format of Shame TV. Novels such as *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* (2015) by Alexandra Kleeman, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) by Ottessa Moshfegh, *The New Me* (2018) by Halle Butler, *Luster* (2020) by Raven Leilani, *Milk Fed* (2021) by Melissa Broder, *Everyone in This Room Will Someday Be Dead* (2021) by Emily Austin, to name a few, foreground experiences of failure, disaffection, and unproductivity, while closely attending to both the mental and physical dimensions of their protagonists' distress. Abandoning any form of allegiance to conventional ideas of femininity and success, narratives centered on catastrofemales do not function as cautionary tales but rather operate as radical critiques of contemporary sociopolitical structures, as well as paradoxical sources of inspiration in times of systemic crisis, illuminating the subversive potential of life at the margins. Indeed, in a cultural moment saturated with narratives of collapse (Cappelle 2023)—whether economic, ecological, or political—the figure of the catastrofemale offers a *counter*-narrative of catastrophe that resists redemptive arcs, resilience discourses, and aspirational logics underpinning neoliberal ideology, without succumbing to sheer fatalism altogether. By foregrounding this critically neglected figure, this dissertation not only posits the emergence of a new aesthetic position in the representation of contemporary female subjectivities but also intervenes in an existing gap within contemporary feminist literary criticism concerning antiheroic or, more broadly, non-conforming women. In doing so, it insists, as will be demonstrated in following parts of this chapter, on the need to reconceptualize female (mental) deviance as a situated, embodied, and politically charged form of resistance, one positioned

outside of traditional binary frameworks that oppose mind to body, madness to sanity, bad girls to good girls, antiheroines to heroines.

While the introductory part of this chapter was dedicated to an investigation of the female antiheroes of contemporary television—their characteristics, origins, the possible reasons behind their emergence and the eventual interpretations of these depictions—the following section turns to the literary character of the catastrofemale, seeking to establish this female figure as a central stereotypical antiheroic protagonist of twenty-first-century American fiction, while also situating her within a broader “continuum” of canonical representations of female madness (Baker & al. 2010, 21).

1.2 The Rise of the Catastrofemale in Twenty-First-Century North American Fiction

As previously discussed, the last decade of television programming has witnessed a noticeable emergence of disruptive and nonconformist antiheroines which, by defying traditional gender roles and Western expectations of femininity, have altogether redefined female representations on the small screen (Hagelin & Silverman 2022). While the rise of these antiheroic characters in serialized media cannot be attributed solely to industry logic, several factors—such as the increasing popularity of antiheroes among audiences, critics, and academics, the ever-growing presence of female writers and showrunners in production teams, as well as advancements within the industry, among which narrowcasting and other technological innovations—have, undoubtedly, played a crucial role in shaping the development of this female character type (O’Keefe 2014; Talley 2016; Omar 2018). However, as argued in the previous section, broader socio-economic changes, specifically those affecting women’s lives, and

complex gender politics have also fundamentally influenced these portrayals. Stories featuring antiheroines have emerged as narrative challenges to neoliberal myths of success, self-determination, and the “can-do-all” mentality promoted by mainstream feminism. Crucially, special attention was devoted to the subversive women of comedies, whose rejection of the status quo has been usually understood as more profound and trenchant than that of the tough superwomen of dramas, who, despite their pursuit of success and power, ultimately fall victim to the very system that entraps them from the outset of their stories. The decision to explore the unruly women of television was informed by two key considerations: the comparison between literature and television is both fruitful and essential since not only do the catastrofemales of contemporary fiction parallel the precarious women of comedies through similar recurring patterns and themes, but also due to the fact that the scholarly attention paid to antiheroines of Western literature has been relatively scarce over the past fifty years.

While the figure of the male Western literary antihero has been extensively investigated by scholars from a wide range of perspectives (e.g., Woolf 1976; Brombert 1999; Simmons 2008; Gurung 2010; Grantham 2015; Peters & Stewart 2016), their female counterparts have, in fact, not enjoyed the same level of academic attention throughout the years.²³ One of the foundational texts on this topic is Edward Friedman’s *The Antiheroine’s Voice* (1987), a comprehensive study of the antiheroines of the Spanish picaresque tradition. In this work, Friedman addressed the subversive nature of these characters, observing that their mockery of conservative values and institutions—such as “purity, matrimony, and

²³ Most discussions of this female figure are usually relegated to journal articles, book chapters within larger volumes, or books focused on television antiheroines (Stuart 2011; Gilchrist 2016; Walderzak 2016; Chappell & Mallory 2017). The figure of the heroine, by contrast, has received more extensive scholarly attention. Concerning the heroic women featured in American literature, see, for instance, Pearson & Pope (1981); Huf (1985); Tate (1992); Powers (2000); Hebbard (2013); Jorgensen (2013); Camden (2016); Kamble (2023).

conventionality" (227)—serves as a clear sign of opposition to traditional patriarchal norms. To date, Friedman's book remains one of the few academic texts completely devoted to the Western literary antiheroine. While its antipatriarchal framework has undeniably influenced contemporary literary criticism concerning antiheroines, its focus on the Spanish picaresque tradition limits its applicability across broader contexts, leaving other literary traditions, such as the American one, largely unexplored. Eleanore Gardner's recent study, *Disruptive Women of Literature* (2024), sought to address this gap in contemporary scholarship by historicizing and exploring the figure of the antiheroine to trace "the evolving trends and patterns in her characterizations" within specific literary genres and historical contexts (10). Gardner's analysis is, however, primarily limited to canonical Gothic novels and crime thrillers from Anglophone countries (United Kingdom, United States, and Canada), with the sole exception of Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* series (2005-2007), originally published in Swedish. Following Friedman's anti-patriarchal interpretation of antiheroines, Gardner similarly contended that these characters should be understood and examined through their relationship to, and most importantly, their defiance of patriarchal structures and ideologies, emphasizing how these fictional women reject conventional notions of motherhood, caregiving and domesticity. Although pioneering in its exclusive focus on the British and American context and its insightful examination of specific yet still under-explored literary genres, Gardner's study nonetheless overlooks many contemporary iterations of the literary female antiheroine—the catastrofemale, of course, being a case in point—thereby creating a critical gap in current scholarship that this dissertation seeks to address.

Although not explicitly dedicated to antiheroines, numerous academic studies exploring various aspects of unconventional femininity similarly adopt an anti-patriarchal framework. *The Bitch is Back: Wicked Women in Literature* (2001)

by Sarah Appleton Aguiar seeks to reconceptualize the literary character of the “bitch” beyond her traditional interpretation as morally or sexually deviant—“the embodiment of the female evil” (5)—rather emphasizing how she “is part of every woman and [...] should not be apologized for, or worse, eradicated” (11). Incorporating Jungian archetypal criticism with a feminist perspective aimed at promoting the “development of more fully individuated feminine types” (8), Appleton Aguiar positioned the “bitch” as an archetypal figure in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and American literature, one that, by refusing to conform to conventional gender roles and norms, is able—much like the antiheroine—to challenge patriarchal expectations of womanhood without adhering to stereotypically masculine or feminine representations that rely on the male/female binary traditionally associated with this psychological framework. Likewise, *Bad Girls and Transgressive Women in Popular Television, Fiction, and Film* (2017), edited by Julie Chappell and Mallory Young, examines the portrayal of “bad women” across various media from the mid-twentieth century to the present, equating the idea of female transgression to the violation of patriarchal limits and norms designed to circumscribe and regulate acceptable forms of womanhood. Even the much more recent *Evil Women* (2022), edited by Robyn Muir, Beatrice Frasl and al., investigates the depiction of “evil women” within literature, poetry, ballads, history, and contemporary culture, similarly emphasizing the potential of these dominant and powerful female characters to defy idealized and traditional representations of womanhood, opposing the stereotyped image of the submissive and passive angel of the house, and threatening—through their deviance—“hierarchical heteronormative patriarchal structures” (2).

As these few examples illustrate, the tendency to read unconventional representations of womanhood through an anti-patriarchal lens has had a pervasive and long-lasting influence on contemporary literary criticism. Yet,

although this anti-patriarchal framework has been essential in highlighting the disruptive potential some female characters hold—especially in novels from past centuries—it also risks oversimplifying their complexities and reducing the nuances of their stories to a singular narrative of defiance against patriarchy, thus limiting a broader understanding of the significance that these figures carry in some contemporary media and literature. In this regard, catastrofemales serve as a primary example: reducing their representations and narratives to a mere critique of patriarchalism diminishes their broader implications, obscuring the complex present-day socio-economic and cultural issues, as well as power structures they engage with and criticize. For this reason, this dissertation moves beyond traditional anti-patriarchal interpretations of antiheroines and seeks to adopt an alternative methodological approach—one that incorporates an intersectional framework that also addresses the white supremacist and capitalist nature of our contemporary society (hooks 2014 [1984], 118)—to enable a more nuanced and comprehensive reading of these characters and the stories they inhabit. But before discussing how this methodological challenge was overcome, it is crucial to clarify what catastrofemales are, outline their defining traits, and explore the origins of this literary representation.

In seeking to define catastrofemales, it is imperative to engage with the broader scholarly discourse surrounding literary antiheroines in order to establish, in the first place, how these characters align with—or diverge from—the conventional traits traditionally ascribed to this archetype.²⁴ A univocal

²⁴ Although extensive criticism was moved from feminist scholars towards Jungian archetypal theory for its one-dimensional and stereotypical conceptualization of female characters, Sarah Appleton Aguiar (2001) maintained that Jung's framework should not be dismissed altogether by feminist literary scholars as his "archetypal descriptions [...] are not only pervasive in literary culture" but also "often accepted as recognized standards for human behaviour" (14). Indeed, Jung's work illuminates enduring patterns of representation that have become "staples in literature" (14), thus uncovering problematic female archetypes that persist in contemporary culture. Naomi R. Goldenberg (1976), however, questioned Jung's fixed definitions, proposing that "instead of a new search for absolutes, feminists could abandon the idea of absolutes altogether" (448). That is to say, rather than conforming to unchanging standards—such as patriarchal expectations—female characters should be created from lived experience, and not

definition of the antiheroine, however, remains elusive. Traditionally, the term has been used to refer to the heroine's opposite or dark double—an untamable (Gothic) woman whose wild, uncontrollable instincts position her as “the antithesis of feminine bourgeois ideology” (Hoeveler 1998, 60), as epitomized most famously by Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* (1847). Alternatively, it has been employed to denote female protagonists who so thoroughly subvert traditional gender roles that they render their male counterparts conventional by comparison (Stanley 2018), as seen with Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth or Emily Brontë's Catherine. In some rarer cases, the term can even describe “lone wolves” (Klecker 2020), women defined by their anti-social tendencies, such as Camille Preaker in Gillian Flynn's debut novel, *Sharp Objects* (2006). Seen in this light, the antiheroine, then, occupies a liminal position, that of unconventionality or “otherness,” existing—as Victor Turner (2017 [1969]) wrote—“neither here nor there [...] betwixt and between the positions arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (95). If this process of “othering,” when representative of gendered experiences, conventionally serves to concretize societal fears surrounding femininity as a whole (Gilbert & Gubar 2000 [1979], 19)—much like the concepts of the abject or the monstrous feminine—then the antiheroine, in this context, likewise comes to signify broader cultural anxieties concerning womanhood, embodying fears related to female power, sexuality, deviancy, maternal instincts, or even the potential for violence (Gardner 2024, 8, 51). Versatile and adaptable, this character continually transforms—from sexually transgressive to unlikeable, from mentally unstable to lacking in maternal instincts (Tzikas 2011; Talley 2016)—to remain culturally relevant, in other words, to address and challenge context-specific problems.

according to essentialist frameworks. Gardner (2024) located this departure from Jung's fixed absolutes in the figure of the antiheroine, as “her metamorphic potential and inability to conform suggest a complexity that is shaped by numerous cultural, social, and historical factors” (29).

Yet, as previous scholarship has pointed out, two significant issues may arise from this reading of antiheroines. On one hand, as Friedman (1987) observed, the inevitable downfall that traditionally awaits antiheroines at the end of their narratives suggests an intrinsic paradox within these storylines: the acts of defiance undertaken by these protagonists to overthrow ideologies and norms that intend to define them are ultimately balanced out by the characters' own undoing in the final pages of the story, a clear signal of the supposedly inherent impossibility of truly subverting the status quo. By the end of such antiheroic narratives, (patriarchal) society always remains intact, while women themselves are forced to pay the price for their unruliness. This is why, according to Friedman, antiheroines are relegated to a limited sphere of representation, as their stories are meant to "provide a respite from reality and at the same time [portray] an accurate vision of the status of women" (226). This observation closely connects to the second criticism moved against this kind of narrative: over the past fifteen years, in fact, the central question surrounding this female character type has primarily focused on her future, as scholars have been increasingly wondering how antiheroines might exceed their roles as figures of female villainy, disobedience or defiance—thus, moving beyond stereotypical representations of unconventional femininity—and instead come to represent humanity as a whole (Tzikas 2011; Gardner 2024). In this respect, Gardner (2024) contended that while "the antiheroine cannot fully flourish as a literary figure representative of the myriad of female complexities," as long as the patriarchal system and its ideologies are not completely overturned, this very dismantling would paradoxically result in the disappearance of antiheroines as we know them altogether (63), as their characterization has always been anchored in dissentient responses to patriarchal power and violence. Yet, as she argued in the final pages of her study, this character's "continued manifestation in literature and beyond suggests the imminent rise of more diverse, culturally inclusive, and

non-heteronormative antiheroines in our immediate future, characters that will be remembered not for their challenges to femininity but celebrated for their expressions of *humanity*" (286).

This dissertation is situated amidst and particularly in response to these specific concerns: though rooted in the well-established tradition of antiheroic women, the catastrofemale emerges as a renewed and revitalized version of the traditional (and stereotypical) archetype examined by previous scholarship. Though retaining some conventional antiheroic traits—such as unlikability, sexual promiscuity, and mental instability (Tzikas 2011; Talley 2016)—catastrofemales are never sidelined to the role of the heroine's double: these narratives, in fact, never rely on traditional conceptions of female evil or of the monstrous "other," abandoning altogether the stale dynamic that counterbalances and opposes the heroine's moral rectitude to the immorality and perversion of her "darker double," rather opting for a morally grey area wherein every female character in the storylines ends up residing. As a matter of fact, catastrofemales, though anti-aspirational and self-sabotaging—their character traits aligning them with the antiheroines of "Shame TV"—are not intrinsically "bad"; rather, they express a more nuanced, multifaceted and oftentimes even problematic female lived-experience, one attuned to the (intersectional) challenges faced by women in the twenty-first century. This departure from the traditional heroine/antiheroine dynamic could be explained through the complete rejection of the "good girl/bad girl" dichotomy (Bauer Maglin & Perry 1996)—a divide upheld by both societal norms and second-wave feminist discourse²⁵—as women, both in the novels as well as in real life, cannot be

²⁵ Nan Bauer Maglin and Donna Perry (1996) argued that second-wave feminism produced an internal division between so-called "good girls" and "bad girls," based on women's perceived willingness either to reject or embrace not only heterosexual relationships but also their own sexuality and sexual desire as a whole. This distinction emerged from the feminist "sex wars" of the 1970s, particularly the debate between anti-sex feminists, such as Ti-Grace Atkinson, Dana Denmore and Roxanne Dunbar, and pro-sex feminists. As Bauer Maglin and Perry suggested, this binary not only policed acceptable forms of female sexuality but also reinforced a conception

divided into neat and rigid moral categories or archetypes, but inevitably occupy a complex spectrum of actions and behaviors that, while not always virtuous, do not render them wholly villainous or evil. As a result, twenty-first-century narratives centered around catastrofemales extend beyond conventional depictions of female defiance against patriarchy, offering instead intricate portrayals of contemporary femininity that not only address gender-specific issues but also engage with broader societal concerns impacting every individual in the new Millennium—from the harmful effects of advanced capitalism and consumerism to the looming threat of climate change.

In light of this, one can easily understand why the concept of catastrophe is integral to catastrofemales' existence and essence: it not only refers to the pervasive impacts and foreseeable disruptions wrought by the ongoing environmental emergency but also to the countless and intersecting social, economic and cultural crises that affect and determine both the fictional worlds these characters occupy as well as our everyday present—what Brown & al. (2023) have defined none other than as “a state of permacrisis.” Within the novels, this ever-present thematic sense of doom and catastrophe is conveyed through the psychological and physical tolls corporate environments, systemic racism, climate change, neoliberal rhetoric, American consumer culture, and beauty standards have on the main female characters, as these stories specifically scrutinize from up close how patriarchy and advanced capitalism intersect and converge to shape the lives of contemporary women.

This thematic focus intrinsically influences the narrative arcs of the novels. Stories centered on catastrofemales, indeed, consistently portray young women in their twenties who, after having passionately pursued their artistic ambitions

of women as perpetual victims of patriarchal sexual relations, leaving little room for female sexual agency or desire.

in college (whether in literature, art, or theater), find themselves, at the beginning of their stories, utterly alienated and disillusioned as they navigate stifling corporate landscapes. Having yielded to societal pressures or the demands of the job market, they now lead dissatisfied and unfulfilled post-collegiate lives, grappling with imposed expectations that shepherd a successful career trajectory while simultaneously attempting to reconcile these pressures with their authentic ambitions and aspirations. As a result, their story arcs mimic repetitive loops depicting catastrophefemales desperately striving to find “a way out”—not only a way out of their misery but also out of the system and status quo that constrain them and forces them to engage with the relentless wheel of capitalism and the aspirational neoliberal mottos of empowerment and self-betterment. As such, their stories—much like those of their television counterparts—refute the traditional marriage plot and reject aspirational trajectories that would see the protagonists finding personal fulfillment within their corporate roles. Attempts to engage with ideals of self-betterment and success are inexorably met with failure, as these narratives unveil the neoliberal rhetoric as ultimately illusory: a myth, an unattainable fantasy. Accordingly, their stories can be considered *anti-bildungsromans*, wherein traditional notions of growth—whether psychological or moral—or conventional coming-of-age trajectories are entirely subverted.

These story arcs, particularly with their emphasis on the corporate world, contribute to the standardization of certain formal features across these novels. On the one hand, they determine the temporal framework of the narratives: as previously mentioned, as these stories usually center around the protagonists’ efforts to escape the suffocating corporate environment and the emotional deterioration it causes, while searching for alternative pathways towards personal happiness, the events typically unfold over the course of one year, interspersed with flashbacks that reveal pivotal (and often traumatic) moments from their past. On the other hand, this thematic focus affects the settings,

establishing an unbalanced binary that opposes ever-present enclosed and claustrophobic spaces (such as offices, crowded public transit, or neglected and unkempt apartments) to the vast, cosmopolitan—and lonely—city, which, in the majority of cases, simply serves as a distant and inaccessible backdrop of the characters' lives. Yet, the (in)visible city—be it New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles—manifests itself as *the* site of social decay: here is where isolation, loneliness, alienation and disconnection thrive; here is where every person is left to fend for themselves—and here is also where catastrofemales are desperately trying to find a way to “opt-out.” Nonetheless, these omnipresent feelings of loneliness and disconnection are not appeased by catastrofemales through rocky romantic affairs—contrary to what the boisterous protagonists of *Sex and the City* might have probably done; romantic relationships with men are, indeed, notably disregarded in favor of platonic (or sometimes even romantic) bonds between women. As a result, these narratives also subvert the traditional “bad girl” versus “good girl” dynamic through the dismantling of their heteronormative framework that would normally see the “bad girl” (meaning, the antiheroine) opposing and sabotaging the “good girl” (namely, the heroine) in her pursuit of male affection. As a consequence, these novels not only displace men from the pivotal role they have traditionally occupied both in literature—or, more broadly, in media—and society but also position the Sisterhood championed by feminist movements as a restorative antidote to the isolation and alienation fostered by the white patriarchal and capitalist system.

If the city epitomizes social collapse, catastrophe, however, is not merely part of the literary landscape these antiheroines inhabit. Rather, as the term “catastrofemale” implies, it is intrinsic to their very being, as these characters *literally* internalize surrounding socio-economic-cultural crises within their bodies and minds alike. Much like television's antiheroines, these figures embody a form of womanhood defined both by physical abjection (manifested in

grotesque and sometimes non-conforming female bodies) and mental illness (usually depicted as depression), a psychosomatic convergence that ultimately emphasizes an embodied, visceral internalization and reaction to the intersecting power structures emblemized by the cosmopolitan environment serving as the backdrop to their narratives. These personal accounts of alienation and mental strain, then, shape both the point of view and style of these novels, favoring the employment of a first-person narrator and a confessional-like tone. Such stylistic features, then, enable readers to immerse themselves into the characters' psyches, providing intimate access to their unfiltered and tumultuous thoughts and desires, thereby fostering a profound understanding of their internal struggles.

After having considered the thematic and formal characteristics of novels featuring catastrofemales, one can finally discern how these contemporary representations go against the traditional antiheroic "grain" examined by previous scholarship. Yet, true innovation can be found within the final pages of these narratives: although anti-*Bildungsromans*, these stories refute the expected downfall that conventionally befalls antiheroines. When endings are negative, catastrofemales not only are able to find themselves completely disenfranchised from the corporate world that stifled them at the outset of the story, but they also gain—together with the reader—a crucial awareness of the deceitfulness inherent to the aspirational mottos and promises perpetuated by neoliberalism, advanced capitalism and mainstream feminism. This newfound knowledge, then, grants them a vantage point from which they can reclaim their position of otherness without entirely submitting to the status quo. Conversely, in positive endings, the protagonists discover alternative pathways to fulfillment through their art, their bonds with other women, or even in their roles as mothers. Notably, positive resolutions are primarily reserved for catastrofemales from minorities. In this way, these literary representations reclaim the white/non-white dynamic prevalent in television narratives subverting it completely by showcasing that

women of color possess the same agency to act against the status quo as their white counterparts do. Although consequences await both groups, women of color are ultimately afforded greater scope to negotiate their position of estrangement from *within* the white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist system that constrains them, at times even gesturing toward alternative modes of visibility and relationality that exceed the structures responsible for their erasures.

The reimagining of the antiheroine's downfall as a reclamation of her position of otherness in a positive, restorative light, along with these narratives' ability to engage with a wide spectrum of present-day socio-cultural-economic issues, reveals why catastrofemales represent a revitalized version of the stereotypical antiheroine archetype discussed at the beginning of this section. As the contemporary antiheroine relocates and moves within the spatial boundaries of the (in)visible cosmopolitan city, her story expands beyond mere acts of rebellion against patriarchal constraints, opening outward to address universal human concerns and paving the way for a reconceptualization of this archetype as a complex emblem of resistance, no longer bound to inevitable failure. Yet, after having examined how catastrofemales diverge from the canonical tradition of literary antiheroines, it becomes essential to consider in the next section of this chapter how these contemporary figures remain anchored—through their pervasive display of mental disorders—to a longstanding tradition of female mental illness originating in the late nineteenth century. Situating the catastrofemale within this “continuum of female madness” (Baker & al. 2010, 21) is, in fact, crucial to tackling the ever-pressing question of how this character should be interpreted and understood, namely to establish an alternative methodological approach that moves beyond the antipatriarchal and psychoanalytical frameworks that have been traditionally employed to read antiheroines.

1.3 Bringing the Madwoman Out of the Attic and into the City: How to Read Twenty-First-Century Catastrofemales

While the rise of catastrofemales has yet to receive any form of official acknowledgment within contemporary scholarly discourse, the phenomenon has not gone completely unnoticed outside academia, attracting the attention of a wide and diverse audience, either devoted to curating the publication and distribution of contemporary literature or engaging with, as readers, as well as producing, as journalists, entertaining and up-to-date cultural commentary. Editorials and think pieces have increasingly started to group contemporary novels due to their shared portrayal of unlikeable female protagonists, also highlighting common patterns and themes among the narratives (Kelly 2019; Liu 2019; Sudjic 2019; Bergman 2020; Batkie 2020; Rosenfeld 2021; Brousset 2023; Fletcher 2024, to name a few), while bookstores have been more and more frequently curating their sections calling attention to these recent publications centered on sad and disaffected women, often co-opting and capitalizing on *TikTok*'s aesthetic trends.²⁶ Moreover, platforms such as *StoryGraph* have recently begun crafting perfectly tailored reading challenges featuring books on unhinged women,²⁷ whilst users on Goodreads—one of the biggest websites dedicated to book reviews and recommendations—have been efficiently compiling, for the past few years, extensive lists celebrating disruptive female characters under captivating titles such as “She’s Not Feeling Good at All,” “women vs the void,” “She’s Nasty: Amoral, Manipulative, and Disruptive Female Characters,” or “sad

²⁶ For further information on the “Sad girl” aesthetic trend born out of TikTok, see Madden (2022); Sun Li (2023); Brousset (2023).

²⁷ See app.thestorygraph.com/reading_challenges/b59e7ed5-1322-4757-b774-005e24280195.

woman, big city, questionable decisions.”²⁸ Without a doubt, all these occurrences and trends seem to be suggesting an implicit and perhaps unconscious recognition, by both the publishing industry and the general public, of the emergence of these unprecedented and distinct antiheroic female characters within our contemporary literary landscape.

As extensively argued in the previous section of this chapter, catastrofemales indeed emerge on the American literary scene as well-defined and easily recognizable fictional protagonists. Although departing from the traditional character arcs associated with antiheroines, narratives centered on catastrofemales—precisely due to their constant engagement with the motif of mental illness (which regularly manifests itself as depression)—enter into dialogue with a longstanding literary tradition of female madness, introducing a revamped iteration of a canonized and near-standardized trope that spans from the nineteenth-century madwoman haunting Victorian mansions to the mid-twentieth-century “loose” woman on the verge of breakdown. This interconnection, once again, has not been entirely lost on the wider popular cultural discourse since canonical works such as *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath, *Valley of the Dolls* (1966) by Jacqueline Susann, or *Play It As It Lays* (1970) by Joan Didion are frequently included in recommendations, reading lists, challenges, or reviews concerning catastrofemales, inherently highlighting—as this dissertation intends to contend—a thematic continuity between contemporary representations of mental illness and their fictional antecedents.²⁹ Not only that, but the accuracy of

²⁸ For “She’s Not Feeling Good At All,” see [goodreads.com/list/show/153374](https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/153374); for “women vs the void,” [goodreads.com/list/show/153845.women_vs_the_void#581811](https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/153845.women_vs_the_void#581811); for “She’s Nasty,” [goodreads.com/list/show/183437.She_s_Full_of_Vice_dangerous_manipulative_appallingly_a_moral_female_characters_in_literary_fiction](https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/183437.She_s_Full_of_Vice_dangerous_manipulative_appallingly_a_moral_female_characters_in_literary_fiction); for “sad woman, big city, questionable decisions,” [goodreads.com/list/show/107712.sad_woman_big_city_questionable_decisions#51541496](https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/107712.sad_woman_big_city_questionable_decisions#51541496).

²⁹ Undoubtedly, these novels can be grouped together based on their shared representation of female madness; yet, certain motifs, themes, and broader social analyses establish a solid continuum between past representations and present ones. Gender-specific issues—such as

positioning narratives featuring catastrofemales within what Charley Baker and al. (2010) defined as a literary “continuum of female madness” (21) is even more evident when this relatedness transpires and is addressed within a twenty-first-century novel that is often regarded as part of the emerging catastrofemal canon.³⁰ Elif Batuman’s *Either/Or* (2022) occupies, in fact, a particularly revealing position within this corpus, not only because it makes this genealogy unmistakably explicit, but also because it prompts—as this section is attempting to do—a broader reconsideration of the critical frameworks through which contemporary catastrofemales should be ultimately interpreted.

women’s roles within patriarchal society and heterosexual marriage, as well as matters related to menstruation, pregnancies, abortions, sexual violence, or problematic medical treatments—consistently recur throughout these narratives, reinforcing their thematic cohesion. Rather interestingly, the persistent experience of female alienation, often exacerbated by mental illnesses, is strikingly uniform across these works, consistently visualized through the image of the protagonist confronting her own reflection in a mirror (or another reflective surface), unable to recognize herself in the distorted, grotesque image before her. In this regard, the emphasis on bodily decay and the grotesque, already evident in earlier portrayals, becomes, in fact, even more pronounced in contemporary fiction, evolving into one of the most evident characteristics of twenty-first-century representations of mental illness, leading to an intensification of the theme of female monstrosity that has always been associated with the “otherness” of antiheroines. Moreover, intertextual echoes between past and present texts further solidify these connections. For example, a central motif in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s well-renowned short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), the “rest cure”—a medical treatment developed by American neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell to cure women affected by neurasthenia—is thematically revisited and reimagined in Ottessa Moshfegh’s contemporary novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), in which the protagonist embarks on a year-long self-imposed “hibernating” project—namely, to sleep for an entire year—to escape her depression. Similarly, in Moshfegh’s novel, the narrator, while contemplating her friend Reva’s abortion, envisions the Hudson River swamped with aborted fetuses, an unsettling image described in nearly identical terms by the main character of *Play as It Lays* (1970) by Joan Didion. These textual parallels, though only a few among many, underscore the enduring relevance of these themes and invite further comparative inquiries, offering fertile ground for future scholarly exploration.

³⁰ As will be further argued, Selin, the protagonist of Batuman’s novels, and her duology occupy a liminal position within the emerging catastrofemal canon investigated in this dissertation. Lacking the ubiquitous corporate setting that characterizes the majority of the other works, *The Idiot* (2017) and *Either/Or* (2022) do not engage directly with issues related to neoliberal capitalism, such as the rhetorics and myths usually reinforced within corporate environments, as the other novels obviously do. Nonetheless, Selin’s narrative retains several key themes and tropes that are prevalent in the other more “standardized” novels (e.g., the experience of loneliness and alienation; the tendency to self-sabotage; the occurrence of mental illness and its physical repercussions; the centrality of female relationships instead of heteronormative love stories) while maintaining their traditional formal features (such as the first-person narrator, the one-year time-frame, the consistent thematic opposition of spaces—university vs abroad—and the subversive ending). Selin’s duology, then, may be viewed as a prequel or a prologue to the typical trajectory adopted by other catastrofemales, representing the hopeful humanities student that these characters once were before succumbing to societal pressures and the demands of the job market.

Published in 2022, Elif Batuman's *Either/Or*, the sequel to her debut novel, *The Idiot* (2017), is the second installment in the Selin duology. Set in the late 1990s, the narrative chronicles two years in the life of Selin Karadağ, a first-generation Turkish American undergraduate at Harvard University. Structured as a series of loosely connected vignettes in which nothing completely exhilarating nor out-of-the-ordinary happens, the story revolves around Selin's personal and academic experiences as she navigates college life, takes her first steps as a writer, and grapples with questions about identity, the meaning of existence, love, sexuality, female agency and autonomy. Batuman's work does not simply recount the experience of a first-generation migrant who tries to balance two cultural traditions in U.S. territory but challenges the traditional developmental narrative of assimilation altogether, striving to negotiate several long-lasting and contentious tensions in ethnic American writing, particularly those regarding the development of the individual against the boundaries of society.³¹

Selin's personal drama—her inability to bridge the gap between herself and society—is epitomized by her puzzling relationship with language. Selin possesses linguistic fluency yet lacks familiarity with the stereotypes that make a culture comprehensible—whether it is a friend's joke about a “German sense of order” or one in *Anna Karenina*. As Constance Grady (2020) put it, “part of the reason Selin has problems with cultural tropes—with the semiotics of cosmopolitan American college students—is that she is bicultural:” not belonging to one side nor the other as a second-generation immigrant, Selin's semiotic confusion arises from her upbringing which, by exposing her to different sets of social norms and rules, renders her immune to perceiving them as universal. Selin's bicultural nature, then, is what hinders her attempts at

³¹ For further investigations of the most common tensions explored by ethnic developmental narratives within the U.S. context, see Bolaki (2011).

socialization: her inability to grasp that language is, fundamentally, all conventional is what traps her in the gap between signifier and signified (Grady 2020), leaving her constantly cornered in the vain pursuit of a linguistic unambiguity and unequivocal objectivity that would allow her to communicate effectively with others, describe reality accurately, and comprehend the world without the risk of being misunderstood. Yet, despite her best intentions, throughout the two novels, Selin repeatedly encounters instances where words and their intended meanings fail to perfectly align—as summarized by Batuman in her interview with *The Rumpus*, Selin’s conflict derives from the fact that “language is all a convention, and that’s something [she] doesn’t understand; she wants it to be direct” (Chen 2017).

This is where literature comes into the picture: the solution to her existential issue—that is, finding the true meaning of language and conveying, through it, a universal truth to establish authentic relationships—is sought after in her university classes and particularly within the Western literary canon. The metaliterary discourse characterizing these novels is already unmistakably evident in the two books’ titles. *The Idiot* clearly references Dostoevsky’s eponymous novel and, as a result, marks Selin as “idiotic” in the Dostoevskyan sense for being—as Chris Townsend (2021) observed—independent and estranged from “the traditional structures of ‘Western philosophy’ and the mainstreams of European and North American culture” (587). *Either/Or*, on the other hand, directly invokes Søren Kierkegaard’s *Enten-Eller* (1843)—or, as it is more commonly known, *Either-Or*—a two-volume philosophical reflection on human existence that outlines the existential dichotomy between a hedonistic/aesthetic way of living and an ethical life, which essentially summarizes the central dilemma confronted by Selin within the second novel. Indeed, for Selin, literature serves as her primary point of reference for interpreting and understanding both the world around her and herself; yet, the

profound disjunction between her existence and the eventful, linear trajectories traditionally depicted in the canonical novels she loves and studies leaves her adrift, not only incapable of adhering to the aesthetic life she idealizes—an aspiration, as we soon learn, wholly unattainable for a woman, whether fictional or real, yet even further removed from the lived experiences of people belonging to a minority—but also unable to transform her life and her experiences into a coherent traditional narrative altogether. Her inability to find the clarity she wishes for within the pages of the Western literary canon echoes her broader failure at navigating academic life and personal conflicts alike, a frustrating and discouraging impasse that, by the end of the second novel, ultimately compels her to “finally [step] outside the script,” seeking for her authentic version of a coherent and meaningful narrative (Batuman 2022, 354).

Mostly consistent with the themes and formal features that stereotypically characterize stories centered on catastrofemales, Selin’s peculiar position within the narrative—simultaneously its naïve protagonist, yet also the self-aware spectator of her own life, conscious, as a literature student and aspiring writer, of the intrinsic “mechanics” of a coherent novel and storyline—places Batuman’s duology at the periphery of the canon examined within this dissertation. Still an undergraduate student in the humanities, Selin escapes the alienation and disaffection that commonly affect catastrofemales resigning themselves, after abandoning their artistic aspirations, to a monotonous and colorless corporate life. In doing so, this duology provides, to some degree, a not-so-pessimistic prequel or prelude to the usual story arc adopted by the other novels. But even more significantly for this argument, Batuman’s novels offer readers a pertinent and thought-provoking entry point for examining the dialogue these contemporary stories featuring catastrofemales intrinsically hold with canonical representations of female madness, as the metaliterary discourse Selin develops around the master narratives of Western literature in the second installment

mainly centers around the theme and issue of female madness. Interspersed throughout the novel, questions surrounding the nature of her depression and its potential resolution lead Selin to examine and ultimately doubt the dominant interpretive frameworks upon which she relies to understand and articulate her circumstances and ordeals. This realization eventually forces her to recognize that her desire to reconcile her experiences with an idealized aesthetic life is, in the end, futile, as such narrative arcs have never been available to a woman profoundly affected by mental illness. Thus, in this context, *Either/Or* propels a critical reflection on how Selin first-hand engages with and disputes the archetype of the madwoman ever-present within the literary canon, while questioning the representation of female madness in literature and history, as well as the dominant, biased interpretations traditionally associated with it.

This nuanced interrogation of the concept of female madness—the questioning of its significance and of the frameworks through which it is usually understood—is perfectly exemplified in the following passage, where Selin on the one hand attempts to navigate the tension between the authoritative meaning and interpretations of hysteria presented to her in lectures as *the* universal truth, and, on the other, her own feelings and reflections on the subject matter, prompted by reading *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (1905) by Sigmund Freud and observing Jean-Martin Charcot's photographs of late-nineteenth-century hysterical female patients.

Reading *Dora* was supposed to teach us to read a text interpretatively, the way Freud “read” *Dora* herself. “Interpretively” seemed to mean “with belligerence and hostility.” Judith wanted us to see the text as a “performance” in which Freud, the “author,” had to establish “authority,” by marginalizing interpretations different from his own. [...]

Why did people still read Freud: because he had been right, or because he hadn't been right? What exactly had been wrong with *Dora*? The word “hysteria” was always spoken with irony, as if it was too backward and un-feminist to merit discussion. We learned that *hysteria* was Greek for “uterus,” and that Hippocrates believed that women's uterus could become unmoored and wander around their bodies. This was clearly

not correct. Judith used an overhead projector to show us photographs from the clinic in Paris where hysteria was first documented. The doctor, Charcot, had asserted power over the women by documenting them. One woman was lying in bed with her arms outstretched, as if she had been crucified. Another was yawning angrily. Some women were having convulsions where they arched their backs. Some of them actually had epilepsy, strokes, or brain damage. Epilepsy, strokes, and brain damage were real. People still got them. But nobody got hysteria anymore. *Apparently, the thing that had been giving people hysteria was repressive Victorian norms. We didn't have those norms anymore, so we didn't have hysteria, either* (Batuman 2022, 145-146; my emphasis).

This passage alone offers a rich and stimulating exploration of the intersections between authority and interpretation in the historical construction of female madness, introducing some of the critical key concepts and considerations that will dominate and shape the latter part of this chapter. Central to Selin's critique of Freud's reading of Dora is the conceptualization of the act of interpretation as a power struggle, which illuminates the deeply ingrained dynamics of authority within psychoanalytic practice and discourse. Interpretative authority, as represented here, then, does not appear as a neutral or merely analytical process; rather, its coercive dimension entails the imposition of meaning by the male analyst onto the lived experiences of psychoanalyzed women, whose realities are often rewritten and distorted to fit a pre-established patriarchal framework—an act that mirrors the tendency, extensively criticized by second-wave feminist literary critics, of male authors to superimpose inauthentic narratives and partial perspectives onto the psyches, lives and realities of female subjects and characters. The description Selin offers of Charcot's photographs can also be understood along these same lines: framed once again as another type of assertion of power, this brutal act of documentation adds a visual dimension to the authoritative interpretation of mental illness, reinforcing the gendered imbalances and biases inherent to medical practices, along with psychoanalytic ones. Despite being presumed "scientific," Charcot's gaze appears to Selin as yet another form of patriarchal control, gaining both from the dehumanization of his female subjects and the objectification of their suffering.

As this passage discloses, the construction of hysteria—or, more generically, female madness—as a useful patriarchal tool perfectly designated to regulate and maintain control over women who stirred away from prescribed gender roles has been deeply embedded in the history of mental illness within the Western world (Chesler 2018 [1972]; Showalter 1985; Smith-Rosenberg 1985; Ussher 1991). As Selin recounts, the widespread hysteria (and neurasthenia)³² diagnoses of the nineteenth century were not only by-products of the sociocultural milieu of that time, but also complicit in reinforcing Victorian ideals of womanhood, which demanded passivity, emotional restraint and unwavering maternal instincts. By labeling women who defied these normative expectations as hysterical, these medical classifications functioned as punitive measures that reinforced women's subjugation to an unforgiving patriarchal authority while systematically nullifying any claims to personal autonomy or self-determination. In line with Michel Foucault's (2006 [1961]) socio-constructivist approach, numerous feminist scholars such Phyllis Chesler (2018 [1972]) or Elaine Showalter (1985) have thoroughly investigated this phenomenon, emphasizing that psychiatric diagnoses, rather than functioning as objective medical classifications, have often served as mechanisms of social discipline designed to categorize what is deemed "abnormal" (or mad) in relation to what is considered "normal" (or sane). This process, within gendered contexts, culminated in the

³² While hysterical women were commonly described as difficult, narcissistic, indolent, self-indulgent, deceitful, or even evil—in Silas Weir Mitchell's words, "a vampire who sucks the blood of the healthy people around her" (Mitchell 1885 [1881], 266; Mitchell 1881 [1877], 37)—women diagnosed with neurasthenia, a more "prestigious" nervous disorder that shared many symptoms with hysteria and served as an antecedent diagnostic category for present-day depression, were often depicted as cooperative, ladylike, well-bread, sensible, "refined and unselfish [in] nature," as individuals "exhibiting a proper amount of illness [with] a willingness to perform their share of work quietly and to the best of their ability"—thus, as one doctor stated, "just the kind of woman one likes to meet" (Showalter 1985, 134-135). This contrast, then, underscores how madness functions as a socially constructed label used to pathologize women's behaviors regardless of their nature: whether through the punishment of nonconformity or the validation of traits expected of the so-called "angels of the house," such medical classifications ultimately served to regulate women in accordance with patriarchal norms and expectations (Showalter 1985; Smith-Rosenberg 1985; Ussher 2011).

construction of the subject position of the “mad woman,” a discursive practice that inherently positioned the problem as *exclusively* female, thereby legitimizing biologically deterministic approaches to mental illness (Ussher 2011, 4-5). Indeed, this historical entanglement between gender and pathology is precisely exemplified by the long-standing tradition of conceptualizing madness as an inherently feminine disease, allegedly rooted in the physical imbalance of the reproductive system. Starting with Hippocrates’ theory of the “wandering womb” and ending with late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theories that attributed mental disorders either to menstrual irregularity, uterine disorders, vaginal infections or even to infertility, medical and cultural discourses have persistently pathologized femininity itself, interpreting any form of nonconformity as symptomatic of dysfunction. By merging psychological instability with reproductive health, these discourses not only solidified the association between womanhood and (mental) disorders but also legitimized medical interventions aimed at reasserting patriarchal authority under the guise of therapeutic obligation. The historical trajectory of female madness, thus, reveals a sociopolitical construct, one that has constantly evolved to uphold gendered hierarchies while discrediting female resistance through the language of pathology (Venable 2022, 93-118). In Jane Ussher’s words, women, hence, were—and still are—at risk of being considered mad for simply being women—“for displaying archetypal feminine traits, or paradoxically, for rejecting their feminine role” (Ussher 2011, 65). As a result, madness has traditionally “act[ed] as a signifier which positions women as ill, as outside, as pathological, as somehow second rate—the second sex” (Ussher 1991, 11).

While these considerations, also encapsulated within the aforementioned passage by Batuman, will necessarily inform the discussion in the following part of this chapter—given their status as essential and cornerstone notions within the academic discourse on female mental illness since at least the 1970s and 1980s—

this brief excerpt, rather more interestingly and innovatively, draws attention to one of the central queries this dissertation seeks to answer to: namely, as the title of this section suggests, how to read twenty-first-century catastrofemales. Selin's provocative closing remark—"Apparently, the thing that had been giving people hysteria was repressive Victorian norms. We didn't have those norms anymore, so we didn't have hysteria, either" (Batuman 2022, 145-146)—astutely introduces, in fact, one of the "blind spots" in traditional interpretations of female madness. What could initially appear as a sardonic dismissal of hysteria—framed by the narrator as obsolete, or even implausible at the end of the twentieth century—as a matter of fact reveals Selin's suspicion of the authoritative narratives surrounding mental illness, since the overall novel reflects on the lingering and persistent presence of madness in contemporary contexts, despite the complete disappearance of the Victorian norms traditionally deemed as culpable. Indeed, once these repressive norms are taken out of the question, how can Selin explain the depression that still seems to haunt the music she listens to, the contemporary novels she reads, the people she meets in college, her own mother, and, in the end, even herself? How can she interpret her own experience of "madness" and find the root of her problems when the dominant interpretative framework she has available is not adequate to understand her present condition? The master narratives of Western literature offer a discouraging picture: traditionally sidelined as expendable love interests of heroes that renounce an aesthetic life to pursue a morally sensible one, the future that canonically awaits mad women or, in her words, "crazy young girls" (Batuman 2022, 225) culminates either in despair or in a tragic death. "This is what I learned from books. There was a problem of application: what did you do if you *were* a young girl?" (Batuman 2022, 225), Selin asks herself towards the end of the novel, questioning the conventional trajectory that literature would typically want her to conform to. The metaliterary discourse carried out within *Either/Or*, then, illustrates the

novel's critical reevaluation of Selin's position within the narrative, both *the* "crazy" girl and, simultaneously, the protagonist of the story, thereby inviting a reassessment of the archetype of the madwoman, while paying homage to its literary tradition and its relationship, albeit controversial, with it.

As might be expected, Selin's concerns precisely mirror this chapter's broader inquiries into catastrofemales, connecting earlier reflections on the non-traditional trajectories awaiting these contemporary antiheroines with forthcoming considerations regarding the representation of mental illness in present-day narratives and the pressing need for innovative methodological frameworks to interpret them. Selin's incisive question, "[w]hy did people still read Freud: because he had been right, or because he hadn't been right?" (Batuman 2022, 145), summarizes her growing skepticism toward the authoritative interpretative frameworks presented in her lectures and, crucially, echoes this dissertation's interrogation of the applicability of traditional feminist approaches to twenty-first-century literary depictions of female mental illness.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's milestone study in feminist literary criticism, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), remains to this day one of, if not *the* most authoritative academic study on the representation of female madness in literature, earmarking its interpretation to author-oriented analyses and psychoanalytical readings that challenge and attack patriarchal structures and paradigms. While its contribution to feminist literary criticism cannot be overstated and will be appropriately explored further in the next section, the methodology it proposes, rooted in biographical and essentialist readings and in a critique of patriarchy, lacks the scope to address how multifaceted these present-day fictional representations are, as they poignantly reflect, interpret, and answer to the current complexities of our world. Orienting the analysis of present-day mentally unstable antiheroines through reductive lenses—whether focusing solely on the lingering opposition to patriarchal structures (as studies

on antiheroines or “bad women” would also have us do) or adhering to biographical readings—risks attenuating and oversimplifying the multiplicity of socio-cultural critiques embedded in these novels. As Selin insightfully observes, restrictive Victorian norms are not a conundrum for the contemporary woman anymore. Rather, catastrofemales, while facing gender-specific challenges, confront broader systemic issues afflicting twenty-first-century society, such as the entanglements of patriarchy with advanced capitalism, the rise of neoliberal feminism, or even the ongoing climate crisis, further complicating with contradictions and inequalities the picture traditionally offered by past literary depictions featuring mentally ill antiheroines.

If catastrofemales—much like contemporary television antiheroines—need to be interpreted as figures exposing and addressing the intersecting and overlapping socio-cultural tensions of our present, it becomes evident that a new methodological approach is then required to unpack and illuminate such multilayered narratives—in other words, to finally bring the madwoman out of the Victorian attic and into the contemporary city. Before advancing this alternative approach, it is, however, necessary to revisit Gilbert and Gubar’s foundational work, not only to acknowledge its contribution and merits but also to critically assess its limits, which reflect the broader shortcomings of second-wave feminist thought. Aware of these limitations, this dissertation advocates for the adoption of more advanced and contemporary feminist tools to effectively investigate the complexities of twenty-first-century narratives centered on catastrofemales, specifically of a posthuman feminist approach (as theorized by Rosi Braidotti 2016; 2018; 2022), a materially grounded framework that while emphasizing the embodied and embedded nature of subjectivities,³³ aims at

³³ The categories of “embodied” and “embedded” originate from 4E cognition theory, a framework that conceptualizes cognition as *embodied*, *enactive*, *embedded*, and *extended*. This model asserts that the mind is fundamentally shaped by the physical structure and constitution of the human body (embodied cognition) and its interactions with concrete environments (embedded cognition), which emerge from perceptual and intersubjective patterns (enactive

critically interrogating the “complex workings of human exceptionalism within neoliberal, biogenetic, and cognitive capitalism” (Braidotti 2022, 111).

1.3.1 Reassessing Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979): Beyond the Methods and Gender Essentialism of Second-Wave Feminist Thought

First published in 1979 at the height of the second-wave feminist movement, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar remains a cornerstone of feminist biographical criticism. Through its then-revolutionary approach to literary analysis and its reevaluation of texts previously interpreted from a predominantly male-centric perspective, this seminal study played a pivotal role in consolidating a new, female-centered literary canon in the decades that followed.³⁴ While women writers and their works had attracted significant academic attention long before the 1970s, they had not been systematically examined within the framework of a distinct female culture or subculture—an

cognition). Moreover, cognition extends beyond the brain into the external, physical world through the use of technological tools, ranging from prehistoric objects to contemporary smartphones (extended cognition). For further details, see Caracciolo & Kukkonen (2021). As it will be further examined in the next section of this chapter, Rosi Braidotti (2011; 2022) adopted the categories of embodiment and embeddedness to establish a materially grounded and anti-essentialist framework of subjectivity that rejects humanist and anthropocentric assumptions traditionally associated with Western philosophy. In particular, Braidotti foregrounds the materiality of the body as an essential site of experience, agency, and subjectivity, rejecting altogether dualistic and hierarchical understandings that oppose—or prioritize—the mind over the body. Challenging the Enlightenment ideal of an abstract, disembodied, and rational individual, her notion of an *embodied* and *embedded* subject underscores the intelligent materiality of the body and its embeddedness within complex, socio-cultural, political, and ecological contexts.

³⁴ Gilbert and Gubar’s endeavor to establish a female-centered literary canon was indeed a cumulative process, spanning multiple critical projects that followed *The Madwoman in the Attic* and comprising *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985), the three volumes of the *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (1988-95) project, and *Still Mad: American Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination, 1950-2020* (2021).

endeavor that feminist critics of that period sought to identify and validate (Gezari 2006, 265). Gilbert and Gubar, of course, did not exist in a vacuum; their scholarship emerged alongside a broader feminist critical movement that, during that decade alone, produced other influential studies such as Ellen Moers' *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (1976) and Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977). Together, these works reflected a collective turn in feminist criticism from analyzing the representation of women in literature written by men to examining literature authored by women. This shift, described by Showalter (1985) as a turn from "feminist critique" to "gynocritics" (243-269), resulted in an academic focus on women as writers—the biological, psychological, linguistic, historical, and cultural grounds they shared—which intended to establish a uniquely female literary tradition. As a result, this season of feminist literary scholarship celebrated the inherent differences between women's and men's writing, positioning these differences as central to appreciating women's contribution to literature in their fight against dominant male paradigms (Bertens 2014, 85-87).

Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* substantiated this approach by opposing Harold Bloom's (1973) (patriarchal) theory of poetic influence, which conceived literary influence as a relationship of sonship rooted in Freudian oppositional dynamics, and portrayed male writers as engaged in a struggle against an authoritative, aesthetic patriarch—a father, a progenitor, a procreator. Rejecting Bloom's framework, Gilbert and Gubar argued that women writers experienced a fundamentally different and more complex dynamic, namely an "anxiety of authorship," which they described as "a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor,' the act of writing will isolate or destroy her" (Gilbert & Gubar 2000 [1979], 48-49). When confronting the oppressive legacy of male precursors, women writers had to grapple first and foremost with their reductive portrayals of womanhood: narrowed down either

to an angel or a monster, this way of understanding and representing women sought to confine their existence within limiting and harmful archetypes. This is why, according to the authors, the search for a female precursor was essential for women writers since, rather than “representing a threatening force to be denied or killed,” it would demonstrate “that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority [was] possible” (49). Through their analysis, Gilbert and Gubar not only reevaluated women writers’ position within the literary canon as well as their relationship with their antecedents but also shed light on the ways in which female authorship functioned as an act of resistance against patriarchal constraints.

Within this theoretical argument, the metaphor of the madwoman emerged as the key to understanding female authorship. Neither angel nor monster, the *madwoman* served as the true alter ego of women writers—“a double, an image of her own anxiety and rage” (Gilbert & Gubar 2000 [1979], 78)—granting them the means to articulate both their frustrations and their attempts to rebel against the oppressive, male-dominated Victorian society that bound them. Through Gilbert and Gubar’s reading, influential nineteenth-century writers—to name a few of the most famous ones, Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, the Brontë Sisters, George Eliot, and Emily Dickinson—were suddenly reimagined as protofeminist figures, unconsciously resisting their own confinement within patriarchy. The issue of female confinement was, by all means, both symbolic and literal. The madwoman locked up in the attic could be understood as an echo—or even a parody—of the Victorian middle-class woman physically trapped within the smothering confines of the drawing room in men-owned households. Otherwise, the madwoman could also represent the broader experience of being constrained by the suffocating and oppressive boundaries of patriarchal culture. Madness, therefore, appeared to be the only logical response to the frustrating condition of existing within such limits: what nineteenth-

century physicians defined as hysteria, neurasthenia, or, more generally, madness was, as Elaine Showalter argued in *The Female Malady* (1985), an attempt to escape the cultural expectations that prescribed women's role and attitudes within society—something already addressed in the previous section of this chapter and hinted at by Selin in the aforementioned passage from *Either/Or*.

Needless to say, this position within patriarchal institutions was even more challenging and daunting for women writers: governed by male-imposed literary conventions, the (masculine) world of literature provided women only with either false or completely distorted reflections of their real selves, realities, and experiences. Yet, in Gilbert and Gubar's eyes, within this asphyxiating world, there was still space for resistance: within the pages of women's literature, one could find an encoded, subversive message that, intelligible primarily to other women, functioned as a cipher questioning or undermining "male truths." As might be expected, the figure of the madwoman became one such cipher and, as such, functioned—to borrow Rita Felski's (2003) words—as a "hidden message or palimpsest that lie[d] beneath the reassuring veneer of Victorian literary conventions" (68). Ultimately, *The Madwoman in the Attic* presented a compelling argument that combining linguistic analysis, psychological diagnosis and spatial imagery not only reshaped the understanding of nineteenth-century women's literature but also offered—through the figure of the madwoman—a powerful allegory that would remain influential and relevant within feminist literary criticism for decades to come.

The long-lasting legacy of *The Madwoman in the Attic* within feminist literary discourse is evidenced not only by its numerous reprints over the past four decades—the most recent being the 2020 edition published by Yale University Press—but also by the publication of Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic. After Thirty Years* (2009), an anthology edited by Annette R. Federico that primarily sought to celebrate and pay homage to the

groundbreaking contribution of Gilbert and Gubar's study, which continues to serve, according to Susan Fraiman, as "a gateway not only to feminist criticism but also to the methods and concerns of contemporary theory more generally," while teaching readers "to read from the margins, to pull a stray thread and watch the rest unravel, to dwell on the unintended and unsaid" (Federico 2009, 32-33). Yet, despite its enduring influence and relevance within feminist literary criticism, the text's methodological and theoretical foundations necessarily warrant some critical reassessment when viewed from the vantage point of the present, especially in regard to its author-oriented approach and essentialist views rooted in second-wave feminist thought.

According to Janet Gezari (2006), the widespread success of *The Madwoman in the Attic* can be attributed to its timely publication and, particularly, to its methodological approach. By the late '70s, particularly in the United States, the notion that men and women were fundamentally gendered differently—namely, shaped by divergent social experiences and cultural contexts for reading and writing—was beginning to gain traction beyond academic circles. Precisely through their interpretation of nineteenth-century women's writing as a form of "gender strife" (Gilbert & Gubar 1988-1995, xiv) against male literary paradigms, Gilbert and Gubar provided an ample number of readers with an example of how the category of gender could serve as a compelling critical lens for examining society at large, history, power structures, and even literature. In particular, their author-oriented approach positioned women writers as historical figures grappling with questions of identity, equality, and authority within a male-dominated world—a counternarrative that not only continues to hold relevance today but also profoundly resonated with the lived realities of many women, not just female writers, in the latter half of the twentieth century. As might be expected, this celebration of authorship was fundamental to the cause of 1970s feminist literary critics who sought to retrieve the works of women writers lost

to the official literary canon. Feminist scholars regarded the lives of female authors—their ambitions, misfortunes, desires, and dreams—as an essential and fertile terrain through which their creative production ultimately could be investigated and comprehended, while the obstacles they faced—the lack of economic independence, of time and a “room of one’s own” away from children or demanding husbands—provided a means to critique the patriarchal constraints that materially affected women’s existences and limited their artistic expressions (Lanser 1989). The dismissal of authorship, first prophesized by French intellectual Roland Barthes and soon embraced by influential (and predominantly male) American critics, therefore, appeared to many feminist scholars of that time as intentional, seemingly a deliberate attempt to undermine feminist literary scholarship by discrediting one of its foundational tenets (Bertens 2014).

Yet, as later feminist scholars have pointed out (Kamuf 1982; Moi 2002 [1985]), the belief in the existence of a quintessentially distinctive female literary tradition—while aware of its political implications—risks reinforcing rigid and intrinsically harmful distinctions between male and female authors rather than fostering a critical interrogation of existing gender norms. Framing literary works and debates in a fixed binary system that opposes male versus female or masculine versus feminine ultimately positions women writers against a “unitary foil of male writing, of western humanism, ‘dead white men’” (Friedman 1998, 26), bolstering a gender essentialism that inherently overlooks the other intersecting axes of identity—such as race, class, ability—that shape the category of “woman.” That is why by the early 1980s, a group of American feminist critics eventually began to adopt a new stance within this ongoing debate surrounding authorship. Arguing against the reliance of 1970s cornerstone feminist studies on a fixed categorization of womanhood and women’s writing, Toril Moi (2002 [1985]), for instance, compellingly declared that

“[i]f we are to undo this patriarchal practice of *authority*, we must take one further step and proclaim with Roland Barthes the death of the author” (63).

Taking its cue from these lines of reasoning, this dissertation maintains that, whereas the objective notion that real authors exist and deliberately craft their work according to their own volition and creative drive is not up for discussion, author-oriented approaches to literature should be considered just another layer for interpreting and attributing meaning to a text, rather than *the* singular revealing key through which the “ultimate” truth can be accessed, and any form of ambiguity be deciphered. Specifically, while biographical interpretations of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century female madness may be understood as part of a broader political effort—carried out by 1970s literary feminist scholars—to bestow authority on women’s literature, Gilbert and Gubar’s portrayal of Victorian writers as “seething rebels rather than moral guardians, as maimed victims of patriarchy rather than prim and censorious foremothers” (Felski 2003, 66-67) actually reveals more about the political exigencies of their own historical moment in time, rather than the actual realities of nineteenth-century women writers, as Rita Felski has observed. Their depiction of these authors as struggling women searching for their true selves, seeking a physical or metaphorical space within the boundaries of patriarchal society, in fact, closely mirrors the experience of early second-wave American feminists, transforming these past female writers and the fictional characters they created into perfectly-crafted literary precursors after Gilbert and Gubar’s own heart.³⁵

³⁵ Besides the renowned re-readings of *Jane Eyre* (1847) carried out by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, another notable example of this act of feminist “reinterpretation” is *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. While Gilman was, indeed, actively involved in the first-wave feminist movement and, thus, fundamentally already possessed a feminist consciousness, at the time of its publication, *The Yellow Wallpaper* was initially read as a horror story, a tale of a woman’s descent into madness, fully aligned with the conventions of the Gothic genre that was extremely popular among audiences of that time. It was only in the 1970s that critics began to interpret it as an allegory of the female condition under the late-nineteenth-

Whereas author-oriented readings of twentieth-century portrayals of female mental illness may still be considered functional due to the autobiographical nature of those narratives,³⁶ the same approach proves inadequate when applied to the twenty-first-century novels analyzed in this dissertation. These texts, indeed, exist as fictional products in their own right, completely separate from their creators, whose personal lives, more often than not, remain entirely inaccessible—and rightfully so—to the contemporary reader. As a result, twenty-first-century fictional madwomen—that is to say, the catastrofemales of the new millennium—cannot be reduced to mere alter egos of contemporary authors voicing their dissent against the status quo, nor can they be construed as hidden ciphers whose meaning is exclusively accessible to female audiences. In alignment with Elaine Showalter’s (1991) assertion, this dissertation contends that both over-feminization—the presumption that every aspect of women’s writing can be explained through gender—and under-feminization—the failure to acknowledge gender’s influence on women’s texts altogether—must be equally avoided in feminist literary practice and analyses, advocating instead for an approach that acknowledges, in Rita Felski’s words (2003), that “one is a woman, but that it is not all one is” (93). Accordingly, while catastrofemales grapple with gender-specific struggles affecting twenty-first-century women in the United States, they ultimately emerge as characters that

century patriarchal system, a chilling reflection on how female behavior was pathologized as a means of control. This short story, then, was reinterpreted as an autobiographical narrative, not only reflecting Gilman’s own experience with the rest cure but also illuminating the psychological and societal struggles of its author. As a result, what had once been an unsettling and uncanny story suddenly became, in Elaine Hedges’ words (1972), a “feminist document” (124). See Lanser (1989).

³⁶ Fictional works such as *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath, *Valley of the Dolls* (1966) by Jacqueline Susann, or *Play As It Lays* (1970) by Joan Didion can be classified as *romans à clef* and, as such, can invite biographical interpretations that draw connections between the authors’ lives and the fictional narratives of Esther, Anne, and Maria, respectively. Notably, the latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a shift toward full-fledged memoirs that delve into experiences of mental illness, psychiatric hospitalization, and substance abuse—exemplified by *Girl, Interrupted* (1993) by Susanna Kaysen or *Prozac Nation* (1994) by Elizabeth Wurtzel—which, due to the nature of their literary genre, inherently lend themselves to author-oriented readings.

are also capable of transcending gendered readings, encapsulating broader sociohistorical anxieties and structural transformations that shape our existence in the new millennium, ranging from the ramifications and intersections between advanced capitalism, neoliberalism, and the pervasive threat of climate change.

Striving to maintain the balance between over-feminization and under-feminization, as advocated by Elaine Showalter, this dissertation, then, asserts the universality of catastrofemales while simultaneously bearing in mind the ways in which the specific axe of gender intersects with those of race and class in fundamentally informing and shaping these representations of twenty-first-century American women. This awareness of intersectionality³⁷ (as conceived by hooks 2014 [1984]) stands in direct contrast to second-wave feminist frameworks that often relied on essentialist assumptions about female identity, an issue that characterized many studies of the earlier years—Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) being perhaps the most renowned case in point. Whereas the essentialist and ostensibly universal category of “woman” functioned—particularly during that era—as a necessary political construct to expose the structural and systemic nature of gender injustice (Mikkola 2017), it has also, as Linda Nicholson (1998) argued, operated as “a policing force which generate[d] and legitimize[d] certain practices, experiences, etc., and curtail[ed] and delegitimize[d] others” (293). By embracing the notion of a “universal woman,”

³⁷ The term “intersectionality” was first coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s within the field of critical race theory to describe how systems of oppression (particularly racism and sexism) interact and overlap in shaping the lived experiences of African American women. It is noteworthy, however, that within black feminist thought, awareness of the intersections of gender and race among structures of power predates the term itself. Notably, during the second-wave feminist movement, the Combahee River Collective, a black lesbian socialist feminist organization active in Boston, articulated a similar understanding of oppression as “interlocking,” insisting that race, gender, and class must be viewed as mutually constitutive axes of power. Without a doubt, bell hooks played a pivotal role in further developing and popularizing this theoretical framework, particularly through foundational texts such as the renowned *Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (2015 [1981]), *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2014 [1984]), and *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (2015 [1990]). On this, see also The Combahee River Collective (2014 [1978]); hooks (2014 [1981]; 2014 [1984]; 2015 [1990]); Crenshaw (1989); Threadcraft (2016).

these works ended up adhering to an exclusionary theorization of gender that assumed *whiteness* as the default lens through which the world was—to paraphrase Adrienne Rich’s words—thought, imagined, and finally articulated (quoted in Harris 1993, 356).³⁸

Much of the criticism directed at *The Madwoman in the Attic*, in fact, specifically targeted the essentialist framework underpinning Gilbert and Gubar’s argument: later scholars such as Jehlen & DuPlessis (1981), Baym (1984), and Lentricchia (1987) commonly criticized their postulation of a unitary, transhistorical, and cross-cultural woman that failed to give consideration to the historical and cultural specificity of nineteenth-century society and Victorian women, rather opting, as Toril Moi (2002 [1985]) contended, for the construction of a “narrative of a mighty ‘Ur-woman’” which, speaking for women too broadly, ended up replicating “precisely what the ventriloquism of patriarchy [had] always done” (66-67). Central to these critiques was the claim that the madwoman in the attic was appointed by the two authors as a universal symbol of women’s oppression under patriarchy, an analysis that ultimately disregarded how the intersections of race and class actually shaped the experiences of both the fictional heroines and the real-life authors they discussed.

The latter part of this section will, therefore, be briefly devoted to a critical examination of some relevant anti-essentialist responses to Gilbert and Gubar’s study,³⁹ not only to reiterate the limitations of their perspectives but also to

³⁸ Essentially, the “generic” woman at the center of these studies was always conceived as *white*, middle class, heterosexual, Christian, able-bodied, and *privileged*. For more information on the “white solipsism” and the gender essentialism of second-wave feminist thought, see Lanser (1989); Harris (1993); Nicholson (1998); Mikkola (2017).

³⁹ Although not specifically addressed in relation to Gilbert and Gubar’s study, another significant line of criticism moved against the essentialist nature of second-wave feminist thought pertains its implicit endorsement of compulsory heterosexuality within its founding construct of the “universal woman.” Central to this notion was the assumption that women were innately and exclusively sexually oriented toward men—a mystical or biologically determined inclination that, among other things, framed heterosexual sex as an inherently masochistic, possessive, and humiliatingly pleasurable practice. Within this paradigm, lesbianism was frequently dismissed as an act of defiance rather than a legitimate sexual identity, with lesbians depicted as women

connect these critiques to the broader trajectory of feminist thought over the final three decades of the twentieth century. This discussion, then, not only reinforces the necessity of critically engaging with more nuanced and updated feminist methodologies when analyzing catastrofemales, but also serves as an introduction into some theoretical discourses that have facilitated the critical disengagement of contemporary feminism from humanist paradigms—an intellectual trajectory that, when intersecting with anti-anthropocentric positions, has significantly contributed to the emergence of posthuman feminist thought, as will be further elaborated in the following section.

Among the anti-essentialist responses to Gilbert and Gubar's study, Myra Jehlen and Rachel Blau DuPlessis (1981), Nina Baym (1985), and Frank Lentricchia (1987) argued that the authors' anti-patriarchal reading of nineteenth-century society entirely overlooked the complexities of class, offering readers a reductive and monolithic portrayal of Victorian women as universally and helplessly repressed under the weight of patriarchal oppression. Claiming that the aristocratic social model informing Gilbert and Gubar's analyses blinded them "to any sort of social experience and any other sort of literature not rooted in the English country house" (Lentricchia 1987, 782), these scholars similarly criticized the essentialist nature of Gilbert and Gubar's argument which—to paraphrase Lentricchia's words—would have us believe that even poor men had it better than a rich woman (781). Indeed, while nineteenth-century women lacked the political and social status traditionally afforded to men in nineteenth-

"acting out" their bitterness toward men. The subsequent detachment of the notion of "gender" from that of "sex" enabled later feminist scholars to dismantle these (biologically) essentialist premises, challenging not only the notion that "sexuality" was a natural or biologically predetermined category, but also the assumption that gender difference was inborn. By interrogating the social construction of both sexuality and gender, these feminist critics fundamentally disrupted the binary logic that had long characterized feminist discourse, paving the way for more anti-essentialist, anti-humanist, and intersectional understandings of identities. For further explorations of these topics, see Rich (1980); Stone (2004); Archer Mann & Huffman (2005); Lanser (2014); Warhol (2016).

century patriarchal society, as their independence was restricted by both the rigid social norms reinforced by Victorian society and their economic reliance on male family members, those women belonging to the middle- and upper-classes of society—like the authors analyzed in *The Madwoman in the Attic*—were far from being the powerless victims Gilbert and Gubar made them out to be. Wealthy women, as a matter of fact, were not only granted a certain degree of autonomy and authority within their households, as they were responsible for the cultural and moral education of their children (Poovey 1988), but also enjoyed the distinct privilege of access to education—albeit outside the premises of renowned institutions and universities, which remained exclusively open to men—an opportunity uniformly denied to individuals from lower social classes, both man and women alike (Lentricchia 1987). Evidently, the picture Gilbert and Gubar painted of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century society was far more complex and fragmented than what their black-and-white analysis suggested, as inequality was not dictated by gender *alone* but was also shaped by other intersecting factors (such as class *and* race) that played crucial roles in determining women’s lives across different socio-cultural contexts.

Even more interestingly, later studies conducted by black feminist scholars employing an intersectional framework—though not explicitly directed as a critique to *The Madwoman in the Attic*—effectively helped deconstructing the essentialist vision projected by Gilbert and Gubar onto nineteenth-century society, challenging once and for all the image of the powerless heroine the two authors associated with nineteenth-century privileged, wealthy, white women (see Davis 2019 [1981]). Victorian upper-class women, in fact, were not only entrusted as “angels of the house” with the cultural and moral education of children within the domestic sphere⁴⁰ (Langland 1995; Towns 2009) but also

⁴⁰ On the emergence of the cult of motherhood as a sexist tool to safeguard white supremacy, see also Davis (2019 [1981]), 107-108.

endowed with the power and responsibility to neutralize working-class women's demands through their active position in the fight for (white) women's rights. The National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was, as a matter of fact, predominantly comprised of educated, wealthy, white women—notably, figures such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony or, even, Charlotte Perkins Gilman—who, rather than advocating and fighting for the common good, rejected wholeheartedly the fundamental principles of unity and class solidarity, prioritizing, instead, the interests and agendas of their own social class. By 1892, the suffragist cause had, in fact, become exclusionary, more focused on advancing the exploitative agendas of the new class of capitalist magnates who sought high profits and low wages in their newly established industrial empires, than on fostering solidarity among women of diverse backgrounds. As black people, immigrants, indigenous, and uneducated native white workers—both male and female—became the scapegoats of this new class of monopoly capitalists, NAWSA effectively marginalized non-white women in the fight for the ballot,⁴¹ seeking instead to persevere—as Angela Y. Davis revealed in her seminal study *Women, Race & Class* (2019 [1981])—"the reigning racial superiority of white people," rather than achieving political equality for all women (111).

Middle- and upper-class white women, therefore, were not merely the helpless heroines depicted by Gilbert and Gubar but actively reinforced class-based hierarchies and racial divisions in alignment with the dominant bourgeois ideology of the late nineteenth century, positioning major segments of the Women's Rights Movement with the white supremacist cause (Davis 2019 [1981], 97-112). As a result, black, immigrant, or white working-class women ultimately

⁴¹ For more information on women's suffrage at the turn of the twentieth century, particularly the collusion of white women suffragists with the white supremacist cause, see Davis (2019 [1981]), 97-112.

pursued struggles for education, unity, and political and economic equality *outside* and *in opposition* to the mainstream suffragist movement (Davis 2019 [1981], 123-133). The intersectional approach embraced by black feminist scholars, closely aligned with the principles of third-wave feminism, not only exposes the limitations of Gilbert and Gubar's framework by critically highlighting the dynamics of power and exclusion rooted in their study, but also challenges the universalist claims and hierarchical binary thinking (namely, the opposition between a "universal" woman and a "universal" man) traditionally associated with second-wave feminist studies, which, on the other hand, still remained tethered to humanist ideals. In doing so, studies employing intersectional frameworks offered a more nuanced understanding of the intersections of gender, race, and class, foregrounding the diverse experiences of women beyond the narrow confines of white, bourgeois perspectives.

In line with this anti-humanistic stance, one of the most trenchant anti-essentialist responses to Gilbert and Gubar's study came from Gayatri Spivak in her seminal essay "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" (1985). Employing a post-colonial framework, Spivak condemned *The Madwoman in the Attic* for its blindness to colonial and racial matters, asserting that it "should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English" (243), thereby adding another layer to the critique of the reductive frameworks employed within the dominant strands of mainstream second-wave feminist discourse.⁴² In particular,

⁴² While the essentialist framework critiqued above underpinned many of the most influential and widely recognized texts of second-wave feminism—most notably Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)—black feminists had already begun, at least since the 1970s, to articulate a more inclusive feminist praxis that explicitly foregrounded the lived realities of those systematically marginalized and excluded by dominant white feminist discourses. Speaking from the margins of second-wave feminism, they laid the groundwork for the decentering and deconstruction of hegemonic narratives, paving the way for the intersectional practices that would come to define third-wave feminist thought. A particularly salient example is the aforementioned Combahee River Collective which not only organized consciousness-raising

Spivak directed her criticism towards Gilbert and Gubar's reading of *Jane Eyre* (1847)—which she described as “a cult text of [white] feminism” (Spivak 1985, 244)—for its analysis and instrumentalization of the character of Bertha Mason, Mr. Rochester's Creole wife.

Paradoxically, the very character that gave Gilbert and Gubar's study its iconic title—the *real* mad woman in the attic—was not, in the authors' eyes, a figure in her own right; rather, she represented none other than Jane's repressed self, her “truest and darkest double, [...] the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious self Jane ha[d] been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead” (Gilbert & Gubar 2000 [1979], 360). As such, Bertha was reduced to a mere metaphorical extension of the protagonist of the story, entirely stripped of personality or agency, her cruel and fatal death serving as a sacrificial act that enabled the heroine to symbolically exorcise her own rage and ultimately reunite with Mr. Rochester in holy matrimony. By erasing Bertha's imperial and colonial history from their reading of the narrative, Spivak countered that the character of Jane Eyre was thus able to emerge as the true “feminist individualist heroine of British fiction,” a figure readily embraced by white European and Anglo-American feminists that, conversely, was completely refuted by Third World women who found their counterpart in the character of Bertha, “the woman from the colonies” coldly “sacrificed as an insane animal for her sisters' consolidation” (Spivak 1985, 251). Similar to the endeavor of third-wave black feminist scholars, Spivak's critique, by advancing a more nuanced and rigorous understanding of difference, emphasized the imperative to incorporate essential postcolonial notions and insights into feminist discourses in order to confront the limitations

meetings and retreats across the Northeast but also developed an alternative ideological project aimed at institutionalizing black feminism. As Alexis De Veaux (2004) recounted, one of the Collective's central aims was to establish a critical distance from white feminist agendas by interrogating their reductive fixation on the primacy of gender as an oppression, thereby challenging the very epistemological foundations of mainstream second-wave feminism.

of emancipatory practices still rooted in humanist ideals. Given that colonial histories had been marked by violence, systemic oppression and disenfranchisement, the perspectives of colonial “others” needed to become central—post-colonial scholars argued—when interrogating the dynamics of power, domination, and exclusion that continued to shape, at that time, feminist and literary frameworks.

In essence, Gilbert and Gubar’s analysis of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century literature, literary practice, and society at large presented a reductive and overly simplistic retelling of history that, by entirely disregarding the intersections of gender with race and class, privileged a humanist and essentialist narrative of universal female victimhood that failed to take into account the structural inequalities that determined women’s lives across diverse socioeconomic and racial lines. Much like the imposition of an authoritative narrative by male analysts onto the lived experiences of female patients—a dynamic Selin reflects on and critiques in the aforementioned passage from *Either/Or*—Gilbert and Gubar similarly superimposed, as Rita Felski (2003) contended, “a single framework and a false coherence onto a many-voiced and many-sided history of women’s writing” (70). In doing so, they not only reinforced the idea of a singular tradition of women’s writing and a single truth to women’s lives, but also ultimately crystallized the category of womanhood into an exclusionary, monolithic entity, in line with second-wave feminist discourses and practices.

While this dissertation acknowledges *The Madwoman in the Attic* for its pioneering attempt to identify an unexplored yet recurrent and distinctly fixed character type within Anglophone literature—a trajectory this study similarly seeks to follow in its examination of catastrofemales—it also contends that Gilbert and Gubar’s foundational assumptions and methodological approach are outdated for analyzing the “mad” antiheroines of the new millennium. Besides

rejecting biographical criticism,⁴³ this study firmly refutes any form of essentialism and ultimately advocates for the expansion of the predominantly anti-patriarchal frameworks traditionally employed in feminist inquiries into literary representations of female madness and antiheroines. This dissertation, therefore, fundamentally underscores the need for more nuanced theoretical tools that not only move beyond essentialist or binary paradigms but also account for the embodied and embedded nature of subjectivities, as well as the complex, multilayered conditions of twenty-first-century life, defined by the demands and logics of neoliberal and cognitive capitalism.⁴⁴ Bearing this in mind,

⁴³ By refuting any form of biographical criticism, this dissertation consequently refrains from employing Mad Studies as a framework for the literary interpretations of the texts under analysis. Defined as “a field of scholarship, theory, and activism about the lived experiences, history, cultures, and politics about people who may identify as Mad, mentally ill, psychiatric survivors, [...] neurodiverse, and disabled” (Beresford 2020, 1337), Mad Studies first emerged in Canada and soon gained recognition on an international scale as both an activist and theoretical movement that challenges psychiatric power, pathologization, and the institutionalization of mentally ill individuals (Beresford & Russo 2016). Rejecting bio-medical approaches to mental health, this field prioritizes non-pathologizing understandings of mental difference, particularly emphasizing how linguistic practices associated with the language of madness can serve as emancipatory tools for people affected by mental illness. Mad Studies, thus, intend to reclaim madness as a site of resistance and identity, while simultaneously recognizing its intersections with race, gender, class, and colonialism. When applied to literary studies, this methodological approach leads to biographical readings that focus on the lived experiences of real-life individuals—specifically, the authors of the texts under analysis—with the goal of raising awareness about mental difference across both historical and contemporary contexts, while fostering “mad communities” that subvert normative psychiatric frameworks and challenge the institutional marginalization of those labeled as mentally ill. As a result, novels such as *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath or *The Snake Pit* (1946) by Mary Jane Ward are interpreted through a biographical lens that re-frames the literary productions of these authors as forms of mental health advocacy and as attempts—sometimes unsuccessful—at community-building. For further information regarding Mad Studies, see LeFrançois, Menzies, & Reaume (2013); Spandler, Anderson, & Sapey (2015); Russo & Sweeney (2016); Beresford (2020); Beresford & Russo (2022). For a more in-depth exploration of the application of Mad Studies as a framework for literary criticism, see Donaldson (2018).

⁴⁴ “Cognitive capitalism” (as theorized by Moulier-Boutang, 2011) refers to the third phase of capitalism—following (1) mercantile and (2) industrial capitalism—in which knowledge, information, and intellectual labor have become the primary sources of value and productivity in the accumulation of immaterial capital. This economic model not only continues to profit from raw materials but also relies on the exploitation of labor as well as the commodification of dematerialized items, such as data, information, and codes, while financially depending on advanced computational networks. Whereas industrial capitalism relied on the organization of manual labor and the technological transformations of matter through the use of energy and labor, cognitive capitalism operates through the cooperative labor of interconnected human minds, utilizing digital networks, computational technologies, and advanced telecommunications to create, distribute, and capitalize on immaterial goods, knowledge, and information. This “virtualization” of the economy extends beyond any single sector, permeating every industry (from agriculture to advanced finance), and producing a “financialization” that abstracts material production into immaterial flows of information. As the living (meaning,

I propose that a posthuman feminist approach (as theorized by Braidotti 2022) is best suited to examine catastrofemales, as it critically challenges anthropocentric, humanistic and universalistic assumptions, while offering a framework that reckons with the materially-situated nature of contemporary subjectivities. The forthcoming section, then, will focus on the interpretation of catastrofemales: considering how mental illness is represented in the selected corpus of literary works and theorized within current scholarship (Ussher 2011; Venable 2022), this analysis—grounded in a posthuman feminist framework—seeks to illuminate how, in these present-day depictions, madness is both embodied and embedded, shaped by the historical and socio-cultural conditions in which these fictional characters are situated, while also functioning as an act of resistance against the constraints imposed by supremacist, patriarchal, neoliberal, and capitalist society.

1.3.2 Catastrofemales at the Posthuman Convergence: Rethinking Contemporary Representations of Female Madness through Posthuman Feminism

Either enraged and rebellious or unruly and dreadful, the madwoman at the center of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal study (2000 [1979]) was framed as both a powerful metaphor for women's writing and a subversive, outlandish figure through which a long-concealed message of rebellion, enclosed exclusively within the literary works of female authors, could finally be

biological, cognitive, and affective) labor increasingly becomes a primary source of surplus value, cognitive capitalism both commodifies and exploits the creative and generative potentials inherent to life itself, ranging from molecular biotechnologies to global digital infrastructures. Consequently, the value generated by this mode of accumulation is no longer limited to the material products of labor, as it once was, but instead resides in the immaterial, networked, and informatic capacities of cognitive labor. For further information, see Moulier-Boutang (2011); Braidotti (2022), 55-60.

uncovered—an implicit yet radical articulation of resistance, quietly passed down from one generation of women to another. As such, the madwoman was presented by the two American scholars as the singular literary figure that could authentically convey the lived experiences of women within Western patriarchal societies, embodying gendered anxieties, concerns and acts of defiance that, in their view, transcended class and racial distinctions. Neither angel nor monster—two archetypes traditionally employed by male writers to define and circumscribe femininity—this disruptive character was ultimately depicted as capable of emancipating female authors from the dominant male-imposed paradigms that had shaped and governed the Western literary canon since the dawn of time. An unsettling and disruptive force within the narratives under analysis, the madwoman—a dark and troubling double, at once the reflection and tangible manifestation of both the heroines’ and real-life authors’ suppressed impulses and subdued discontent—was consistently constructed by Gilbert and Gubar as an oppositional and destabilizing figure that permanently occupied a position of otherness. Madness, then, emerged from their analysis as a spectral presence, one that potentially loomed over and haunted not only the protagonists of the stories under examination, but also the real-life authors who, through their writing, expressed a deep-seated dissatisfaction and simmering anger toward the patriarchal constraints imposed by Victorian society at the turn of the twentieth century.

Fundamentally, within *The Madwoman in the Attic*, madness operated simultaneously as a form of opposition to the oppressive status quo—a transgressive force that challenged the established gender order, subverting the restrictive ideals of femininity historically imposed on women—and as a condition that, within the logic of these narratives and, crucially, within Gilbert and Gubar’s argument, required eventual containment or eradication in order to realign the parable of the heroine with traditional literary norms and the

expectations of the conservative (fictional) social order in which the characters were situated.⁴⁵ This dynamic is, in fact, unmistakably evident in the fate traditionally assigned to heroines and antiheroines within the European literary canon: whereas figures such as Jane Eyre could attain the expected conventional resolution only through the symbolic or literal elimination of their “mad doubles,” the unconventional, mentally unstable women of the Western literary tradition were invariably condemned to narratives of fatal downfall and brutal demise—as previously explored in this chapter and reflected upon by Selin, the narrator of *Either/Or*. By positioning the madwoman as the ultimate incarnation of otherness—someone requiring correction, containment or, even, elimination—Gilbert and Gubar not only reinforced the division between the good heroine and her mad, antiheroic double but, more significantly, distanced the fictional female heroines and the authors under analysis from the threatening, spectral presence of insanity itself.

⁴⁵ The vast majority of literary texts analyzed by Gilbert and Gubar belong to the Western canon and are particularly grounded in the tradition of the European *Bildungsroman*. As Franco Moretti (2000 [1987]) insightfully observed, the heroine’s development in nineteenth-century European literature was typically tethered to the observance of social norms, with the resolution of the narrative traditionally symbolized by a socially sanctioned marriage. This narrative closure ensured the heroine’s (or hero’s) financial security, social legitimacy, and full integration into the fictional social order. The character of Jane Eyre is, of course, a case in point, but Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse also exemplify this narrative arc: both female protagonists are, in fact, gradually reabsorbed into the normative structures they initially challenge, ultimately renouncing their unruliness or non-conforming behavioral traits in favor of adapting to social expectations and integrating into the social order through matrimony. It is rather evident why, within this context, the madwoman would emerge as a disruptive presence, an antagonistic force that had to be silenced or removed from the narrative in order to restore order and uphold the conservative logic of the *Bildungsroman*. By contrast, the American *Bildungsroman*—particularly in its modern and contemporary iterations—resists such definitive closures, favoring what Sarah Graham (2019) identified as “prolonged emerging over categorical endings,” and privileging processes of *becoming* rather than static, fully-formed identities (120). Unlike the European model, the American version often emphasizes the individual’s ongoing negotiation with national ideals of self-reliance and autonomy, rather than conformity to collective social norms. The anti-*Bildungsroman* narratives examined in this study, however, push this divergence further by centering figures who not only fail to achieve normative self-actualization, but actively resist it. As I sought to demonstrate, these antiheroines are not passively confined to the marginal space traditionally occupied by the madwoman, but rather actively reject the imperative of social assimilation altogether, asserting their agency and subjectivity through “mad” acts of resistance. In doing so, they challenge the very structure of the developmental narrative and destabilize the binary oppositions—madwoman/protagonist, disorder/order, insanity/sanity—upon which Gilbert and Gubar’s framework relies.

This displacement of anxieties surrounding psychological collapse and this projection of nonconforming behaviors or transgressive character-traits onto an externalized “Other” marked by vulnerability is, in fact, entirely consistent with broader Western cultural discourses and literary representations of mental illness (Gilman 1988): to paraphrase the words of Sander Gilman, it is not the heroine who totters on the brink of collapse, but rather the antiheroine, the madwoman—the pathologized Other—who is traditionally compelled to do so. As a result, Gilbert and Gubar’s construction of madness is caught in a conceptual conundrum: if their analysis, on the one hand, acknowledged the subversive potential of fictional madness to articulate a distinctly female form of dissent and resistance, on the other, it ultimately remained anchored to traditional and, by extension, patriarchal paradigms that sought to police the boundaries of femininity and female agency. Conceived inherently in stark opposition to the sane, virtuous, and compliant ideal of the “good woman”—as described by Ussher (2011, 64-109)—the unruly madwoman, defined by her disruptive and destabilizing force, was consistently framed by Gilbert and Gubar as an anomaly that needed to be contained, subdued, or erased—rendered, in essence, the quintessential Other.

In light of the significant reimagination of madwomen within twenty-first-century literature—no longer portrayed as figures relegated to a position of otherness, lingering at the periphery of a heroine’s story, but instead recast as unapologetic antiheroines who occupy the central position within their narratives—this dissertation underscores the pressing need to re-evaluate existing definitions of madness, informed by contemporary scholarly debates (Ussher 2011; Venable 2022), and to reassess the literary function such representations perform within the selected corpus of novels. If, within traditional frameworks, fictional madness has predominantly been read as a form of transgression that ultimately demanded containment to restore

conventional social order, its contemporary reiterations call for a more nuanced approach—one that neither pathologizes nor romanticizes its disruptive potential. Whilst acknowledging it as a radical expression of agency, resistance, and self-actualization within our contemporary society,⁴⁶ this revised notion of madness also intends to confront the material reality of mental disorders by focusing on the lived experiences of the fictional characters examined within this dissertation. In the case of the catastrofemales of the new millennium, such reconceptualization becomes particularly urgent, as their narratives reimagine the figure of the madwoman not as a destabilizing presence to be morally corrected or removed at the end of the story, as was customary in earlier depictions of mental illness, but rather as a central protagonist who unapologetically embraces and embodies catastrophe and defiance. In doing so, these novels open up a new pathway for rethinking what it means to inhabit madness and to live with mental disorders in the present literary and cultural landscape, not as aberrations to be resolved or hidden away, but as complex, meaningful, and sometimes even transformative experiences that demand recognition and nuance, and deserve literary attention.

This representational reorientation of female madness necessarily invites a critical reassessment of the theoretical frameworks that have long governed feminist discourses on female insanity, while also demanding careful consideration of more recent scholarly investigations into the subject matter (Ussher 2011; Venable 2022). Drawing on Michel Foucault's seminal study *Madness and Civilization* (2006 [1961]), feminist scholars have traditionally understood madness as a socially constructed phenomenon. Interested in the discursive practices through which systems of power historically regulated and delineated the boundaries between normal and abnormal, sane and mad, their

⁴⁶ For an in-depth discussion of madness as a radical expression of female agency and resistance, see Ussher (2011).

analyses (Chesler 2018 [1972]; Weisstein 1973; Smith-Rosenberg 1985; Ussher 1991; Metzl 2003; Metzl & Angel 2004) have been primarily concerned with interrogating the constructed subject position of the mad woman, challenging the longstanding authority of biologically deterministic paradigms that had, for centuries, been accepted as universal truths.⁴⁷ Refuting essentialist biomedical and psychological models, these scholarly studies, grounded in socio-cultural theories, investigated the myth of female madness through a rigorous and critical examination of the heteropatriarchal structures that governed women's lives across different historical, political, and socio-cultural contexts—structures that specifically intended to limit women's reproductive and economic autonomy and institutionalize gender-biased inequalities under the guise of scientific objectivity. Ultimately emerging from their feminist Foucauldian analyses was the notion that madness was a culturally constructed label, fabricated by medicine and “psy-professions” to define distress or deviance in ways that served the interests of those in power.

Building on this foundational body of feminist scholarship, Jane M. Ussher's study, *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience* (2011), offers an influential and timely contribution to the ongoing scholarly debate, not only consolidating but also expanding existing critical perspectives by integrating a material-intrapsychic approach into the predominantly social constructionist framework that has traditionally informed feminist analyses of female insanity. Addressing the complex interplay between power structures and the cultural and discursive practices that shape dominant understandings of madness, Ussher interrogated the ways in which women's psychological distress has been historically pathologized, psychologized, or medicalized within systems of knowledge inherently complicit in the reproduction of patriarchal power, with

⁴⁷ For further insights into the historical pathologization of women's bodies as mad, see Showalter (1985); Smith-Rosenberg (1985); Ussher (2011); Bakay & Dedehayir (2022).

the stated aim of uncovering “the genealogy of our current practices in the prejudices and policies of the past” (7). Her study compellingly demonstrates that diagnostic classifications and therapeutic treatments have rarely constituted neutral or objective measures operating in the interest of women’s well-being; rather, they have consistently functioned as instruments of oppression, reinforcing normative ideals of femininity by identifying women’s anger, sexuality, and forms of physical or behavioral non-conformity as symptoms of pathological deviance from an implicitly male-centered standard of sanity. In particular, by focusing on developments from the latter half of the twentieth century onwards, Ussher foregrounded how the rise of large pharmaceutical companies transformed these practices into a full-fledged profit-driven enterprise, one that actively capitalized and still profits off female suffering and commodifies distress as a marketable pathology.

Most importantly, Ussher called for the integration of a crucial focus on the lived realities of women into social constructionist analyses, in order to counter the tendency of dominant medical practices, rooted in positivist or realist approaches, to disregard female experience and reductively portray women as silent, passive victims. It is Ussher’s intent, in fact, to reclaim women’s agency even within contexts of madness, reframing female mental distress as “a reasonable response to the material circumstances of [our] lives” (186), “the result of living in an insane world” (6). In doing so, her work shifted the focus away from individual pathology and towards broader socio-cultural and political structures, while asserting the importance of holding together the discursive construction of madness and the material conditions of women suffering under systems of oppression. Through this reconceptualization, madness is disentangled from the stigma of otherness historically attached to it and is no longer perceived as a condition requiring women to be “locked away or shunned” (220). By paying attention concurrently to the material, discursive, and

intrapsychic aspects of madness, Ussher ultimately proposed a new epistemological model for understanding female insanity—one that rejects the Cartesian mind-body divide upheld by biological determinism,⁴⁸ along with reductive dualisms (e.g., subjectivity-objectivity, mental-physical) often employed in realist-constructionist studies. As a result, Ussher’s reframing insisted on the embodied and embedded nature of women’s madness: neither solely reducible to internal pathology or external sociocultural forces, madness must instead be understood, in her own words, as “a mediated both” of what is *inside* and *outside* a woman (108), a condition that simultaneously reflects the authentic experience of mental distress and the internalization of discursive practices that historically defined or constrained female subjectivity and agency, and still continue to do so.

Alongside Jane M. Ussher’s work, Hannah Lyn Venable’s more recent study, *Madness in Experience and History* (2022), may likewise be situated within this growing body of critical scholarship that seeks to reconceptualize madness beyond the reductive binaries of mind and body, self and society, which have long underpinned dominant conceptions of mental illness. By proposing an integrative theoretical framework that draws respectively on Merleau-Ponty’s

⁴⁸ The binary paradigm that separates mind and body can be largely attributed to René Descartes, the French philosopher who famously inaugurated a model of subjectivity grounded in rationality. In his *Meditations of First Philosophy* (1641), Descartes argued that the human subject is defined primarily, if not exclusively, by the capacity for conscious, rational thought. This philosophical orientation, foundational to modern rationalist traditions, instituted a rigid dualism that privileged the mind while relegating the body to a secondary, mechanical status. Consequently, the body was conceived not as integral to subjectivity but as a mere instrument, thus minimizing its epistemological and experiential significance. Drawing on this framework, biologically deterministic approaches to insanity pathologized women by attributing madness to their physical nature—specifically, to their reproductive bodies, which were construed as inherently unbalanced or disordered. In this logic, the female body was imagined as capable of “overwhelming” the mind, rendering it irrational and thus susceptible to madness. As a result, physicians—and, more broadly, patriarchal society—cast women as potentially irrational beings, the ontological opposites of the rational male subject, based on the very conditions of their being. For further insights, see Chesler (2018 [1972]); Showalter (1985); Smith-Rosenberg (1985); Ussher (2011).

phenomenological⁴⁹ and Foucault's archeological approaches to insanity, Venable similarly argued—though articulated in different terms from Ussher—that madness, while continuously redefined by cultural structures that evolve across historical contexts, is nonetheless intrinsic to human existence, insofar as nonrationality and rationality not only coexist within it but are also inextricably interwoven, both experientially and historically.⁵⁰ Seeking to foster a more nuanced understanding of mental illness and of human experiences more broadly, her analysis aimed to dislodge the concept of madness from stagnant medical paradigms that continue to operate through stark dichotomies opposing normal to abnormal, sanity to insanity, advocating instead for a redefinition of rationality that transcends binary divisions between the rational and the nonrational.

What emerges from Venable's argument is the assertion that, although such classifications may serve as provisional categories for explaining certain

⁴⁹ Hannah Lyn Venable drew upon Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of subjectivity, particularly as articulated within *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), to conceptualize madness as an embodied and integral dimension of human existence. Rather than framing madness as a deviation from an abstract rational norm, Venable emphasized, following Merleau-Ponty, that it arises from and remains constitutive of the human condition itself. Within this framework, humans are conceived not as disembodied rational minds, but as integrated wholes—embodied subjects in which mind *and* body are inextricably intertwined. Crucially, Merleau-Ponty challenged the Cartesian division of mind and body, arguing that such a split not only impoverishes our understanding of subjectivity but also relegates the body to the status of a mere mechanical or animalistic entity, subordinate to a detached rational mind. A phenomenological approach to madness—which hence acknowledges individuals as embodied, relational beings—on the other hand foregrounds the inescapable presence of nonrationality within human experience and its constant interplay with rationality, ultimately resisting binary oppositions between reason and unreason that have historically structured both clinical and philosophical discourses on madness. For further discussion, see Venable (2022), pp. 37-90.

⁵⁰ Venable identified four types of nonrationality—the pre-rational, the irrational, the supra-rational, and the unrational—but focused primarily on the first two, as they are most pertinent to Merleau-Ponty's and Foucault's discussion of madness. The pre-rational refers to experiences that precede conscious rationalization, often manifesting in habitual, embodied actions that occur without explicit reflective thought (such as driving a car). The irrational, by contrast, denotes actions that stand in direct opposition to rational or societal norms, such as hallucinations or behaviors deemed socially deviant. Throughout her work, Venable insisted that rationality and nonrationality are deeply intertwined, both experientially and historically, and that madness, thus, should not be seen as a pure absence of reason but rather as a disruption within the continuum of human rational and nonrational experience. In this respect, see also Venable (2019; 2022).

aspects of human experience, human existence itself resists rigid categorizations within inflexible epistemological frameworks. A more comprehensive interpretative strategy—one that attends simultaneously to the internalization of dominant discursive practices and to the phenomenological dimension of lived experiences—is thus necessary to fully account for the complexities of madness, as it enables reflections both on “the personal effects of the disorder and the environment and the conditions surrounding the disorder itself” (180-181). Approaching madness through this integrated account of history and experience, Venable contended, ultimately enables us to move beyond reductionist conceptions of mental illness rooted in biological determinism or in those positivist paradigms that frame madness as an individual problem. From her reconceptualization, then, emerges an idea of the human subject as an “embodied historical creature, a being who has an integrated mind and body and who interacts with the world as a unified whole, but who is also shaped by the hidden structures of society” (225). Only by bringing together the lived-body experiences and the structural conditions that shape them can we, according to Venable, construct an authentically holistic account of madness, one that not only informs more ethical and effective practices of care, but also resists the violence traditionally perpetrated by dominant diagnostic regimes (199). As such, Hannah Lyn Venable’s work contributes a vital philosophical dimension to contemporary investigations into madness.

Though underpinned by distinct methodological approaches, the works of Jane M. Ussher and Hannah Lyn Venable nonetheless converge in their reconceptualization of madness, similarly foregrounding the embodied, material nature of mental disorders and their inextricable embeddedness within the sociocultural structures that shape our society and human experience. While Ussher emphasized the importance of incorporating a material-intrapsychic dimension into both medical practices and feminist scholarship on female

madness, seeking to validate women's lived experiences and reassert their agency even amid conditions of suffering, Venable contributed a critical philosophical dimension to this reorientation, proposing an integrated framework that brings together phenomenological embodiment and historical discursivity. Together, these studies reject disembodied, ahistorical, and depoliticized models of psychopathology, insisting instead on the need for alternative frameworks that account for the ways in which madness is not only constructed by structures of meaning and power, but also negotiated in the material, lived experience of the body.

From these perspectives, a new approach to mental deviance emerges: uniting mind, body, *and* the sociocultural-political contexts in which individuals affected by mental disorders are situated, this reconceptualization of madness acknowledges how these three dimensions mutually inform, shape and determine one another in an endless, recursive, and dynamic loop. As a result, these theorizations effectively dismantle biologically deterministic paradigms and rigid binary oppositions—such as mind/body, rational/irrational, sane/mad, individual/society—that have historically governed both academic discourses and clinical models of mental illness, as well as, more broadly, the Western philosophical tradition. At the same time, they challenge dominant narratives of otherness traditionally ascribed to mental disorders, while fostering a renewed affirmation of women's agency even within the destabilizing, and often stigmatized, space of madness—a reorientation that, as previously contended, is mirrored in the contemporary novels examined throughout this dissertation.

Indeed, this theoretical realignment resonates with the representational shift in contemporary literary portrayals of female madness, as novels featuring catastrofemales advance an understanding of mental illness that is both embodied and embedded: a meaningful depiction of the material, lived

experiences of mentally ill women, and a reflection of, as well as a response to the social, cultural, and political conditions that define our contemporary world. Building on this reconceptualization of female madness—understood as a dialectical interplay among mind, body, and context, and simultaneously as a powerful, destabilizing force that reveals a disruptive form of female agency—the subsequent portion of this section intends to transition from theoretical considerations to literary analysis, illuminating how these intertwined dimensions of mental illness actually materialize within literary works featuring catastrofemales. Central to my argument is, in fact, the idea that precisely this rearticulation of female madness determines the very nature of these contemporary narratives, establishing not only recurrent themes and motifs, but also a number of their essential formal features. In particular, attention will first be directed toward the mental dimension, which shapes some of the most noticeable aspects of these texts, before turning to the physical and contextual ones, which respectively underscore the material reality—namely, the embodiment and embeddedness—of the mental disorders represented. Reflecting on how this triangular conception of madness—comprising mind, body, and context—translates both thematically and formally into these literary works not only demonstrates the alignment between contemporary theoretical perspectives on female insanity and its twenty-first-century literary portrayals, but also justifies the methodological turn toward a posthuman feminist framework. As previously contended, its emphasis on the embodied and embedded nature of subjectivities, its refusal of traditional binary categories, as well as its critique of contemporary power structures and socio-economic forces proves more fruitful than traditional feminist frameworks and is, in fact, indispensable for fully and critically engaging with narratives centered on catastrofemales.

In the novels under analysis, the mental dimension of madness functions not only as a window into the psychological distress and inner turmoil of the protagonists but also produces distinct formal consequences that effectively accentuate the internal rupture experienced by the main characters. First of all, it accounts for the stripped-down—and often repetitive—nature of the plots which, rather than adhering to action-driven narrative arcs, privilege introspective, character-oriented explorations. More significantly, this inward orientation results in the systematic use of homodiegetic narrators, a stylistic choice that establishes the adoption of a somber, confessional-like tone through which the protagonists of these stories reveal their suffering and unfiltered struggles with striking immediacy. This emphasis on introspection frequently translates into non-linear narrative structures that employ retrospective sequences or flashbacks to gradually unveil traumatic experiences initially concealed from the reader. Lastly, in certain instances, these internalized tensions even lead to moments of unreliability, in particular when narrators attempt to downplay or rationalize the symptoms of their mental distress, a strategy that not only dramatizes their erratic and unpredictable perceptions but also underscores the permanent state of instability at the core of their condition.

While the mental dimension predominantly shapes the more self-evident features of these narratives, the embodied dimension of madness similarly plays a crucial role in establishing thematic continuity among these stories, while also influencing their temporal settings within a year-long narrative arc. Refuting the stark, dichotomous Cartesian opposition between mind and body altogether, these contemporary representations of madness conceptualize mental illness both as a psychological state *and* as a physical, corporeal condition, producing tangible and visible effects on the bodies of the protagonists of these fictional works. Indeed, within these novels, the psychological struggles of catastrofemales are closely mirrored by a concomitant, gradual yet steady

deterioration of their physical appearance, thereby offering readers, through grotesque imagery of bodily decay, a visual and corporeal dimension to their experience of mental distress. This embodied aspect of madness plays a pivotal role in establishing one of the central thematic concerns emerging across these narratives: feeding into the neoliberal rhetoric of self-care and wellness (see Gill & Scharff 2011; Elias, Gill & Scharff; Gill & Orgad 2017; Braidotti 2022), the protagonists of these novels firmly believe that by transforming their physical appearance—whether through make up, a stylish haircut, intense dieting, exercise, or the purchase of new clothes—they can, in turn, “get better,” effectively cure any mental disorder afflicting them. By collapsing the mental into the physical, and vice versa, these texts reconceive the relationship between mind and body no longer as two divergent or oppositional categories, but as two entangled entities within a continuous loop of reciprocal influence, providing readers with a relevant, literary representation of an embodied subject. What is more, the thematic emphasis on these projects of self-betterment encapsulates one of the central critiques articulated by these novels to the individualistic logic—dominant in clinical models and, more broadly, in present-day society—that locates the resolution to personal suffering in private efforts of self-regulation and self-improvement, rather than in collective acts of resistance to systemic and structural inequalities. By bringing together the mental and physical dimensions of the antiheroine’s descent into madness, these literary works ultimately expose the illusory promises of the neoliberal ideology underpinning Western capitalist society. As argued earlier in this chapter, it is precisely this thematic concern with personal improvement that justifies the temporal setting of these novels, as catastrofemales’ journeys toward self-betterment typically unfold over the course of a year.

Whereas the mental and physical dimensions discussed above illuminate the emergence of certain key formal and thematic features, the contextual

dimension of madness, even more significantly, anchors these literary representations within the realities of supremacist, racist, capitalistic, and patriarchal American society, thematically establishing the sociocultural and political critiques central to these novels, and determining the urban and corporate settings in which these stories unfold. Retaining the notion that madness functions as a disruptive form of opposition to intersecting structures of power, these narratives highlight how the despair of catastrofemales is not an aberrant or isolated experience in time or space, but rather a condition shaped by the sociopolitical environment in which these characters are situated. As a matter of fact, the settings of these novels—typically urban and corporate—serve as symbols of broader systemic forces, microcosms encapsulating the ways in which structural inequalities influence the characters' mental, emotional, and physical well-being. In the face of neoliberal capitalism, patriarchal oppression, systemic racism, and pervasive cultural ideologies of self-care, consumerism, and individualism, madness is thus reframed not merely as a personal affliction but as a comprehensible, even coherent, response to the precarity, alienation and exhaustion of contemporary life.

The destructive condition of catastrofemales, then, may serve as a mirror of the broader contemporary female experience, not only exemplifying the struggles faced by other characters within the narratives but also replicating the experiences of real women living today. In this sense, the representation of madness as embedded challenges the traditional boundaries between sanity and insanity—or, more broadly, between the “insane” individual and a “sane” society—conventionally upheld by clinical models of mental disorders, suggesting instead that mental illness is not a deviation from normative rationality, but an understandable, *logic* response to the brutalities of our present—as also pointed out by Jane M. Ussher (2011). As a result, madness is freed altogether from the stigma of otherness and reimagined as a transformative

force that gives voice and dignity to collective experiences of suffering and resistance. It is precisely this reconceptualization of madness—as embodied, embedded, and as a subversive, transformative force—that ultimately informs the innovative narrative arcs of catastrofemales: far removed from the fatalistic trajectories traditionally assigned to mentally ill antiheroines, these stories always culminate in moments of hard-earned clarity. As argued throughout this chapter, it is specifically through their experience of madness that these protagonists gain critical insight into the inner mechanisms of contemporary society, eventually emerging disillusioned—regardless of their positive or negative outcome—with the false promises sustained by both neoliberal capitalism and neoliberal feminism. Yet, this reconfiguration of madness—understood as a dialectical interplay between mental, physical, and contextual dimensions—not only reshapes the thematic concerns and formal features of these novels, but also, as argued throughout this chapter, invites a critical reconsideration of the frameworks through which we read these contemporary representations of female mental illness.

Indeed, precisely in light of this rearticulation of fictional madness—closely aligned with recent theoretical interventions that conceptualize mental distress as an embodied and embedded phenomenon (Ussher 2011; Venable 2022)—it becomes increasingly evident why earlier feminist frameworks, such as those proposed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2000 [1979]), can no longer be regarded as adequate for interpreting contemporary portrayals of female mental illness. As previously contended, while their foundational work was crucial in establishing the madwoman as a figure of proto-feminist resistance—albeit through a strikingly essentialist lens—it ultimately reduced madness to an *abstract* metaphor of opposition to patriarchal norms, detaching it from its material, experiential dimension, and reinscribing it as a condition of “otherness” requiring containment or erasure within the dominant, normative and rational

social order. By contrast, twenty-first-century narratives featuring catastrofemales not only reaffirm female insanity as a subversive form of resistance to intersecting regimes of power, but also thematically and formally incorporate a triangular reconceptualization of madness—as an entanglement of mind, body, and context—that actively dismantles traditional binaries (such as mind/body, rational/irrational, or sane society/mad individual) long embedded in clinical models, earlier feminist discourses, and indeed in Gilbert and Gubar’s own critical framework. These literary texts, as a result, reframe madness not as deviant “otherness,” but as a coherent, even intelligible, response to the sociopolitical and material conditions of our present, emblematic of broader collective experiences under neoliberal capitalism and patriarchal oppression.

Bearing all this in mind, the turn toward a posthuman feminist framework (as theorized by Braidotti 2022) then emerges not only as justifiable but crucial: its rejection of traditional humanist paradigms, its emphasis on the embodied and embedded nature of subjectivities, alongside its explicit political commitment to unpacking contemporary structural socio-economic forces and powers, render it a productive critical lens through which we can engage with these literary reconfigurations of female madness. The final section of this chapter will therefore introduce and outline the implications of reading catastrofemales through a posthuman feminist perspective—an interpretative trajectory that will be, of course, substantiated in the chapters that follow through close readings of five novels featuring catastrofemales: *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) by Ottessa Moshfegh, *The New Me* (2019) by Halle Butler, *Severance* (2018) by Ling Ma, and *Luster* (2020) by Raven Leilani. Before doing so, however, a brief overview of posthuman feminist theory and its core tenets will be provided, both to underscore its conceptual resonance with the novels under consideration and to lay the groundwork for the interpretative chapters to come.

The expansion of earlier reflections primarily found in *The Posthuman* (2013) and *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019a), alongside the culmination of earlier theoretical explorations developed across numerous essays and articles (2014; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019b; 2019c; 2021, to name a few), finds its most comprehensive expression in one of Rosi Braidotti's most recent volumes, *Posthuman Feminism* (2022), which offers—as the title suggests—a systematic articulation of what posthuman feminism is and entails. Aiming to bridge the gap between two fields of scholarship that, according to the author, represent complementary facets of a shared critical project, Braidotti framed the intellectual endeavor carried out in *Posthuman Feminism* (2022) as an urgent re-evaluation of feminist thought *through* and *with* posthuman theory.

Celebrated for its subversive and radical nature in redefining the concept of difference among marginalized groups through a positive, enriching outlook, contemporary feminism is particularly commended by Braidotti for its anti-humanistic orientation (2016; 2021; 2022). Its active commitment to the political empowerment not only of women, but also of people of color, black people, Indigenous peoples, and LGBTQ+ communities, translates into a broader critical objective that coincides with the creation of “alternative visions of ‘the human’ generated by people who were historically excluded from, or only partially included into, that category” (2022, 3). Indeed, this challenge of the category of “man”—intended as androcentric, exclusionary, hierarchical, Eurocentric—has characterized feminist theory at least since the third-wave, which, once freed from the essentialist limitations of mainstream second-wave movement, redirected its purpose toward advocating for those living at the intersection of multiple axes of inequality.⁵¹ It is precisely this anti-humanistic orientation,

⁵¹ According to Braidotti (2016), the anti-humanistic turn adopted by feminist discourse from the 1980s onwards reflected the desire to critically interrogate the humanist ideal of “Man,” intended as the white, heterosexual, privileged, and able-bodied male positioned at the pinnacle of the hierarchical order of European culture and society, and upheld as the universal representative of humanity. Though differing in methodologies and frameworks (hooks 2015

aimed at dismantling the dominant Western philosophical ideal of “man,” that positions feminist theory—according to Braidotti—as a valiant precursor to the posthuman turn, and as a necessary theoretical step toward the formulation of anti-anthropocentric agendas.

Posthumanism, in turn, extends this anti-humanistic critique by incorporating an anti-anthropocentric stance that fundamentally challenges exclusionary conceptions of the human while advocating for the disruption of entrenched binary paradigms and hierarchical species divisions, emphasizing instead the interconnectedness and interdependence between humans and non-human others (Haraway 1985; Haraway 1990; Braidotti 1994; Hayles 1999; Haraway 2003; Wynter 2003; Wolfe 2010; Braidotti 2013; Ferrando 2013; Ferrando 2018). Yet, posthumanism is not merely a critical lens for analyzing the complexities of our present, but is also a marker of our present condition. For Braidotti, the twenty-first century is shaped by what she termed the “posthuman convergence” (2013; 2019a; 2022), a historical moment determined by rapid technological advancements, the escalating ecological crisis, and the ongoing dominance of neoliberal, cognitive capitalism. In the face of these entangled and prevailing forces, posthumanism, then, emerges as a necessary and timely theoretical response to the structural inequalities of our present, demanding the decentering of the human as an exceptional entity in favor of a theoretical framework that recognizes the blurred boundaries between humans and non-human others, subjects and objects, nature and culture, mind and body.

Drawing from radical theorizations within ecofeminism, feminist technoscience studies, queer theory, and black, decolonial, and Indigenous feminisms, posthuman feminism brings together the anti-humanistic legacy of

[1990]; Harding 1993; Crenshaw 1995; Shiva 1997; Spivak 1999, among others), these feminist scholars uniformly rejected universalist claims and hierarchical binary thinking—positions that stood in direct contrast to the second-wave feminists who, conversely, relied on humanist and essentialist ideals to establish the grounds for a feminist political ontology.

third-wave feminist theory with the anti-anthropocentric imperatives of the posthuman turn, seeking to “dislocat[e] the centrality of humans” while advocating for the creation of “new definitions and practices of what being human may mean” (Braidotti 2022, 6). Informed by new materialist feminist theories (Grosz 1994; Braidotti 2002; Alaimo & Hekman 2008; Alaimo 2010; Bennett 2010; Iovino & Opperman 2014; Pitts-Taylor 2016), posthuman feminism, in fact, seeks to critically challenge universalist, exclusionary humanistic assumptions by proposing a reconceptualization of subjectivities as embodied, embedded, and sexed across all material entities, centering the lived experiences of subjects who have historically been marked as “others” in relation to the privileged figure of the “Man/Anthropos.” Moreover, it also contests anthropocentric notions by emphasizing the entanglement of all life forms within a material net, advancing—in opposition to the bio-centric world of “Man,” which both privileges certain lives and renders others invisible through processes of dehumanization (Rabinow 2003; Esposito 2008)—a relational ontology that foregrounds the interdependence of human and nonhuman others, and thereby calls for a more inclusive and ethical mode of being-in-the-world. The posthuman feminist project, indeed, proposes new relational ethics and practices of care that affirm the mutual dependence of all entities, aiming to strengthen cross-cultures and cross-species collaborations in response to pervasive, multilayered and ongoing crises. In this sense, it fosters an ontological relationality without erasing difference, affirming instead plurality and diversity while recognizing our collective entanglement within the conditions of the posthuman convergence—as Braidotti argued, “‘we’ are, after all, in *this* together” (Braidotti 2022, 84). As such, posthuman feminisms emerges as a radical project in an age of political exhaustion, one that reasserts the importance of everyday actions of respect, solidarity, and resistance, with the clear aim of

opposing, reconfiguring, and ultimately *transforming* the unjust conditions of the present in pursuit of a more just and sustainable future (237-238).

At the same time, posthuman feminism also functions as a critical navigational tool, providing a multifaceted repertoire of adequate concepts and approaches to read the fractures and paradoxes of the posthuman convergence, and to confront the multi-scalar challenges of our contemporary era. By moving beyond fixed identity categories and binary paradigms, and instead focusing on the broader systems of material and discursive power, it allows for a more nuanced critique of how the humanist and anthropocentric ideal of “Man” continues to endorse and underwrite gendered, racialized, and colonial hierarchies, while also focusing “on the complex workings of human exceptionalism within neoliberal, biogenetic, and cognitive capitalism” (Braidotti 2022, 111). This posthuman turn of feminist theory—or its “becoming-otherwise-human” (6)—can thus be understood as a desire to productively reposition feminist analyses within the present conjuncture, shaped by intersecting systemic socio-economic forces, accelerating technological progress, and ecological catastrophe, integrating critiques of structures of power and knowledge into the heart of the feminist project. In doing so, posthuman feminism emerges as a timely and urgent critical intervention in contemporary debates concerning the redefinition and renegotiation of the notion of “Human” from the perspective of those who have traditionally been excluded from it.

Having briefly outlined the theoretical and political stakes of the posthuman feminist agenda, it becomes increasingly evident why this methodological framework proves particularly well-suited for analyzing contemporary narratives centered on catastrofemales. Posthuman feminism, first and foremost, offers a compelling interpretative lens for decoding the political and socio-cultural critiques embedded in these contemporary narratives. If fictional madness continues to carry its radical and defiant connotations, then the

subversive gestures enacted by catastrofemales must be understood, as this chapter has emphasized, as broader acts of resistance against dominant power structures, socio-economic forces, and prevailing cultural discourses that shape twenty-first-century Western life. Catastrofemales inhabit fictional worlds defined by the posthuman convergence, shaped by rapid technological development, ecological catastrophes, and the pervasive yet often obscured presence of neoliberal capitalism. These entangled dimensions—whether they materialize through the looming specter of climate change, the detrimental impact of social media and dating apps on self-perception and intimacy, or the alienation and disaffection caused by corporate labor—constitute the narrative background within which these characters aimlessly navigate their lives, suffer, and ultimately seek forms of resistance. In this context, posthuman feminism proves especially productive: not only does it facilitate a rigorous interrogation of the twenty-first-century sociopolitical landscape—particularly the different “strands” of contemporary feminism such as neoliberal feminism—but it also foregrounds the ways in which subjects’ material locations across multiple categories (such as gender, race, class, age, ability) determine their positionality within intersecting regimes of power. Drawing on a politics of location,⁵² posthuman feminism, in fact, reorients feminist inquiry toward situated knowledges and embodied epistemologies, conceiving subjectivity as a material assemblage shaped by socio-cultural codes and defined through one’s embeddedness within intersecting structures of power. This empirical

⁵² The concept of a feminist “politics of location” has a rich genealogy, originating from 1970s activist techniques of consciousness-raising. First articulated in 1984, when Adrienne Rich coined the term as a tribute to the profound wisdom generated on the margins, this concept has since undergone several reformulations, turning into a full-fledged critical feminist framework. This materialist and intersectional approach confers epistemic privilege upon the knowledge and experiences of marginalized and oppressed groups, asserting that their direct experiences of exclusion and oppression provide a clearer understanding of how power operates concretely in present-day society. Ultimately, this approach contends that the marginalized are uniquely positioned to speak truth to power, offering a perspective that is both more objective and more accurate in its depiction of the world. See Braidotti (2022), 116-118.

orientation enables a more precise analysis of how the multi-scalar workings of power function within Western societies governed by advanced capitalism, while simultaneously endorsing situated forms of resistance (Braidotti 2022, 116-118; 137-139).

What emerges from this posthuman feminist reading of twenty-first-century novels featuring catastrofemales is, then, the idea that female oppression cannot be located solely within patriarchal structures—as traditional feminist frameworks often suggest—but instead must be understood in relation to the convergence and dynamic interplay of multiple systemic forces (economic, cultural, and political) that, always in accordance with each character’s specific positionality, *collectively* configure the lived realities of these contemporary antiheroines.⁵³ Seen in this light, these narratives expose the intricate ways in which neoliberal capitalism and patriarchal structures coalesce to affect the lives, desires, and mental wellbeing of these fictional women, while simultaneously laying bare the ideological contradictions of present-day neoliberal feminism.

If, as scholars have already observed, contemporary media representations centered on antiheroines target the figure of the “future girl” and the logics of mainstream feminism (Hagelin & Silverman 2022), then the novels under current examination, I contend, participate in a parallel project of critique,

⁵³ While my current argument is grounded in the assumption that the actions and re-actions of these fictional women to the political, social, cultural landscapes of the new millennium reflect a broader Western experience of womanhood under advanced capitalism, this analysis is also informed by the politics of location central to the posthuman feminist project. This framework enables me to foreground the material situatedness of these fictional subjects within their narratives, emphasizing how their embodied experiences and entanglements with intersecting systems of power are mediated by their positionalities across axes of gender, race, and class. This intersectional orientation has directly informed the selection of the novels under analysis, with the aim of presenting a more diverse cast of catastrofemales than the predominantly white, privileged characters who have dominated Shame TV. While the protagonists of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, *The New Me*, and *The Pisces* conform to the white, privileged standard (albeit with notable class distinctions), *Luster* follows a black woman navigating economic precarity, whereas *Severance* traces the experience of a first-generation Chinese-American woman grappling with identity, cultural dislocation, and the collapse of late capitalism. Catastrofemales, then, constitute a heterogeneous group of women bound by shared experiences of alienation and resistance, though their individual trajectories are distinctly shaped by the material conditions of their racial and class locations.

one that especially condemns twenty-first-century reconceptualizations of the “ideal woman,” which, as Alice Cappelle (2023) argued, has been rebranded as either a girlboss or a self-care guru within capitalist contexts (21-52). As the following chapter—focusing on *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by Ottessa Moshfegh and *The New Me* by Halle Butler—will specifically illustrate, these narratives decisively challenge the notion—wholeheartedly embraced by the feminist project since at least the second wave—that work equates to female liberation, interrogating neoliberal feminism’s dominant rhetoric, which celebrates careerism and professional achievements as markers of female emancipation while concealing its alignment with capitalist imperatives. By examining the intersections of patriarchal oppression, capitalist ideology, and neoliberal discourses of self-betterment and self-care, these novels reveal how contemporary systems of power not only exploit women’s labor under the guise of empowerment, but also obstruct any systemic understanding of their psychological suffering, instead displacing responsibility onto the individual, who is urged to resolve their discomfort through hollow acts of self-care and self-fashioning. The concomitant mental and physical unravelling of catastrofemales—their rejection of aesthetic ideals commonly imposed on women, their embracement of physical abjection and, most importantly, their descent into madness—should thus be interpreted as a radical and embodied act of resistance against these intersecting forces. In this context, then, madness emerges as a strategic disruption—mental as well as physical—an act of defiance whose multilayered socio-cultural and political implications are most effectively illuminated through a posthuman feminist lens, as it broadens the reductive anti-patriarchal interpretations offered by traditional feminist frameworks.

Not only the political, and socio-cultural commentary embedded in narratives featuring catastrofemales clearly calls for a posthuman feminist approach, but also their thematic content and formal features similarly align

these contemporary novels with posthuman feminist tenets and concerns.⁵⁴ The stories under examination, I argue, thematically underscore the materiality of the human body, as catastrofemales are represented as embodied and embedded subjects, enmeshed within the fractured and unstable forces of the contemporary posthuman convergence. Crucially, posthuman feminism's reconceptualization of subjectivities as materially grounded, relational, affective, embodied, and embedded (Braidotti 2022, 112-116)—rather than merely biologically determined or socially constructed—offers a compelling analytical framework through which we can frame the lived materiality of these fictional characters.

As previously contended, their experiences of mental distress are not reducible to individual pathology but are instead constituted within the integrated materiality of mind *and* body, shaped by the recursive entanglement between biogenetic components and the socio-cultural forces affecting our present. This representational reorientation of madness—as a phenomenon comprising mind, body, and contextual embeddedness—aligns with posthuman feminism's theorizations of the body, thereby reinforcing the necessity of adopting more advanced and temporally-attuned feminist frameworks to read twenty-first-century representations of mentally ill antiheroines. Moving beyond the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, the posthuman feminist project, in fact, conceptualizes the body as an ontological site of becoming—at once enfleshed and affective, relational and signified, and always implicated in networks of

⁵⁴ Although this dissertation primarily employs posthuman feminism as a theoretical framework through which to examine the socio-political critiques and embodied subjectivities articulated by catastrofemal narratives, it is worth noting that the relationship between these texts and posthuman feminist thought may extend beyond the thematic level. Their disruption of conventional temporal linearity and sequentiality, the reconfiguration of urban spaces into materially entangled environments that foster relations between human and non-human actors, the inclusion of non-human characters, the occasional deployment of what Marco Caracciolo (2022) terms “posthuman narrators” (1100), and their broader subversion of the teleological structures traditionally associated with the realist novel (Caracciolo 2021; 2022) likewise invite a posthuman feminist reading of narrative form. While a sustained formal analysis falls beyond the scope of the present research, these features suggest a productive avenue for future scholarship on the catastrofemal as a literary figure.

power. Emerging from this framework of bodily materialism—informed by the works of Massumi (2002), Clough and Halley (2007), and Protevi (2009) on affect—is the understanding that bodies are not merely passively molded by external forces but actively “unfold outward,” manifesting tangible expressions of pleasure or pain, desires or despair, in response to external conditions (Braidotti 2022, 113). In light of this, the catastrofemalé’s descent into madness can be further re-articulated: not only as a psychological expression of resistance to the pressures and contradictions of present-day American society, but as the mental *and* corporeal internalization of oppressive power structures *as well as* their external manifestation, resulting from a dynamic and recursive interplay between material embodiment and embeddedness. Accordingly, these characters’ bodies become sites of assimilation and response—spaces *within* and *through* which the crises and catastrophes of contemporary life are registered, inscribed, and ultimately contested.

Having thus established the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this study, the following chapters will turn to the close reading of four selected novels—*The New Me* (2019) by Halle Butler, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) by Ottessa Moshfegh, *Severance* (2018) by Ling Ma, and *Luster* (2020) by Raven Leilani—with the intent to illuminate the intricate ways in which contemporary narratives featuring catastrofemales reimagine the possibilities of female embodiment, agency and resistance at the posthuman convergence. In particular, the following chapter will offer a comparative close reading of *The New Me* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, focusing on two white catastrofemales, whose experiences of psychic disintegration emerge at the intersection of neoliberal labor regimes, affective exhaustion, and privileged yet unstable subject positions. It will further examine how both protagonists engage in divergent “makeover” projects—one oriented toward conventional forms of self-optimization and productivity, the other toward radical withdrawal through

chemically-induced sleep—as competing attempts to alleviate their suffering, only to reveal the persistent deferral of recovery embedded in the neoliberal promise of “getting better.”



Figure 2 "Pilot," Season 1, Episode 1 of *Girls* (HBO, 2012-2017).

Chapter 2. New Year, New Me: White Catastrofemales and the Failure of Reinvention in *The New Me* (2019) and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018)

2.1 “A Voice of a Generation?”: White Catastrofemales and the Collapse of Scripts of Feminine Fulfillment

Seated in a New York City restaurant, twenty-four-year-old Hannah Horvath learns in the cold open of the pilot episode of *Girls* (HBO, 2012-2017) that her parents are cutting her off financially. Forced to confront the uncomfortable reality that her post-college life has failed to unfold according to the linear trajectory she had anticipated, Hannah—mentally suspended between adolescence and adulthood—finds herself full of aspirations yet entirely unable to articulate a concrete future, armed with a seemingly useless humanities degree and vague artistic ambitions but no clear professional plan. Desperate to change their minds, she goes to her parents’ hotel room towards the end of the episode, imploring them to read her unfinished manuscript so they might recognize her latent potential. At her now-famous declaration, “I don’t want to freak you out, but I think I may be the voice of my generation,” her parents appear visibly amused by the hyperbole of the claim, if also somewhat baffled by her confidence. Doubtful of her own statement almost immediately, Hannah then recalibrates: “Or at least, *a* voice of *a* generation.” Simultaneously comic and tragic, this moment—and, more broadly, this first episode of *Girls*—encapsulates a hyper-specific set of anxieties that, as discussed in the previous chapter, would come to define cultural representations of millennial womanhood throughout the following decade: acute uncertainty about the future, visceral dissatisfaction with the present, prolonged economic precarity, diffuse feelings of aimlessness, and

an inability to reconcile the inherited promises of self-realization with the fragmented realities of post-recession American life.

While *Girls* quickly became a touchstone for debates surrounding millennial privilege and arrested development, its enduring cultural resonance stems from its ability to capture a broader existential condition associated with the post-recession era. Neither conventionally successful nor straightforwardly disadvantaged, the young women populating Lena Dunham's TV series inhabit an uncomfortable space between opportunity and disappointment, possessing many of the educational, cultural, and social advantages associated with middle-class white femininity while remaining structurally and psychologically unable to convert these resources into coherent narratives of fulfillment. Describing this particular trend in contemporary small-screen representations of young womanhood as the emergence of an archetypal "Young Millennial Woman," Rebecca Liu (2019) observed that this figure—embodying a distinctly contemporary form of feminine ennui—is typically "pretty, white, cisgender, and tortured enough to be interesting but not enough to be repulsive," frequently described as *universally* relatable despite the considerable privileges she enjoys. Emerging at the intersection of precarity and affective instability, this figure crystallizes a *specific* form of psychic disarray that becomes central to the catastrofemale narratives examined in this dissertation.

Arising from this same cultural formation, the catastrofemales at the center of this chapter, in fact, can be understood as literary counterparts to the aimless antiheroines of contemporary television. Similarly well-educated, white, and relatively privileged, yet equally incapable of transforming these advantages into stable forms of happiness or self-realization, white catastrofemales usually drift through their twenties and, following the forced abandonment of their creative aspirations, spiral into paralyzing forms of depression shaped by the rigid structures of wage labor. In alignment with those other media

representations of “instituted and normalized” forms of “alienation” identified by Amy Dobson and Akane Kanai (2019, 783), these narratives of feminine madness similarly unsettle the cruel optimism and taken-for-granted happiness of “can-do-girl” trajectories, exposing the increasingly fragile foundations upon which contemporary fantasies of feminine fulfillment rest.

Indeed, where neoliberal and postfeminist cultures consistently frame happiness as the outcome of a specific, highly disciplined life trajectory—typically achieved through successful self-fashioning and professional advancements—catastrofemale narratives consistently dramatize the total collapse of these very promises. If, as Sara Ahmed (2010) argued, contemporary “happiness scripts” operate through the implicit assumption that personal fulfillment is attached to socially sanctioned forms of conduct and aspiration, the antiheroines inhabiting these narratives find themselves structurally incapable of accessing the futures they have been taught to desire, even when they *do* actually perform the “right things” required to attain them. Confronted with the failure of those anticipated trajectories, these women fall into profound forms of psychic disintegration, unable to navigate a reality in which the very ontological frameworks through which they have been taught to understand their worth and orient their lives suddenly begin to unravel.

Bearing this in mind, this chapter examines two foundational catastrofemale novels, Halle Butler’s *The New Me* (2019) and Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), exploring how madness *emerges from*, and *responds to*, the collapse of these scripts of feminine futurity. Frequently read respectively as a workplace satire of late-capitalist office culture (Cosslett 2019; Etter 2019; Seidlinger 2019; Tolentino 2019; Hoffman 2022; Pignagnoli 2024) and a nihilistic narrative against capitalist productivity (Behluli 2018; Cummins 2018; Filgate 2018; Kleeman 2018; Kreizman 2018; Tolentino 2018; Greenberg 2021; Guleryuz 2024; Woodhead 2025), these novels are considered here as

participating in a shared exploration of contemporary forms of alienation and the desperate search for relief to psychic suffering. Both narrated by young women whose lives are marked by acute emotional exhaustion and profound disaffection, these stories center on protagonists who pursue radical strategies to alleviate—or even overcome entirely—their condition of mental distress. In this sense, both novels offer particularly illuminating examples of what a “traditional” catastrofemal trajectory entails: not only do they emerge among the earlier texts within the corpus examined in this dissertation, but they also establish the formal, thematic, and ideological parameters that later catastrofemal narratives within this dissertation will replicate and complicate.

Reading these novels as foundational texts within the broader corpus, this chapter traces how contemporary cultures of wellness recast emotional well-being as a project of embodied labor, thereby situating these literary works within a broader contemporary feminist discussion critiquing capitalist subject formation (see Ringrose & Walkerdine 2008; McRobbie 2009; Gill & Scharff 2011; Gill & Orgad 2015; Scharff 2016; Gill 2016; Elias, Gill & Scharff 2017; Braidotti 2022). Within these narratives, madness is neither an exceptional pathology nor a purely romanticized, symbolic form of anti-patriarchal feminist resistance, but an embodied and embedded condition produced through the protagonists’ entanglement with broader social, economic and ideological structures of contemporary life. Drawing on recent new materialist theorizations, particularly those advanced by Rosi Braidotti (2022), this chapter understands the body not as a passive container of experience, but as an ontological site of becoming—simultaneously affective and material, relational and signifying—through which socio-cultural, economic, and political pressures are internalized, metabolized, and materially manifested in forms of despair and alienation that exceed the language of individual responsibility through which they are typically pathologized.

To map this trajectory, this chapter is organized into three distinct yet deeply interconnected sections. The first two analyze, respectively, *The New Me* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* as narratives that stage madness as an embodied and embedded condition, produced through the recursive entanglement of feminine subjectivity with broader structures of labor and power. In *The New Me*, this is primarily shaped by the neoliberal organization of corporate temporality and deferred self-realization under precarious labor. In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, by contrast, it emerges at the intersection of both neoliberal and patriarchal scripts of feminine fulfillment, negotiated through a project of chemical hibernation that nonetheless remains structurally bound to logics of self-repair. The final section reads these trajectories together, showing how both aesthetic self-fashioning and alternative projects of radical withdrawal function as distinct yet structurally continuous responses to a shared cultural logic of cure, which posits psychic distress as something that can be resolved through intensified intervention upon the self.

By tracing this conceptual trajectory across Butler's and Moshfegh's novels, this chapter ultimately argues that catastrofemal narratives register the failure of neoliberal happiness scripts not as an abstract critique but as a lived psychic and embodied disintegration produced within contemporary regimes of labor and self-optimization. It is precisely through this failure that the catastrofemal comes to articulate her historical moment—not as a stable “voice of a generation,” but as its fractured and symptomatic reminder.

2.2 Drowning in the Office Blues: Precarious Labor and the Erosion of Futurity in *The New Me* (2019) by Halle Butler

Borrowed from the *Breck Girls* advertising collection, the close-up image of the young woman dominating the Penguin front cover of Halle Butler's *The New Me* (hereafter *TNM*) zooms in on a serene blue eye and a portion of soft, sandy hair. With their immaculate makeup and diverse yet impeccably styled hairdos, the women featured in the *Breck Girls* portraits—a series of commercial pastel advertisements produced during the Great Depression and popularized throughout the 1940s and 1950s to sell shampoo—represent to this day an unshakeable image of pristine, wholesome American femininity that, from the front cover of *TNM*, immediately evokes for the reader an idealized, perfectly curated model of womanhood. Yet, standing in stark contrast to this image of perfection is a single, hyper-realistic addition on the right side of the cover: a massive housefly, resting obscenely upon the woman's bangs. By introducing an element of physical defilement—the abject, the parasitic—into the visual codes of the jacket, the fly subtly suggests the presence of a latent decay lurking beneath the flawlessly manicured surface. In doing so, the front cover immediately stages the novel's intrinsic tension between the coercive pull of aesthetic entrepreneurship under neoliberalism and the forms of psychic deterioration it simultaneously engenders. While looking at the cover one might easily assume, as Jia Tolentino (2019) has argued, that the woman represents the protagonist, the reader discovers only by the novel's conclusion that Millie is, in fact, the fly, caught “in a final minute of frantic reaction—trapped in a jar, flailing against what is to come.” The cover's oscillation between idealized femininity and the possibility of abject decay, therefore, prefigures the novel's sustained interrogation of the unstable boundaries between self-fashioning and disintegration in contemporary life, a dynamic that is ultimately condensed in the antiheroic figure of Millie and her parable of disaffection.

Set against the stark backdrop of 2010s corporate Chicago, *TNM* chronicles, in fact, the profound psychic and material stasis of Millie, a thirty-year-old temporary office worker trapped in a cycle of precarious labor and existential impasse. Preoccupied by the persistent, haunting conviction that her life should be *otherwise*—more coherent, economically secure, and socially legible—Millie embodies the agonizing friction between neoliberal promises of self-reinvention and the depleting reality of modern wage labor. The plot is actually minimal. At the novel's opening, Millie secures a short-term placement at Lisa Hopper, an upscale interior design firm. Instead of offering a path toward stability, this position quickly absorbs her into a monotonous rhythm of administrative tasks that only deepens her affective detachment. Millie's domestic life mirrors this stagnation: reeling from a recent breakup with her boyfriend, James, she lives in near-total isolation, passing her non-working hours watching true crime television and eating junk food.

Despite the vacant, petty environment of the firm, Millie intermittently clings to the promise of full-time employment, convincing herself that a permanent contract at the firm will finally bring her life coherence and, in the long run, fulfillment. Millie, then, embarks on a project of self-renewal, desiring to become—through an intense process of aesthetic and behavioral self-fashioning—the perfect candidate for permanent employment. Her efforts are however cut short when she is abruptly fired before her contract even expires. Left without the stabilizing anchor of a daily corporate routine, Millie plummets into a deeper, months-long depressive episode, completely withdrawing into her apartment and becoming trapped within a destructive loop that leaves her even more isolated than before. The novel closes with an ambiguous epilogue set years later: Millie is employed at a different office, leaving it fundamentally unresolved whether this new position has yielded any genuine sense of satisfaction or happiness.

Structuring Millie's trajectory within this deceptively minimalist plot, *TNM* emerges as a paradigmatic instance of the catastrofemal narrative, where structural precarity and social alienation are mapped directly onto a story of psychological disarray. Unfolding over a time span of approximately one year—excluding the epilogue—the novel intentionally eschews comprehensive chronological development to focus instead on specific, isolated moments within its arc. Because everyday life under late capitalism is characterized by a flat, interchangeable monotony, Millie remains endlessly suspended in a recursive loop of temporary employment and sudden unemployment, allowing the reader to easily fill in the narrative gaps produced by her structural inertia. This formal containment is mirrored in the text's shifting narrative architecture: the primary first-person narration—marked by Millie's dense, deeply alienated internal monologues—is periodically interrupted by brief chapters scattered throughout the story, vignettes narrated by a heterodiegetic voice that focalizes characters occupying the margins of Millie's life, such as her coworkers or neighbors. It is precisely through the disjunction between these two narrative perspectives that Millie's profound aimlessness becomes legible. While she consistently interprets herself as an exhausted and misunderstood worker struggling to endure increasingly untenable circumstances, the external vignettes sharpen the self-sabotaging dimensions of her behavior, presenting her instead as unreliable and socially inept—in other words, “off.” By repeatedly estranging Millie from her own self-perception, the novel strips her of the romantic status of the misunderstood individual and relocates her psychic distress within the broader social world she inhabits, revealing that the dissatisfaction, precarity, unhappiness, and thwarted aspirations that structure her experience are neither unique nor exceptional. In doing so, the novel constructs a counter-narrative, as Virginia Pignagnoli (2024) contended, to the “silent assumptions of a master-narrative” that continues to promote the American Dream as an aspirational

parable (63), thereby exposing the systemic conditions through which promises of self-improvement and upward mobility fail to materialize. It is precisely this relocation of psychic distress from the individual to the social that informs the reading developed in this chapter.

Far from being represented as an individual pathology located within a self-contained subject, Millie's madness operates within the novel as an embodied and embedded condition that, as this section intends to explore, is produced through the continuous entanglement of the protagonist's subjectivity with the material, affective, and ideological structures that organize her everyday life. As such, Halle Butler's novel, much like Ottessa Moshfegh's, resists any clinical or individualizing account of mental distress, staging instead Millie's psychic disintegration as both a result of and an outward response to her interaction with the precarious forms of corporate labor shaping the economic landscape she inhabits and the neoliberal scripts of feminine subject-formation through which she constructs her identity, understands herself, assesses her value, and even imagines her future. Millie's suffering is therefore not staged as a sudden breakdown or an exceptional crisis, but as a diffuse and ongoing state that is at once embedded within broader interlocking systems of power and inscribed in the material reality of her body through psychological disarray and bodily abjection. Rather than serving as a passive container for suffering, Millie's body becomes, then, the very terrain upon which the alienating contradictions of the social, cultural, and economic world she inhabits are materially lived, affectively registered, and somatically reproduced.

Millie's affective life, namely her depressive stasis, is undoubtedly shaped and exacerbated by her precarious position within corporate labor. At the beginning of the novel, she secures yet another temporary position, filling in for a receptionist job at Lisa Hopper. Deeply disheartened after having spent the last six months of her life jumping from one temp job to another without ever

securing stable employment, Millie derives little relief from this recent development in her professional circumstances, convinced that she is fundamentally “trapped” in an endless “loop” of precarity without any possibility of escape (Butler 2019, 37). Reflecting on her situation throughout the novel, Millie offers the reader a portrait of contemporary labor as a stifling and alienating mechanism of continuous instability, one in which work produces *neither* security *nor* coherence, but leaves the subject trapped in a recursive cycle of employment and unemployment—as she reports, “drowning in days, money running out, parents vaguely aware of a situation that I have spun as positively as I can” (145).

Although published before the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent socio-political phenomenon termed the “Great Resignation” (Klotz 2021), *The New Me* remarkably anticipates the psychic and affective exhaustion produced by contemporary trends of “quiet quitting” (Constantz 2022; Newport 2022), placing at the center of the narrative the intense psychological costs of sustaining a minimal, emotionally detached attachment to work under conditions of systemic precarity. More broadly, the novel participates in a wider trend of millennial literature concerned with interrogating and dismantling contemporary myths surrounding work in a landscape where, as Jia Tolentino (2019) suggests, the absence of any expectation of long-term employment has become itself the defining certainty. Populated by a handful of characters who, as Yonina Hoffman (2022) has noted, appear trapped within circumstances they cannot meaningfully alter—“they need money, their coworkers are being laid off, and as they see it, having a bad job is better than no job”—Millie emerges as only *one of* the many “bored workers” in the narrative, living out her “empty life seemingly traumatized, paralyzed, and uncertain.” Through Millie’s trajectory, work fails to function as an *actual* source of self-realization, appearing instead as an endless, dizzying loop that traps the protagonist in an ongoing state of

alienation, compelling her to move through interchangeable office spaces day after day.

While temporary employment may initially appear to promise variation, Millie recognizes this variability as entirely illusory, admitting that she is “drawn to temp work for the slight atmospheric changes” because “the new offices and coworkers provide *a nice illusion of variety*” (Butler 2019, 22, my emphasis). Beneath this surface fluctuation, however, lies a deeper, inescapable monotony: “There’s a lot of repetition in my life. No real routine or narrative, just repetition” (21). As this passage discloses, a central paradox lies at the heart of contemporary labor under capitalism: workplace precarity does not interrupt the soul-crushing monotony of late-capitalist labor but merely multiplies it under the deceptive guise of variation. In this sense, the novel portrays labor under late capitalism as an alienating environment where, as Byung-Chul Han (2015) observed, the activities of “merely working and merely living” collapse into one another, tightly “defin[ing] and condition[ing] each other” (18). While Millie initially remains attached to the neoliberal premise that work functions as a pathway toward self-realization, her trajectory throughout *TNM*—and her gradual descent into deeper forms of distress—ultimately deconstruct this belief from within, exposing contemporary labor as a regime of managed instability in which change itself is emptied of any transformative potential.

Though settings and tasks may vary slightly, work under late capitalism—the novel suggests—ultimately remains the same and provides no genuine source of meaning or identity to the subject embedded within it. Millie’s responsibilities at Lisa Hopper—answering phones, greeting clients, assembling “packets of junk mail” (Butler 2019, 9)—appear to her as mindless trivialities, tasks that even “an idiot” could perform (38). Yet, if today’s work ethic is one in which, as Sarah Jaffe (2021) has aptly pointed out, “we are expected to enjoy work for its own sake” (19), what happens when that work appears utterly

meaningless? Millie's blunt confession— "I really hate the idea of this job. Everyone there is so ridiculous, *and the work is completely meaningless, and thinking about taking the job is depressing*. I mean, thinking about where it might lead is completely depressing" (Butler 2019, 84, my emphasis)—thus verbalizes the internal contradiction of a culture that positions work as the ultimate site of self-realization while offering forms of labor that increasingly appear hollow and devoid of significance. Paradoxically, while the work Millie carries out does not feel "real," the emotions it produces are profoundly material, leaving her with the sense that "every morning is just one more used-up day" (21) and her "life is completely meaningless and empty" (30). By portraying Millie's psychological distress as emerging directly from her embeddedness within contemporary labor structures, *TNM* contributes to a broader questioning of the deeply entrenched cultural assumption that productivity and self-realization necessarily provide meaning, coherence or fulfillment, despite their supposed centrality within contemporary American life.

Importantly, Millie's depression does not arise solely from her skepticism toward the tasks she is expected to perform at the interior design firm but from her gradual recognition that work itself appears incapable of delivering the fulfillment it promises under contemporary socio-economic conditions. While the expectation that labor should be intrinsically rewarding remains an imperative that Millie recognizes and continues to internalize throughout the novel, the working conditions she encounters repeatedly uncover the fragility of that very promise. Rather than stemming solely from the bleakness of her present circumstances, Millie's existential dissatisfaction then arises—perhaps even more significantly—from the painful gap she perceives between her lived reality and an anticipated future that never actually arrives. Admitting that "a sense of something more—like *Oh, there must be something more!*—was always nagging at me" (25), Millie exists in a state of suspended animation, perpetually waiting for

life to officially begin, for adulthood to become meaningful, for wage labor to become rewarding, and for her superficial relationships to acquire genuine significance. Temporally and ideologically embedded within a regime that organizes contemporary subjectivity through deferred promises of self-realization, Millie's distress emerges precisely from the deep-seated conviction that life ought to contain some larger, redemptive meaning, while that horizon of promised transformation remains permanently out of her reach.

This temporal entrapment also helps explain why the ideological distinction between temporary and permanent employment ultimately loses all significance for her. Advancement into permanent employment appears not as a solution, but as "an endless abyss" (3), while her friend Sarah's reassurances that her unhappiness is only temporary are immediately undermined by Millie's recognition that "if it's not this job, it'll be the next" (30). As such, the source of Millie's psychological disintegration—the novel seems to counter—is *both* the toxicity of a particular workplace—or corporate labor more generally—and the broader temporal structure through which contemporary life itself is organized. *TNM*, then, suggests that what ultimately collapses is not only *faith in work*, but *faith in futurity* as a meaningful horizon of transformation, as the repetitive structure of Millie's laboring life erodes any sense of temporal progression beyond the iterative present. As the promise of fulfillment recedes even further into the distance, this diffuse sense of failure and disarray becomes, little by little, also registered at the level of Millie's body itself, as the suspension of futurity is translated into an embodied experience, collapsing the perception of her temporal stasis into somatic stagnation.

Indeed, if Millie's systemic entrapment within regimes of precarious labor and neoliberal subject-formation produces her initial alienation, this psychic disarray is rendered fully legible—much like in the other catastrofemal narratives under discussion—at the level of the flesh, as madness manifests itself

through the somatic register of exhaustion and material abjection. Throughout the novel, in fact, emotional and physical states are inextricably fused together, staging Millie's distress as something immediately felt in the smell, texture, taste, and visceral weight of everyday life. As she declares in one of the central passages of the novel:

I feel completely dry and cracked, my lips standing off my face, rough. Inside of my mouth stuck together, throat swollen, eyes dry, face crunchy, hair crunchy, muscles dry, skin dry, brain dry, and I can't move. [...] The silence in my apartment is deafening, and my reasons for getting out of bed are absent [...] *Bitter, my whole body, my whole insides, everything about me that my body makes but that isn't of my body—thoughts feeling personality—bitter for having to live in my shitty body, and my body dittoing the sentiment back to its master.* [...] What's inside me struggles for a minute, some kind of tension pushing at the walls of my body, and then it recedes (67-68, my emphasis).

Articulated through the language of abjection, this passage captures the total collapse of the boundary between the (psychological) self from Millie's flesh, portraying a recursive dynamic in which bodily discomfort intensifies Millie's emotional alienation, while her psychic distress simultaneously reshapes her corporeal experience. Far from merely describing psychological suffering through convenient somatic metaphors, Butler dismantles the distinction between psychic and somatic experience altogether. The passage's repeated insistence on dryness—expanding from skin and muscles to the cells of the brain itself—figures consciousness as fundamentally inseparable from the material body sustaining it, thereby suggesting that affect, cognition, and corporeality operate as part of the *same* embodied continuum.

Such a representation resonates, of course, with posthuman feminist understandings of subjectivity, which frame the individual not as an autonomous, self-contained consciousness, but as an emergent property of interlocking biological, affective and material processes. Millie's body, thus, ceases to function as a passive vessel inhabited by a sovereign self and instead acts as an active participant in the production of her alienation. Every component

of this corporeal assemblage—from organs and muscles to saliva, mucus, and skin—registers and recalibrates the structural pressures of her environment. This hostility developing between the body and its so-called “master” does not signify a tear between two distinct entities but rather exposes the *impossibility* of such a division altogether. Millie’s madness, then, becomes legible not as an interior mental pathology, but as a *relational phenomenon* generated within the feedback loop between an individual’s embodied existence and the social, economic and affective landscapes they are forced to navigate.

Across the novel, the increasing detailing of Millie’s grotesque embodiment emphasizes the escalation of her psychological distress, exposing not only the profoundly destabilizing conditions of her corporate labor but also the fragility of the neoliberal façade of wellness and self-management that structures her attempts at self-renewal. Millie’s body is relentlessly marked by a vocabulary of abjection, characterized by chronic dryness, nausea, fatigue, and a pervasive sense of corporeal disintegration. Rather than functioning as incidental descriptions, her self-representations accumulate into a sustained aesthetic of bodily excess and failure, as seen in her repeated insistence on sensory and olfactory degradation: “My pits are slick, and my face smells like a bagel” (2), “an aimless bile rising at the back of my throat already, as usual, for no reason, like it always does” (5), “my armpits wet with sweat, and I can feel how dry my lips and face are, how ridiculous I must look” (41), “I feel mucus dislodge from my mouth and throat with every sip” (135), and the saturation of her existence in “the stiff feeling of my body, the smell, part dirty clothing, part cooking oil, part garbage, part incense” (21), or “not like who I am now, flailing, filled with puke, thinking about death and feeling angry all the time” (77). Within this sustained aesthetic regime of bodily collapse, the novel stages a crucial displacement: Millie’s distress becomes most clearly legible through its somatic inscription, showing directly on the protagonist’s flesh—usually the site for continuous

optimization and improvement—how the self-betterment she pursues is, in reality, not being attained.

The novel makes this crisis explicit within its recurring mirror scenes—a trope central to catastrofemale narratives—where intense self-scrutiny yields no redemptive coherence but only deepens Millie’s estrangement from her physical form. In *TNM*, the mirror does not function as a site of recognition, but rather as a site of visual disintegration: her reflection appears alien, broken down into repulsive micro-details: the “countable pores on my forehead,” yellowing teeth, and a “sallow and grayish” skin prove too horrific to endure (101-102). Her final decision to cover the mirror in her bathroom with a pillowcase signals a violent refusal of her own material reality, clashing directly with the pristine visual regimes of contemporary culture she desperately tries to mimic. These scenes of grotesque embodiment, then, make visible the impossibility of reconciling a lived, suffering body with the idealized figure of the optimized, self-regulating entrepreneurial woman. Millie’s flesh does not fail as an external impediment to an otherwise functional mind; rather, its breakdown reveals that the neoliberal mandate for endless optimization is itself *structurally unlivable*. Bodily abjection, in this sense, transcends simple physical decay and serves as the very somatic site where the structural contradictions of self-optimization are registered, endured, and ultimately unmasked. Yet, this embodied excess does not remain contained within Millie’s inner life but, quite evidently, spills outward into the evaluative gaze of the workplace, where her bodily failure is instantly coded as a professional deviance.

Rendered increasingly unintelligible within the normative expectations of the late-capitalist office, Millie, in fact, quickly becomes an object of surveillance. Her colleagues—in the brief chapters narrated by the heterodiegetic narrator—repeatedly perceive that “there was something a little off-putting about her” (15), a vague yet devastating evaluation that instantly marks her as a professional

liability. In another pivotal scene, told through the focalizing point of view of her supervisor, Millie's morning greeting to Rebecca is physically interrupted by "a piece of phlegm caught in her throat," producing an awkward, and partially audible "He—" before the remainder of the word is silently mouthed (19). Incapable of interiorizing and performing the strict bodily discipline and immaculate hygiene demanded by contemporary corporate settings, Millie's failing body introduces a localized material friction into the smooth machinery of Lisa Hopper. By failing to maintain the clean, clear, and affectively managed presentation demanded by the firm, Millie's flesh stages an unconscious, mute rebellion against the scripts of propriety and optimization she consciously attempts to adhere to. In doing so, the protagonist's corporeal abjection becomes both a painful manifestation of her madness and a functional form of material friction against the very socio-economic systems that produce it, ultimately rendering her body the primary site through which structural conditions are materially internalized, experienced, and rendered visible.

Far from being reduced to a discrete psychological pathology or a passive reflection of economic precarity, Millie's psychic unraveling must be conceptualized as a fully embodied, embedded process generated within the recursive entanglement of subjectivity, labor, and neoliberal ideology. What initially appears as a personal manifestation of depressive disintegration is, in fact, structurally produced through her immersion in a socio-economic system that compulsorily demands self-realization through work while systematically denying the material conditions under which such realization could occur. Yet, while this disarray is systemic—as evidenced by the parallel alienation and frustrations shared by the peripheral figures populating the third-person chapters—*Millie* still experiences her depression as an isolated, deeply individualized failure—as she confesses, "I could be who I wanted to be—calm, cool, self-assured, self-reliant, independent enough to attract people who could

enjoy my company [...]. Not like now, *not like who I am now*, flailing, filled with puke, thinking about death and feeling angry all the time" (77, my emphasis).

It is precisely this privatization of structural suffering that motivates her turn toward subjective reconstruction, as her body itself becomes the final site upon which coherence is imagined to be recoverable. Withdrawn from social life outside the few hours she spends at Lisa Hopper, Millie redirects the imperative of improvement inward, imagining a microscopic, cellular renewal as an antidote to psychic distress. As she reflects: "I'm able to think of the bouncing flub on my body as becoming oxygenated by my blood flow, the fat cells heating and immediately shrinking. *I imagine that over not too much time, the cells will completely disappear.* Maybe explode, whatever they do" (134, my emphasis). As this passage illustrates, the market logics of optimization can even penetrate her molecular imagination, reducing Millie's subjectivity into a site of biological "engineering" where affective healing and metabolic transformation collapse into one another. In this sense, Millie's fantasy of somatic self-renewal does not simply reflect a desire for wellness; it reveals the total colonization of the inner life by the mandate for constant self-betterment, such that even her most intimate corporeal sensations are reorganized through the language and metrics of efficiency.

Yet, as the novel progresses, this project of aesthetic and physical optimization reveals itself to be structurally impossible. Although Millie remains intermittently invested in the fantasy of becoming a "new me," her own self-sabotaging actions—including her persistent disengagement at work, her refusal to carry out tasks assigned by her supervisor, and repeated withdrawal into bodily abjection—systematically erode her aspirations for professional advancement and, along with it, her project of self-betterment from its very outset. Millie's eventual realization that the future can no longer redeem the misery of the present culminates toward the novel's conclusion, when Millie bitterly admits that "things never change. How they're on a slow-rolling slope

downward" (182), a clear-eyed recognition that no individual attempt at self-betterment can cure a depression that is fundamentally structural. *TNM*, then, demonstrates how the very logics that promise transformation simultaneously generate the conditions of their own failure, producing a subject who is trapped in the exhausting double-bind of being compelled to pursue self-optimization within structures that render it impossible.

It is within this impasse that Millie's radical withdrawal into madness and alterity becomes legible. "Better to be inside, better to be sick like I am now than to be out and not accomplishing what I thought I might accomplish [...] Good to be sick, good to be alone, good that it's cold, good to stay inside, good that no one needs anything from me" (68). Far from signaling recovery, this moment reconfigures sickness as a paradoxical refuge from the taxing demands of corporate visibility and productivity, while simultaneously aligning Millie with the abject figure of the hidden madwoman. Her trajectory of self-betterment does not culminate in transformation but in suspension, revealing instead the impossibility of reconciling neoliberal demands for affective stability and embodied performance within the protagonist's lived realities of precarity and exhaustion. This unresolved tension prepares the ground for the following section, which turns to *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* in order to further examine how contemporary narratives of millennial unfulfillment—whether located in labor or domesticity—consistently stage madness as an embodied and embedded response to the failure of normative scripts of life-making.

2.3 “A woman out of her mind, locked in an apartment:” *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and the Embodied Politics of Privileged Millennial Ennui

Long overshadowed by his other, more renowned artworks, Jacques-Louis David’s *Portrait of a Young Woman in White* (c. 1798) invites the viewer into a private tableau of feminine boredom. Slouched against a wooden chair standing out sharply from the green background, the young, pale woman sitting at the center of the portrait appears to languidly await the passage of time, her vacant gaze—suspended between boredom and indifference—drifting away from the painter in front of her and moving instead outward, toward an indeterminate elsewhere. Now housed at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the painting has unexpectedly resurfaced in contemporary popular culture since 2018 and has gradually become—surely beyond the painter’s wildest imagination—one of the *most* recognizable visual symbols of millennial ennui,⁵⁵ inextricably associated, at least in the wider public imagination, with Ottessa Moshfegh’s name and her best-selling novel, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (hereafter *MYORAR*).

Towering over the novel’s cover while jarringly clashing with the striking neon pink typography of the title and byline, David’s *Young Woman in White* was—as the author herself has explained in a conversation with actress Lena Dunham⁵⁶—Moshfegh’s own choice for *MYORAR*’s front cover, as the subject’s expression, “so contemporary in her ennui, you could feel her sitting there with

⁵⁵ Since its adoption as the cover image of *MYORAR*, Jacques-Louis David’s *Portrait of a Young Woman in White* has, in fact, started circulating widely beyond institutional contexts, emerging as a recognizable visual shorthand for millennial ennui across fan-produced digital content and physical products, including posters, stickers, t-shirts, and even mugs. Here, the painting is completely detached from its eighteenth-century provenance and re-coded as a contemporary aesthetic signifier of exhaustion and disaffection, thereby participating in the broader commodification of ennui as a consumable affective style; see also Madden (2022).

⁵⁶ For the conversation between Lena Dunham and Ottessa Moshfegh, see “Ottessa Moshfegh in Conversation with Lena Dunham,” YouTube, youtu.be/B5vx4LLmoFM.

the painter for days [...], and she's just like, *ugh*, you know?," seemed uncannily resonant not only with present-day articulations of feminine ennui, but also, and perhaps most importantly, with the detached and emotionally exhausted disposition of the novel's unnamed narrator. But beyond these immediately recognizable shared sensibilities, why should this particular eighteenth-century painting serve as the visual threshold to a story explicitly set at the dawn of the twenty-first century? The answer to this question, I contend, must be traced within the very fabric of the narrative, as the novel's cover merely signals, through its visual and aesthetic codes, the deeper critical engagement that *MYORAR*—being a catastrofemal narrative—sustains with the long-standing literary tradition of representing female madness.

Jacques-Louis David's portrait, as a matter of fact, anticipated what, several decades later—particularly within nineteenth-century American visual culture—would become *the* conventional iconography of the melancholic—or, more properly, neurasthenic—woman.⁵⁷ From the downward-tilted head to the slouching posture and vacant gaze, the detached young woman dominating Moshfegh's cover exhibits the precise aesthetic features that Kevin Muller (2005) has identified in the American portraits featured in the exhibition *Women on the Verge: The Culture of Neurasthenia in Nineteenth-Century American Art*.⁵⁸ The book cover, therefore, immediately establishes a direct connection with those visual codes that came to define, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, artistic representations of female mental illness and despair. In doing

⁵⁷ For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Chapter 1, Section 3.

⁵⁸ For further information, see the accompanying catalogue: *Women on the Verge: The Culture of Neurasthenia in Nineteenth-Century American Art* (2004), edited by Zachary Ross, Amanda Glesmann, and Katherine Williams, published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name held at the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University. The exhibition brought together works by major late nineteenth-century featuring American artists, including Thomas Eakins, Henry Ossawa Tanner, and Eastman Johnson, and explored the visual construction of the neurasthenic woman as a paradigmatic figure of feminine mental illness and fatigue in turn-of-the-century portraiture.

so, this visual threshold prepares the ground not only for the novel's deeper engagement with themes of emotional detachment and alienation, but also, even more significantly, for the narrative's active dialogue with the well-established literary tradition revolving around female madness underlying this dissertation. To understand more clearly how these dynamics unfold within the narrative itself, however, a brief outline of the novel's plot is necessary.

Set in New York City between 2000 and 2001, *MYORAR* chronicles the profound psychological unraveling of its unnamed female narrator who, as the title itself suggests, abruptly resolves "to tak[e] some time off" from the world to sleep for an entire year (Moshfegh 2018, 12). While fate appears to have granted her all the privileges conventionally associated with happiness—financial security, beauty, and an elite education—the protagonist of the story nevertheless finds herself deeply dissatisfied with her post-collegiate life, unable to process the unresolved grief following her parents' sudden deaths and increasingly disillusioned by her vacuous job at a contemporary art gallery in Manhattan, which stands in stark contrast to what she had once imagined the art world to be. Conceiving her hibernation not as an act of self-destruction, but rather as a rigorous and paradoxical project of self-preservation and self-renewal, the protagonist becomes increasingly convinced that this prolonged sleep will allow her to emerge from her year of rest and relaxation "renewed, reborn" (51), and entirely cleansed of her past, transformed into a better version of herself.

The execution of this project officially begins in June 2000, when the protagonist is fired from her job after repeatedly sleeping in the gallery's supply closet during work hours. Facilitated by the wildly incompetent psychiatrist Dr. Tuttle, who indiscriminately prescribes her a vast cocktail of sedatives, the narrator spends the first months of her hibernation alternating between prolonged periods of sleep and waking hours numbed by movies and short trips to the corner bodega to buy coffee and crackers. While she is by now almost

completely cut off from the exterior world, her routine is nonetheless interrupted by the sporadic, yet intrusive visits of her sole friend, Reva, whose anxious adherence to the neoliberal imperatives of productivity and self-improvement initially appears to contrast sharply with the narrator's careless and withdrawing attitude, even as both women, in actuality, remain trapped within different versions of the same logic of self-management and reinvention.

The project gradually escalates when the protagonist begins taking Infermiterol, a fictional, exceptionally potent psychotropic medication that induces extended blackouts during which, despite being unconscious, she unknowingly leaves her apartment and engages in erratic, compulsive behaviors. Terrified that these somnambulistic episodes might ultimately disrupt her efforts at resting, the protagonist initially resolves to return to her previous medications, only to discover that, after experiencing Infermiterol, these weaker substances no longer induce sleep in her. Following several sleepless weeks, the narrator ultimately decides—fearing she may be losing her mind—to isolate herself completely within her apartment. Taking Infermiterol every three days, she aims to spend the remaining months of her hibernation almost entirely unconscious, convinced that total withdrawal from consciousness itself may be the necessary condition for her renewal.

When the protagonist finally awakens in June 2001, her radical experiment at first appears to have achieved its desired effect, as she steps into the New York summer seemingly freed from her cynicism and newly capable of perceiving the world with a vulnerable, childlike wonder. The novel's final page, however, abruptly relocates this private narrative of annihilation and subsequent restoration within the collective trauma of 9/11, as the very brief, final chapter reveals Reva among the victims of the attacks on the Twin Towers. What initially seems to be a radical retreat from the demands of late capitalism gradually reveals itself to be—as this chapter intends to argue—yet *another* failed iteration

of the neoliberal fantasy of self-reinvention that Reva had long pursued, as the narrator's chemically induced hibernation remains structured by the same imperatives of optimization and self-management she appears to reject throughout the entire story.

If *MYORAR*'s paratextual framing already suggests the text's sustained engagement with female experiences of emotional detachment and withdrawal, the narrative arc itself—following a young woman who, in her own words, “feel[s] dead” (19) and is “at the end of [her] rope” (21)—reaffirms the centrality of these themes, positing the protagonist's downward spiral into depression and self-annihilation as the novel's primary driving force, creating the very *raison d'être* for the reparative, yet hazardous project of hibernation undertaken throughout the narrative. As the story fundamentally follows, to quote directly from the novel, “a woman out of her mind, locked in an apartment” (266)—where much of the action unfolds *within* the protagonist rather than through external plot devices—*MYORAR* stages a story of mental disarray that, while explicitly revisiting the well-established literary trope of the confined woman gradually descending into madness within a domestic setting,⁵⁹ nevertheless remains representative of a quintessentially millennial experience of psychological erosion that remains deeply tethered to its late-capitalist backdrop.

As discussed in the introduction of this chapter, the protagonist's mental distress, in fact, rather than functioning solely as an antipatriarchal expression of dissent, emerges instead as a response to the progressive collapse of the dominant scripts of feminine self-realization available to her—namely, that of patriarchal domestic fulfillment and neoliberal careerist empowerment. As this

⁵⁹ On the literary trope of the confined woman descending into madness within domestic or enclosed spaces, see, to name only a few, Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), and Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (1963), all of which establish a literary genealogy of female psychological confinement that *MYORAR* implicitly engages.

section will try to demonstrate, *MYORAR*, through its exploration of the failures of domesticity, romantic attachments, professional success, and aesthetic self-fashioning according to contemporary ideals of beauty, traces how madness is produced and lived at the intersection of patriarchal and neoliberal forms of power, ultimately exposing the inadequacy of the socio-cultural promises inherent to these normative scripts structuring contemporary femininity. As these blueprints of happiness unravel, the novel relocates psychic disarray from the realm of abstract dissatisfaction to the material reality of the body, revealing madness—in line with the broader catastrofemal canon—as an embodied and socially embedded condition. The protagonist’s mental distress, therefore, is not staged as a sudden rupture or spectacular collapse, but rather as an ongoing state that is at once embedded within the interlocking of patriarchal, capitalist, and neoliberal structures of power, and inscribed in her flesh through psychic disaffection and bodily deterioration. Rather than functioning as a passive container for psychological suffering, the narrator’s body, then, becomes the very site where the alienating contradictions of her position within late-capitalist society are materially lived, affectively registered, and somatically reproduced.

Far from presenting her psychological disarray in a structural vacuum, the text, however, persistently foregrounds the privileged material conditions that sustain it, operating with a keen awareness of the protagonist’s distinct position of entitled detachment. Significantly, the unnamed narrator of *MYORAR* represents, in line with the long-standing tradition of literary madwomen within the U.S. canon, the clearest embodiment of privilege among the two narratives analyzed within this chapter, as the unlikable white antiheroine at the center of the story possesses virtually all the social, economic, cultural advantages that the other catastrofemales discussed throughout this dissertation essentially lack. Canonically beautiful to the point of being described as looking “like an off-duty model” (35) and financially secure, she not only moves with relative ease through

the elite social and cultural spaces that, theoretically, should guarantee her happiness and personal fulfillment, but also carelessly embraces her own position of emotional detachment, openly admitting that “it was easy to ignore things [happening in the real world] that didn’t concern me” (4).

Instead of obscuring or neutralizing this privileged position, Moshfegh’s novel in fact persistently emphasizes the protagonist’s entitlement, ultimately maintaining an ambivalent posture toward the protagonist’s condition of psychological deterioration. While the narrator’s madness undoubtedly renders materially legible the ways in which gendered, capitalist, and neoliberal systems of power coalesce to shape feminine subjectivity in the new millennium, her alienation is nonetheless structurally enabled and sustained by a system of extraordinary privilege that permits her project of hibernation in the first place. In this sense, *MYORAR* refuses to either dismiss the protagonist’s suffering as trivial or to romanticize it as inherently radical or politically subversive, exposing instead how even experiences of psychic disarray remain profoundly mediated by class, whiteness, and economic insulation, thereby achieving an analytical clarity that traditional narratives of white female madness usually lack.

In line with Moshfegh’s broader literary production—which, despite the author’s own background, consistently resists the conventional narrative arcs of immigrant uplift and assimilation often privileged by the publishing market for second-generation authors—*MYORAR*, thus, offers another example of what Frank Guan (2018) has identified as her recurring interest in “narratives of downward mobility on the part of the already privileged,” stories which, rather than recounting “from below” experiences of aspirational ascent from the margins, expose “from above” those already occupying positions of power as, if not entirely unfit to exist, at the very least profoundly unfit to rule (11). Underlying the protagonist’s mental disarray, therefore, lies the novel’s broader interest in interrogating how even subjects who ostensibly possess every

structural advantage may nevertheless experience psychic fragmentation under late capitalism, ultimately failing at the very social scripts of self-realization and female empowerment they were supposedly best positioned to embody.

Indeed, while contemporary Western societies attach a collective “promise of happiness” to specific, socially-sanctioned life paths—operating on the premise, as Sara Ahmed (2010) has argued, that “happiness lies ahead of us, at least if we do *the right thing*” (29, my emphasis)—the novel closely investigates how *women* in particular are structurally oriented toward specific, social ideals through the promise that fulfillment inheres in them. Much like other catastrofemale narratives, *MYORAR* illustrates how the blueprints for self-actualization confronting twenty-first-century women typically coalesce around two dominant, and often opposing, imperatives: either the centuries-old, traditional script of domestic motherhood and marital fulfillment, or the modern neoliberal script of corporate empowerment and careerist self-realization, frequently condensed in contemporary popular culture into the trendy figure of the “girlboss.” This novel, however, methodically dismantles both, exposing how the objects toward which women are directed under patriarchy and late capitalism function less as sources of genuine fulfillment than as disciplinary fantasies that organize desire while perpetually deferring satisfaction. The protagonist’s psychological deterioration, then, should not be reduced to an individual failure to properly inhabit these normative ideals, but understood as the embodied manifestation of the contradictions they themselves produce. As a result, Moshfegh stages madness as structurally embedded within the affective and material logics of late capitalism, revealing how the very systems that promise feminine self-realization concurrently generate the exhaustion and alienation that undo the protagonist from within.

If the novel dismantles the misogynistic script of feminine fulfillment achieved through domesticity, motherhood and marriage, it does so primarily

through the narrator's recollections of her own mother's personal story, as the mother's dramatic spiral into depression and ultimate suicide function throughout *MYORAR* as a cautionary tale of feminine subject-formation under the dictates of patriarchal power. Forced, at barely nineteen years old, into marriage after becoming pregnant by a man twelve years her senior, the narrator's mother abandons her education and gradually disappears, deeply entrenched in her resentment and isolation, into a miserable domestic sphere. Neglected by a careless husband, far more invested in his academic career than in his family, and utterly uninterested in developing any kind of meaningful relationship with the daughter she comes to associate with the loss of her own aspirations, she soon becomes emblematic of the psychic costs inherent in patriarchal domesticity, slowly falling into a deep depression that she attempts to anesthetize through alcohol and an assortment of sleeping pills. Far from presenting domestic femininity as a natural site of emotional care or fulfillment, the narrative, then, unmistakably reframes it as a hostile and emotionally barren environment sustained through the exploitation of women's bodies and affective labor. In doing so, the novel aligns itself with the broader tradition of novels centered on female madness which, from the nineteenth century onwards, have investigated and exposed the profound violence concealed beneath the idealized rhetoric of familial or reproductive happiness.

In line with this literary tradition, rather than depicting motherhood as rewarding or meaningful in any way, *MYORAR* repeatedly foregrounds the physical and somatic costs that come along with the mother's compliance with this patriarchal script. This violence is most vividly rendered through the narrator's recollections of her mother's body. Recalling the physical aftermath of her pregnancy, she remembers her mother describing the marks left across her abdomen as though "a raccoon had disemboweled her" (Moshfegh 2018, 48), a grotesque and violent image that vehemently strips motherhood—in both the

mother's estimation and the narrator's own—of any sentimental association with ideas of nurturance or care. To them, reproduction becomes inseparable from the experience of bodily disfigurement, transforming their bodies into the very sites where patriarchal expectations are *embodied*—materially inscribed into the flesh through pain and irreversible anatomical changes. Significantly, the narrator's unsettling reflection that “maybe [she] did” contribute to this suffering, wrapping “[her] umbilical cord around [her] neck on purpose” (ibid.), further reveals the extent to which this logic of violence has been physically internalized by both women. The maternal bond, within the novel, thus appears fundamentally fractured by the conditions of patriarchal domesticity itself, contaminating what is conventionally imagined as a “sacred” and intimate bond between mother and child with resentment and guilt from the moment of the protagonist's conception.

The patriarchal impositions placed upon women, however, are not merely confined to the material realities of childbearing, but rather demand a continuous, aesthetic performance, tailored to male sensibilities and validation. As such, within this social order, a woman's work extends far beyond keeping house or raising children, requiring instead a relentless performance of effortless beauty and emotional compliance. The narrator's reminiscence of watching her mother “put her face on” (213), despite her profound unhappiness, before accompanying her husband to social functions crystallizes this dynamic with particular force, as the mother is remembered as “a beautiful fish in a man-made pool, circling and circling, surviving the tedium” (ibid.). This image powerfully condenses the novel's critique of femininity as a patriarchal performance: within this social order, women may be expected to sustain the domestic sphere through emotional and reproductive labor, yet their value remains closely tied to their function as an ornamental extension of a man's success, a beautiful accessory on the husband's arm ready to be flaunted publicly. Through the narrator's eyes, the

domestic sphere emerges as an artificial enclosure in which womanhood ossifies into an endless performance of beauty and composure, while slowly eroding the self from within behind closed doors.

Without a doubt, then, the mother's story functions, more than a personal tragedy, as a cautionary tale for the protagonist, bringing to light the profound inadequacy of domestic femininity as a viable pathway toward personal fulfillment or autonomy. Yet, despite having witnessed firsthand the devastating consequences of this script, the narrator never entirely escapes its ideological pull, unable to detach herself completely from the affective structures through which patriarchal femininity reproduces itself. Throughout the novel, she struggles to sever her attachment to Trevor, her on-again, off-again boyfriend, whose presence repeatedly reveals the persistence of heteronormative fantasies even within a subject who consciously rejects them. Much older than she is, Trevor exercises almost complete control over the terms of their relationship, using the protagonist largely for sexual gratification before abandoning her whenever a more desirable partner appears. Although she bitterly acknowledges that "[n]othing panned out in terms of 'love'" (28), she nevertheless continues to invest this relationship with a residual hope that it might somehow provide meaning or—at least before her hibernation project—salvation. Her attachment to Trevor, thus, illuminates the extent to which patriarchal narratives of romantic fulfillment remain operative even after their promises have been repeatedly exposed as illusory. As a result, the novel suggests that patriarchal power persists not merely as an external social structure but as a deeply internalized mode of subject formation, one that continues to shape feminine desire even when its failures are fully recognized.

This psycho-physical internalization is grotesquely literalized during the narrator's interactions with Dr. Tuttle, whose absurd claim that "the death gene is passed from mother to child in the birth canal" (80) satirically medicalizes this

intergenerational transmission of female suffering. Beneath the comic absurdity of this scene lies, in fact, a significant insight, one that explicitly reframes the female body as the literal carrier of patriarchal violence. If systemic power structures can be understood as sedimenting themselves directly into the characters' flesh, then madness becomes the means through which these inherited forms of feminine oppression are materially and affectively registered in the body, uncovering the extent to which this misogynistic violence persists not only socially and culturally but also through embodied experiences of vulnerability and pain. The suffering experienced by the novel's women, as a consequence, appears not as a series of disconnected individual crises, but as the cumulative effect of social arrangements that reproduce themselves across generations through both affective and corporeal planes.

Far from offering the protagonist a viable model of self-realization, the domestic script ultimately reveals itself to be structurally incapable of delivering the happiness it promises. Having seen first-hand the devastating outcome of this trajectory through her mother's life and soon recognizing her own inability to succeed in any romantic, heteronormative relationship, the narrator becomes deeply skeptical of marriage and motherhood as desirable futures for herself, admitting that the concept of "settling down [...] sounded like death to me" (28). Yet her rejection of this traditional ideal does not free her from the broader cultural imperative to pursue fulfillment through normative forms of feminine self-fashioning. Rather, it only redirects her toward the supposedly emancipatory alternative offered by postfeminist neoliberal culture, which promises to deliver through professional success what domesticity failed to provide. In doing so, the novel broadens its critique beyond traditional patriarchal structures, demonstrating how the protagonist's psychic disarray is simultaneously shaped—and perhaps even more explicitly—by the complementary and self-disciplining logics of neoliberal culture.

If the maternal narrative exposes the patriarchal violence underlying domestic femininity even within the contemporary landscape, the narrator's retelling of her immersion in the hyper-commodified spaces of elite Manhattan art culture demonstrates a parallel yet seemingly antithetical disciplinary logic governing feminine subject formation within a postfeminist order—one that relocates the promise of self-actualization from the domestic sphere to the realms of labor and aesthetic self-management. Employed at the elite Manhattan gallery Ducat—a position perfectly aligned with both her Art History degree from Columbia University and her aspirations for a fulfilling creative career—the protagonist initially appears to perfectly embody the script of cosmopolitan professional success celebrated by neoliberal culture. Yet, as she quickly discovers, the artistic world she had once imagined would provide meaning and purpose to her life offers neither the personal realization nor the happiness she had wished for, revealing itself to be yet another cog in the wider capitalist machine, no less governed by the imperatives of market consumption and accumulation than any other sector of the contemporary workforce.

Functioning as a microcosm of the broader commodifying logics governing the Manhattan art scene, the Ducat gallery, marketed as “subversive, irreverent, shocking,” is soon dismissed by the narrator as exhibiting nothing more than “canned counterculture crap, ‘punk, but with money’” (36), offering its sophisticated audiences neatly repackaged products attuned to the demands of the market, yet entirely emptied of any significant meaning. Exemplary of this dynamic is the gallery's star artist, Ping Xi, whose sensationally titled works—such as *Sunsets over Sniper Alley*, *Decapitated Palestinian Child*, or *Bombs Away, Nairobi* (37-38)—eschew any actual political engagement with the real world, consisting merely of the artist masturbating onto large canvases after inserting pigment into his penis. Within the capitalist order, even artistic creation and provocation—the novel seems to argue—are revealed to be fully incorporated

into circuits of economic exchange and profit, where shock value operates as the sole metric for producing commodities marketed as culturally relevant or prestigious. As the narrator recalls, “The art world had turned out to be like the stock market, a reflection of political trends and the persuasions of capitalism, fueled by greed and gossip and cocaine” (182). Deprived of both artistic substance or meaningful political efficacy, art is transformed from a “sacred human ritual” into a luxury investment, traded by the wealthy only to secure social status or financial profit (ibid.). In the eyes of the narrator, then, artistic production no longer functions as a space of critique *independent of* capital but operates as a privileged node through which capitalism reproduces itself aesthetically, absorbing even gestures of dissent into its logic of spectacle and consumption.

As a result, for the protagonist, immersion within this environment produces not merely disillusionment toward the creative process itself but also a growing sense of dissatisfaction and alienation toward the very career that ideally should have ensured her happiness. As she retrospectively comments once she is fired from Ducat, “I thought that if I did normal things—held down a job, for example—I could starve off the part of me that hated everything” (35), and elsewhere, “There was no sadness or nostalgia [for leaving], only disgust I’d wasted so much time on unnecessary labor [...]. I’d been stupid to believe that employment would add value to my life” (49). Confronted with the reality that her work and achievements add, in her own words, “no value” to her existence nor offer any meaningful antidote to her psychological ailments, the neoliberal script of personal fulfillment through labor—much like the patriarchal script of feminine realization through domesticity—gradually begins to unravel, intensifying the pre-existing sense of purposelessness and emotional detachment that had long gripped the protagonist throughout her life. The narrator’s inability to derive meaning from her work, then, does not signal a quintessentially

millennial incapacity to properly adapt to adult responsibilities, but rather expresses the novel's broader critique of neoliberal ideology that promises women's liberation and self-actualization through productivity while concealing, beneath the guise of a "can-do-all" mentality, the material costs and structural contradictions of succeeding under late capitalism. In this sense, the narrator's employment at Ducat—despite its illusory façade of artistic prestige—ultimately mirrors the exact same alienating dynamics that shape the corporate careers of other catastrofemales, exposing the gallery as a site through which the narrator's disaffection is not resolved but reproduced and intensified.

Yet, even more significantly, what becomes increasingly evident is that *MYORAR*, compared to the other catastrofemale narratives analyzed throughout this dissertation, pushes this critique further than simply staging the protagonist's failure to inhabit the neoliberal script of self-realization. While *TNM*, *Severance* (2018), and *Luster* (2020) illuminate the discrepancy between neoliberal ideals and the material realities of their protagonists by foregrounding the physical and psychological tolls these women incur while striving to attain such standards—only to ultimately fall short of them—Moshfegh's novel instead directs attention toward something more structurally unsettling: the collapse of the promise of happiness even in *the absence of failure*, and even in the presence of those very attributes that neoliberal culture codes as *necessary* for success. Indeed, unlike the other catastrofemales discussed here, the narrator of *MYORAR* possesses many of the qualities conventionally associated with feminine accomplishment. Economically secure, highly educated, young, white and, most importantly, conventionally attractive, she already approximates the idealized figure of postfeminist femininity before the narrative even begins. Yet, despite successfully occupying this position of social and aesthetic privilege, she remains profoundly unhappy, unable to secure the promised affective and material rewards that this narrative of feminine self-realization seems to promise. Her

condition—outwardly aligned with neoliberal ideals while inwardly exhausted by the life she leads—thus points toward a deeper contradiction within neoliberal culture itself: although she remains fully legible as *the* ideal neoliberal subject, such legibility fails to translate into the psychic coherence and emotional fulfillment that this model of femininity takes for granted.

Turned into a project of perpetual self-management, under neoliberal feminism the female body *itself* has, in fact, become one of the principal assets through which women are expected to access, to paraphrase Alison Winch's words (2015), freedom and empowerment. Valued, to quote from Ana Elias, Rosalind Gill, and Christina Scharff (2017), "less for what it can do than for how it appears" (26), a woman's body currently occupies a central position within contemporary constructions of feminine success, where individual worth is measured less by skills, education, career achievements, or economic independence than by the deliberate cultivation of a desirable, productive, healthy, and emotionally coherent self (Gill & Arthurs 2006; Gill 2007; Winch 2015; Elias, Gill & Scharff 2017). Beauty, as a result, operates as a form of embodied capital, a visible marker capable of generating social legitimacy and personal value (Cairns & Johnston 2015). Yet, as Gill and Elias (2014) also observed, within contemporary postfeminist culture physical attractiveness alone is no longer sufficient, as a "beautiful body must be accompanied by a *beautiful mind*," requiring women to cultivate "an affirmative confident disposition, *no matter how they actually feel*" (185, my emphasis). The ideal neoliberal feminine subject, therefore, does not simply need to be beautiful, but affectively regulated; not merely successful, but *visibly* happy. It is precisely at this point that *MYORAR* begins to destabilize this fantasy of coherence. While the narrator completely possesses the social and aesthetic characteristics associated with successful neoliberal femininity, her lived experience continually undermines the image of wholeness these attributes are supposed to signify.

Throughout the novel, then, a widening gap emerges between the protagonist's external legibility and embodied reality, demonstrating how the appearance of beauty only conceals a profound experience of psychological exhaustion and, eventually, corporeal decline. Far from treating the body as a transparent indicator of success, Moshfegh recasts it as the material terrain upon which the contradictions of neoliberal subjectivity become registered and, then, rendered perceptible. In doing so, the narrative exposes the deep fragility of this script of feminine self-realization, tracking its failure not from the margins of lack, but from the very center of its supposed fulfillment.

Rather than offering a gateway toward genuine self-empowerment, the narrator's obsession with beauty, then, functions as an insidious form of ideological entrapment, one that anchors her, almost against her will, to the very social structures she seeks to escape. In the elite, transactional spaces of the Manhattan art scene, her exceptional attractiveness—"I looked like an off-duty model," the narrator reminds the reader time and time again (Moshfegh 2018, 35)—operates as a double-edged form of capital, granting her, on one hand, easy access to this prestigious microcosm while demanding, on the other, a rigorous and taxing performance of perfection. Within the walls of Ducat, then, the protagonist's body undergoes a process of commodification that renders it a literal *extension* of the high-end art objects circulating through the gallery space: just another luxury asset whose value is entirely predicated on its continued aesthetic legibility. As she sharply notes, "being pretty only kept me trapped in a world that valued looks above all else" (ibid.).

Yet, contrary to what one might assume, the coercive force of this disciplinary aesthetic logic governing the protagonist's self-perception does not cease when she finally escapes the "corporate" reality of Ducat. Rather, the ideal of beauty continues to structure her self-understanding even when she retreats behind the closed doors of her apartment for her year-long project of hibernation,

thus revealing—even more explicitly—the extent to which these normative standards of feminine value have been internalized by the character and consequently can function as a coping mechanism in the face of personal suffering or collapse. As she reaffirms on multiple occasions throughout the novel, “But I was tall and thin and blond and pretty and young. *Even at my worst, I knew I still looked good*” (27, my emphasis), and, in a later passage, “*It did comfort me to see that I was still pretty, still blond and tall and thin*” (92-93, my emphasis). As these superficially snobbish statements suggest, the character’s physical appearance continues to function, even as she pursues her unconventional project of self-renewal, as a stabilizing interpretive framework through which she attempts to negotiate her worsening psychological deterioration. While her sense of self grows little by little more fragmented, those fleeting moments of self-recognition within the canon of normative beauty ideals offer her a temporary form of coherence and legibility that would otherwise be completely lost. The persistence of these self-assessments throughout the narrative, then, demonstrates how thoroughly neoliberal constructions of feminine value have been absorbed into her psychic life, rendering beauty not merely a social expectation but an internalized mode of self-regulation that remains operative even amidst profound psychological distress. Very much in line with the visual economy of Jacques-Louis David’s painting reproduced on *MYORAR*’s front cover and, more broadly, with the long artistic tradition of neurasthenic portraiture recalled at the outset of this chapter—which subtly counterbalanced female mental disaffection through carefully composed and aesthetically pleasing feminine figures—the protagonist’s tentative attempt to mitigate her depression through the reaffirmation of aesthetic legibility could, therefore, be understood as the novel’s broader participation and critique of the cultural impulse to render mental distress *at least* visually palatable. In this sense, the narrator’s reliance on her own “good” appearance could also be read as

MYORAR's attempt to expose that long socio-cultural tradition that, as Stephen Harper (2009) has argued, has discursively and visually reorganized representations of feminine distress and suffering through processes of aestheticization, making madness intelligible and, arguably, even consumable and glamorous within the parameters of a regulating gaze.

The discrepancy between this reassuring act of self-recognition and the narrator's *actual* material reality of mental distress is, however, foregrounded throughout the novel by the persistent, grotesque representation of the protagonist's body, which repeatedly destabilizes the impression of composure and coherence she continues to seek in her reflection. Much like the protagonists of the other catastrofemale narratives examined in this dissertation, the narrator's psychological deterioration unfolds alongside a gradual process of bodily decline, binding mind and flesh within a shared trajectory of disintegration. Instead of presenting mental distress as an abstract or exclusively psychological condition, the novel insists upon its corporeal dimensions, demonstrating how psychic suffering is also continuously registered by the protagonist's body and materially inscribed upon her physical self. No longer maintained as a polished aesthetic surface, the narrator's body emerges then, once her hibernation project beings, as an unruly entity characterized by decay, leakage and excess. Vomit, sweat, dirt, and even visceral descriptions of physical abjection repeatedly appear throughout the narrative, foregrounding those corporeal realities that neoliberal femininity would typically seek to discipline or, at the very least, conceal. As the hibernation project deepens, this process of deterioration—which begins with her muscles withering (Moshfegh 2018, 3)—is further exacerbated by an accumulation of grime and bodily discomfort that consistently undermines the protagonist's idealized self-image of “a celebrity in slovenly incognito” (93). Grotesque detailed descriptions of her “teeth fel[ing] gummy, [her] mouth tast[ing] like peanuts and cigarettes” (118), of her “chewed-up fingernails” with

“a gray line of dirt” underneath (ibid.), of her tongue feeling “thick and gritty,” “like [she] had dirt in [her] mouth” (179), of her pungent body odor smelling “like gin [...] like vinegar” (180), or of her puke “com[ing] up as sour, milk-flavored syrup,” splashing into her face (243), and of her face “red and wet with sweat” (244), crystallize the novel’s aesthetic project, using bodily abjection and disgust to dismantle from *within* her flesh the pretense of perfection that the narrator repeatedly professes to embody. By constantly directing attention toward this leaking, sweating, and expelling body, Moshfegh strips her protagonist’s madness of any romantic or transcendent quality, representing it instead as an embodied process of deterioration and material collapse.

What distinguishes *MYORAR*’s indulgence in this grotesque register, however, is that it takes place within a sustained oscillation between corporeal collapse and the persistent imperative for aesthetic self-management. Even as the narrator’s body deteriorates, she repeatedly attempts to reincorporate this unruly flesh into the visual economy of normative femininity, seeking to reconcile the abject body she inhabits with the desirable image she continues to recognize as herself. This tension becomes particularly evident in several key scenes of self-observation in mirrors—a trope ever-present within catastrofemale narratives. In one early scene, while preparing for the funeral of Reva’s mother, the protagonist finds herself alone in Reva’s downstairs bathroom, and here she assesses for the first time the effects of months of hibernation:

Since I’d started sleeping all the time, my body had gotten very thin. My muscles had turned soft. *I still looked good in clothes, but naked I looked fragile, weird.* Protruding ribs, wrinkles around my hips, loose skin around my abdomen. My collarbones jutted out. My knees looked huge. I was all sharp corners at that point. [...] Reva would have been horrified to see me naked like that. “*You look like a skeleton. You look like Kate Moss. No fair,*” she would have said (143).

The passage perfectly illuminates the striking tension between the bodily deterioration the protagonist experiences and the interpretive framework—

aligned with the beauty trends of the period—through which she reframes her own body and desirability. The narrator's emaciated frame bears visible signs of decline—the “protruding ribs,” the “wrinkles around [her] hips,” the “loose skin around [her] abdomen,” the jutting collarbones, the skeletal frame—yet these physical markers are immediately reinterpreted and neutralized by the dominant visual codes of late-twentieth-century beauty standards. Through its reference to Kate Moss, the passage evokes the legacy of 1990s “heroin chic” and its visual regime of thinness and exhaustion, exposing the capacity of postfeminist beauty culture to absorb even the material evidence of emaciation and illness into an object of aesthetic desirability that, as a result, transforms thinness—as Hannele Harjunen (2017) pointed out—into a visible marker of privilege and a prerequisite for prestige and success. The imagined ventriloquism of Reva's jealousy—“No fair”—underscores the absolute inescapability of this logic: what might otherwise appear as evidence of self-destruction here is easily reconfigured as an object of envy, suggesting that, within contemporary regimes of female subject formation, the distinction between ideal beauty and deterioration becomes increasingly unstable. Far from disrupting dominant aesthetic norms, the narrator's collapsing body remains legible through them, demonstrating the remarkable ability of beauty culture to aestheticize forms of corporeal suffering that would otherwise resist idealization.

The limits of this process of aesthetic recuperation, however, become more apparent during a subsequent scene in the bathroom of the protagonist's apartment, which explicitly revises and destabilizes the logic established in the earlier Kate Moss passage. Gazing at her reflection in the mirror, the narrator is confronted with an image that can no longer be reframed as a source of reassurance or tentatively re-inscribed within the ideal aesthetic canon, being revealed instead, for the first time in the novel, as a site of estrangement.

Confronted with the physical aftermath of her somnambulistic blackouts, the protagonist recounts:

A wave of nausea made me lurch over and regurgitate an acrid globule of phlegm, which I spat into the sink. From the sandy feel of my mouth, I was expecting to see granules of dirt or grit of a crashed pill speckling my saliva. Instead, it was pink glitter. [...] When I righted myself, *someone* appeared in the mirror as if through a porthole window, and it startled me. *My own startled face startled me*. Mascara had streaked down my cheeks like a masquerade mask. Remnants of bright pink lipstick stained the outer edges and corners of my lips. [...] I looked in the mirror again. Wrinkles in my forehead and lines around my mouth looked like they'd been drawn in pencil. My cheeks were slack. My skin was pale. Something flashed in the gloss of my eyeballs. I got close up to the mirror and looked over carefully. *There I was, a tiny dark reflection of myself deep down in my right pupil*. [...] I watched my reflection disappear in the steam (Moshfegh 2018, 186-187, my emphasis).

As this scene aptly demonstrates, the aesthetic framework through which the narrator has consistently sought to stabilize herself eventually starts to crumble before the material reality of her body. No longer capable of being subsumed within romanticized ideals of thinness or emaciation, the reflection is rendered in its most grotesque composition: a depleted body marked by wrinkles, paleness, slackened skin. Interestingly, the sentence “my own startled face startled me,” with its repetition of “startled”—functioning simultaneously as an adjective signaling the character’s passive shock and as an active verb driving the clause—verbalizes the profound rupture in self-recognition taking place within her. The pretense of beauty is finally cracking in a highly visible and visceral way.

As the cosmetic traces that once contributed to her attractiveness fail to produce reassurance and instead intensify her alienation, the description of her face as a “masquerade mask” crystallizes the collapse of her performance of neoliberal femininity. Within the metaphorical economy of the passage, the pink glitter she regurgitates could, thus, be understood as a material reminder of the “party girl” persona she has consistently attempted to inhabit, now transformed into bodily waste and expelled from within. If the ideal of beauty is revealed to

function throughout the novel as both a disciplinary mechanism *and* a fragile source of psychological reassurance, it ultimately proves incapable of containing the forms of depression and psychic fragmentation the narrator experiences. As her reflection gradually dissolves into steam, the novel offers a powerful visualization of her psychological unraveling: the polished, beautiful façade quite literally disintegrates, leaving behind no coherent self at all.

The apex of this dismantling process of the logic of self-fashioning takes place in the final quarter of the novel, when the narrator is first confronted with the possibility that her face has become crooked. During one of their final encounters, Dr. Tuttle informs her that her face has shifted “approximately negative ten degrees,” interpreting this sudden supposed asymmetry as evidence of her mental imbalance and suggesting that she is now “having to work *that* much harder just to hold [her] mind centered” (234-235). Significantly, the narrator’s immediate response to the psychiatrist’s absurd comment is not to reflect upon her worsening psychological condition but to seek visual confirmation of her appearance, terrified of losing, once and for all, the final vestige of coherence anchored to her “perfect” features. Examining her reflection in the tinted windows of a taxi, she initially dismisses the diagnosis outright: “My face was perfectly aligned: Dr. Tuttle was obviously crazy” (235). This statement is immediately followed by a rapid sequence of self-comparisons to Hollywood actresses—“I looked like a young Lauren Bacall the morning after,” “I’m a disheveled Joan Fontaine,” “I was Kim Novak,” ““You’re prettier than Sharon Stone” (ibid.)—through which aesthetic identification with canonical beauty ideals intends to temporarily naturalize the anxiety produced by Dr. Tuttle’s observation. Once again, beauty is used as a compensatory framework through which psychic instability is managed and rendered intelligible. Yet, the reassurance offered by these reflections proves, at this point of the narrative, entirely fragile.

Indeed, although she initially rejects the psychiatrist's assessment, the suggestion of asymmetry lingers, generating an obsessive uncertainty that gradually starts to undermine her confidence in her own image: "Was her face a deviant angle? Was everyone's? Were my eyes crooked?" (237). The progression culminates when she later confronts her reflection and experiences the now familiar shock of self-estrangement: "My face in the mirror startled me. I leaned in and looked to see if it had shifted anymore since Dr. Tuttle's weird assessment. *I did look different. I couldn't put my finger on how, but there was something that hadn't been there before*" (241, my emphasis). While the novel never confirms whether any physical alteration has actually occurred, the episode clearly demonstrates how thoroughly the narrator's pretense of coherence is crumbling, no longer sustained at the psychic level alone, but also at the level of visual self-legibility, which until this point had functioned as her primary anchor of self-recognition. The possibility that her face may no longer conform to the ideal symmetry she associates with beauty signals the complete destabilization of the aesthetic legibility that, up until this point, had functioned as her primary means of maintaining the appearance of psychic and emotional stability. The motif of the crooked face, therefore, reiterates a central tension running throughout the novel: even as the narrator attempts to withdraw from the social world, she ultimately remains unable to escape the evaluative neoliberal gaze she has profoundly internalized within her body. What unravels throughout the course of the narrative is not simply her appearance but her faith in appearance as a reliable guarantee of identity, coherence and self-possession.

Ultimately, the bodily oscillations traced throughout *MYORAR* reveal why the protagonist's madness cannot be adequately understood through any framework that maintains a strict separation between psychic interiority and material embodiment. Throughout *MYORAR*, Ottessa Moshfegh, in fact, persistently dismantles such a distinction, presenting instead subjectivity as

something that emerges through the continuous entanglement of affective, biological, material, and socio-economic forces, in which mind and body operate not as discrete domains but as *mutually constitutive* entities. The narrator's psychological deterioration, therefore, is never staged as a purely interior condition unfolding independently from the body but is rather continuously registered—as shown in this section—through exhaustion, sensory distortion, physical decay, and corporeal discomfort, thereby demonstrating how mental distress is always *already* materially lived and somatically experienced.

This becomes particularly evident in moments where her mental disarray fails to appear as a clearly delineated psychological state and instead surfaces as dispersed physiological sensations. After deciding to sell her now vacant childhood home, the last tangible connection to her deceased parents, the narrator begins reflecting on her own condition of emotional despair and grief, observing: “I should have felt something—a pang of sadness, a twinge of nostalgia” (Moshfegh 2018, 221). Yet, this anticipated emotional coherence never materializes, while this sense of detachment is encountered only as a diffuse bodily disturbance: “I just felt a tingling feeling in my hands, an eerie tingle [...] My heart bumped a little” (222). Far from emerging as an interior feeling subsequently expressed through the body, despair here is produced *through the body itself*, distributed across nerves, circulation, and sensations, so much so that what might be conventionally read as emotion becomes indistinguishable from her physiological response. What here the narrator describes as an “oceanic despair” (221) is, thus, inseparable from the minute bodily processes through which it becomes perceptible, underscoring that her affective condition is neither purely mental nor purely physical but generated through their continuous intra-action. In this sense, the novel implicitly resonates with a posthuman feminist understanding of embodiment as a dynamic and distributed field in which subjectivity is produced through the interaction of minds, bodies, and

environments at multiple scales, from large socio-economic structures to the most granular material processes of cellular and neural activity. The self is not located in a singular cognitive center but arises across interdependent systems—cells, organs, nervous responses, and affective intensities—whose functioning is thoroughly enmeshed with external material and social conditions. What appears as “psychic life” is, then, inseparable from the biological and infrastructural conditions that sustain it, reinforcing the extent to which madness, in the novel, is never autonomous or self-contained but fundamentally embedded within the material organization of life itself.

Taken together, the analysis developed in this section has traced how *MYORAR* stages madness as a condition produced at the intersection of patriarchal and neoliberal regimes of feminine selfhood, where the failure of normative scripts of domesticity, labor, romance, and aesthetic self-fashioning gives rise not to a purely psychological breakdown but to a *fully embodied* and socially *embedded* form of disintegration. From the maternal narrative of reproductive suffering to the final collapse of aesthetic legibility within the year of hibernation and passing through the alienating logics of elite cultural labor, the novel persistently returns to *the body itself*—both mind and flesh—as the site where these overlapping structures are registered, negotiated, and ultimately made visible. It is precisely in this context that the protagonist’s hibernation project must be read as emerging from *within*, rather than outside, the conditions of her embodied and embedded madness. Having found the available scripts of feminine self-realization—productivity, beauty, relationality, autonomy—fundamentally exhausting and structurally incoherent, she turns toward sleep, understood as the suspension of consciousness itself, as a solution to her ailments, imagining her psychological transformation as a process of corporeal reset. As she declares, “I’d be renewed, reborn. I would be a whole new person, *every one of my cells regenerated enough times the old cells were just distant, foggy*

memories" (51, my emphasis). Yet, as the following section will demonstrate, this fantasy of biological renewal does not constitute a departure from neoliberal logics of self-betterment, but rather its *ultimate, inverted* expression. Read alongside Millie's entrepreneurial project of self-fashioning in *TNM*, the two novels reveal themselves as complementary case studies in the structural failure of the makeover imperative. Where Millie attempts to cure her alienation through a hyper-visible escalation of aesthetic labor, Moshfegh's narrator pursues an identical fantasy of cellular renewal through the chemically induced project of hibernation. Taken together, both narratives map the exhaustive limits of contemporary self-betterment, demonstrating that whether optimization is pursued through compliance or absolute withdrawal, the promise of an individualized cure remains a structural impossibility.

2.4 It Will Never Be the Cure: Failure of Neoliberal Projects of Self-Betterment in *The New Me* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

While the preceding analyses of *TNM* and *MYROAR* aimed to illustrate how mental distress, within catastrofemal narratives, is traditionally represented as structurally produced and psychosomatically inscribed on the antiheroines' bodies, these contemporary narratives of madness also repeatedly return to a related and ever-pressing question: how might such suffering be, once and for all, effectively cured? Indeed, although these fictional women are consistently portrayed as grappling with profound forms of psychological fragmentation, the cultural landscapes they inhabit are paradoxically saturated with commercialized promises—or, more accurately, illusions—of transformation and renewal, offered as definitive remedies for alleviating their suffering and securing a coherent, happy sense of selfhood. It is precisely by staging the failure

of these individual pursuits of wellness that the catastrofemal narratives under discussion interrogate the contradictions underpinning the neoliberal rhetoric of self-betterment, exposing—as this section intends to argue—their inherent fallacies and ultimately dismantling from *within* the promises of entrepreneurial self-transformation that continue to shape dominant constructions of feminine subjectivity in the twenty-first century.

Certainly, it is difficult to dispute that contemporary media culture is permeated by a distinctly neoliberal injunction that encourages individuals to conceive themselves as projects requiring continuous improvement. From social media influencers promoting elaborate ten-step skincare regimens or highly curated “morning” and “nighttime routines,” to nutritionists and personal trainers suddenly turned TikTok personalities who disseminate fitness plans and anti-inflammatory diets, and extending even to self-help books and reality television makeovers, contemporary culture—accessible twenty-four hours a day at the swipe of a single finger—is constantly permeated by an ever-expanding repertoire of exhortations to become healthier, happier, more productive and, above all, more desirable, encouraging individuals to attain an idealized, optimized version—“the very best”—of themselves. While some of these practices undoubtedly contribute to individual well-being—there is, of course, no denying the benefits of exercise or a well-balanced diet—this unceasing call to self-improvement reveals a more troubling reality: namely, the extent to which contemporary subjectivity has become, little by little, organized around the imperative of self-management, requiring individuals to continuously monitor, evaluate and transform themselves in pursuit of an idealized, and frequently unattainable, version of the self.

Understood through a Foucauldian (2008) lens, this relentless injunction toward personal betterment reflects a broader restructuring of social life under neoliberalism, which has progressively relocated responsibility for well-being

from collective institutions onto individual subjects. Encouraged to interpret their own circumstances as outcomes of personal conduct or deficiency rather than the effects of structural inequalities, individuals are led—as Han Byung-Chul (2015) and Ulrich Bröckling (2016) have thoroughly contended—to conceive themselves as entrepreneurial projects requiring constant refinement and optimization across every domain of existence, from labor and productivity to affective life and bodily presentation. While neoliberal culture disseminates this imperative of self-management across *all* individuals, feminist scholarship has however demonstrated that its effects are nevertheless unevenly distributed and distinctly gendered. As multiple scholars have maintained (Davies 2005; Ringrose & Walkerdine 2008; McRobbie 2009; Gill & Scharff 2011; Elias, Gill & Scharff 2017), the primary target of this contemporary makeover culture is unmistakably feminine, as *women alone* have been consistently positioned—as Pamela Thoma (2014) aptly pointed out—as the *ideal*, privileged subjects of these processes of self-optimization. Called upon to transform themselves not merely through the consumption of beauty products, but also through the active reconfiguration of their *entire* identities, women are invited to render their femininity legible as a practice of aesthetic entrepreneurship, whereby appearance, sexuality, health, and *even* emotional well-being become interconnected and mutually reinforcing sites of a continuous process of self-management and improvement (Elias, Gill & Scharff 2017). Within this reconfiguration, the distinction between external appearance and internal affect is, thus, collapsed into a singular register, in which the experience of “looking good” has been conflated, as Rachel Wood (2017) observed, with that of “feeling good” (329). As such, contemporary beauty culture has gradually evolved from a promise of aesthetic enhancement into an alleged pathway towards happiness and emotional stability, recasting psychological well-being as a byproduct of

diligent bodily labor and practices of self-care (see also Gill & Orgad 2015; Kanai 2015; Scharff 2016).

This convergence between beauty, self-care, and mental health, significantly, provides the socio-cultural framework within which the catastrofemal corpus under analysis unfolds, as these narratives consistently stage the attempt to overcome alienation and psychic disaffection through precisely those practices of transformation that neoliberal culture positions as therapeutic or salvific. If, as argued throughout this dissertation, the question animating these contemporary narratives of disaffection is not merely why these women suffer but also *how* they attempt to alleviate such suffering, these protagonists—faced with forms of psychological distress that appear otherwise incurable—turn toward their own bodies as sites of intervention, embracing projects of self-optimization in the hope that corporeal discipline might produce a corresponding form of psychic renewal.⁶⁰ Yet these attempts at self-improvement, grounded in the neoliberal belief that mental well-being can be achieved through the successful management and betterment of the self, ultimately prove incapable of delivering the transformation they promise. These novels, in fact, unanimously suggest that what neoliberalism offers is little more than a hollow fantasy, one destined to fail from the outset—whether one complies with conventional trajectories of optimization, as Millie does, or seeks alternative forms of self-renewal, as the unnamed protagonist of *MYORAR* attempts to do.

⁶⁰ While *TNM* and *MYORAR* are the primary focus of this section, similar investments in bodily transformation as a remedy for psychic distress recur throughout the broader catastrofemal corpus. In other narratives centered on white catastrofemales, such as *The Pisces* (2018) by Melissa Broder and *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* (2015) by Alexandra Kleeman, trajectories of aesthetic entrepreneurship and glamor labor similarly structure the protagonists' attempts to negotiate psychic fragmentation and loneliness through regimes of self-fashioning. By contrast, *Milk Fed* (2021) by Melissa Broder places a more sustained emphasis on dieting and weight loss, foregrounding the extent to which the control of food intake becomes a central axis through which emotional stability and self-worth are imagined as attainable.

By examining the two apparently opposite yet ultimately complementary projects of self-renewal undertaken in *TNM* and *MYORAR*, this section, in particular, argues that both narratives systematically expose the structural limitations of the makeover imperative underpinning neoliberal logic and rhetoric. More specifically, by tracing the failure of two women who, despite possessing the social and material resources ostensibly necessary for self-reinvention, remain unable to secure the happiness, fulfillment, coherence, and stability these models promise, both novels insist that not even the privilege of whiteness can insulate the contemporary subject from psychological disintegration or, even more significantly, transform the illusory promises of self-reinvention into a genuine cure.

Among the novels examined in this dissertation, Halle Butler's *TNM* perhaps offers the most direct engagement with contemporary discourses of self-improvement. Unlike Ottessa Moshfegh's unnamed narrator—whose project of hibernation appears, at least superficially, to suspend dominant regimes of productivity and self-fashioning—Butler's protagonist, Millie, remains profoundly invested in the possibility of personal transformation. If catastrofemal narratives are characterized by a persistent attempt to negotiate the psychic impasse in which their antiheroic protagonists find themselves trapped, Millie emerges as a particularly clear illustration of the extent to which contemporary projects of self-betterment continue to exert a powerful pull upon disaffected young women in twenty-first-century American literature. Throughout the novel, in fact, she consistently imagines that happiness, fulfillment and, most importantly, emotional stability might be achieved *only* through sufficient work upon herself, embracing the distinctly neoliberal conviction that dissatisfaction originates not in structural conditions but in her personal inadequacy and can, therefore, be remedied through individual optimization. As such, *TNM* provides a particularly effective starting point for

examining how catastrofemale narratives engage with, and ultimately dismantle, the promises of entrepreneurial self-transformation that continue to shape contemporary constructions of feminine subjectivity in the new millennium.

As soon as the novel begins, Millie's investment in a neoliberal logic of self-betterment becomes visible in the projections of self-realization she casts onto her recently acquired position at Lisa Hopper. Although she experiences the type of work she is assigned as deeply alienating—and, to an extent, humiliating—much like the succession of temporary positions that preceded it, she nevertheless invests this impermanent office role with an almost disproportionate significance, imagining it as the *first necessary step* toward becoming a different version of herself altogether. Positioned as a pathway toward permanent employment, her job at Lisa Hopper is never valued simply for the financial stability it could provide but is instead incorporated into a broader narrative of self-realization, wherein professional advancement functions primarily as the bedrock upon which an entirely new life might eventually be built. Paradoxically, even before any promotion has been formally offered, Millie is *already* projecting herself into an imagined future, calculating the savings she might accumulate over the course of a year of stable employment and envisioning how those resources would ultimately enable her to pursue—at least in her fantasies—work more closely aligned with her aspirations. As she explains, “If I’m frugal, I should have a savings account by the end of the year. So, a year from now, I can start looking for other jobs [...] and eventually apply for management or admin or copywriting jobs in a setting more in line with my values and interests (those all TBD), and then change can happen organically from there” (Butler 2019, 96). What emerges from this fantasy is, then, a distinctly neoliberal logic of self-making, in which employment is imagined not as an end in itself but as the necessary precondition for personal fulfillment, promising

Millie access to a future in which she might finally become happier, more authentic and, overall, more coherent as a subject.

Access to permanence at Lisa Hopper—and, by extension, to the emancipated life she associates with it—appears, however, structurally contingent upon a rigorous process of self-optimization. Explicitly articulated during her first day on the job, when she wonders “*how many changes I would have to make, to tip myself over the edge into the endless abyss of perm*” (2-3, my emphasis), Millie’s intuitive attribution of economic survival to personal transformation reflects a broader mutation in the nature of the contemporary neoliberal labor market. As Micki McGee (2005) observed, the growing precarity of contemporary employment has rendered “efforts at self-making and self-invention increasingly urgent” (16), compelling “belabored” workers—particularly female employees concentrated at the lower end of the wage scale—to continually work on themselves *simply* to remain employable (12). Read through this lens, it becomes clear why the prospect of professional advancement, for Millie, depends less on any objectively measurable display of productivity than on a highly demanding performance of subjectivity, insofar as her economic stability will remain provisional *until* she is able to embody, with apparent ease, that idealized model of corporate femininity that her colleagues at Lisa Hopper seem to inhabit. If professional success is, in her view, inseparable from proximity to this ideal, then her precariousness is immediately pathologized as a personal failure—a tangible evidence of intrinsic deficiencies that require immediate correction. Displaced from any structural context, her unemployment is, thus, re-framed as the ultimate measure of her own inadequacy, registering a supposedly defected body, mind, and affective life—what she articulates elsewhere as “I’m fat, I smell, no one likes me, my clothes suck, I’ll never amount to anything” (Butler 2019, 46)—an interpretative act that

reproduces that neoliberal logic through which socio-economic precarity is systematically privatized and rearticulated as an individual responsibility.

It is precisely from this conviction that Millie decides she must correct—or, quite literally, *make over*—all those aspects of herself she perceives as defective. If her dissatisfaction originates within herself, then happiness appears attainable *only* through a process of self-optimization that will allow her to become the entrepreneurial subject implicitly underpinning contemporary narratives of corporate success. Embarking on a project of “aesthetic entrepreneurship” (Elias, Gill & Scharff 2017), Millie believes that her professional stability depends upon her ability to transform herself into the kind of subject demanded by neoliberal corporate culture, a process encompassing appearance, habits, health, and emotional disposition alike. The “new me” invoked by the novel’s title is, thus, imagined as the *corrected* version of the self she persistently inhabits: thinner rather than fat, confident rather than anxious, socially desirable rather than alienated, sane rather than mad. Never articulated as isolated goals, these aspirations of physical *and* psychological self-optimization are understood as interlocking dimensions of a broader fantasy of reinvention, one in which bodily attractiveness, emotional well-being, professional success and, ultimately, social belonging become mutually constitutive parts of a *singular* process of neoliberal makeover.

Millie’s appearance, of course, becomes one of the primary sites through which this all-encompassing transformation toward self-betterment is pursued, preceding later attempts at regulating her everyday routines and even restructuring her emotional life. Treating her body as an unfinished project requiring constant intervention, Millie develops her own version of what Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill, and Christina Scharff (2017) define as “glamor labor,” namely elaborate routines of self-care that she imagines as central to “[her] new beauty ritual” (Butler 2019, 96): she covers herself in coconut oil after reading

online recommendations—"I work the oil into my body, soak my hair in it, rub it on my teeth, my nails in coconut oil after, [...] into my eyebrows" (95-96)—attends to unwanted hair growth, obsessively monitors her water intake, regulates her diet, updates her wardrobe, and even joins a yoga studio. Convinced that dedication to a self-established regime of aesthetic labor might eventually produce a corresponding form of psychological renewal, Millie's fantasies of entrepreneurial self-fashioning are anchored in one of the central assumptions of contemporary wellness culture: namely, the belief that emotional well-being can be attained through the disciplined management of bodily processes (Scharff 2016; Gill 2016; Elias, Gill & Scharff 2017). As she asks herself, "If I'm dead inside already, why not make a few simple changes? At least my body could feel better" (Butler 2019, 82). This statement proves particularly revealing, as it acknowledges, however fleetingly, the inadequacy of these practices while nonetheless reaffirming their appeal. Although Millie recognizes that her suffering exceeds her body, the solution she imagines remains firmly located at the level of bodily maintenance alone, translating psychic distress into a problem of personal management that can supposedly be alleviated through healthier habits and greater self-discipline.

Yet, Millie's investment in bodily transformation does not simply remain at the level of surface appearance or externally imposed aesthetic discipline but extends significantly into a more radical reimagining of the body as a materially malleable and internally reconfigurable entity. Indeed, rather than conceiving weight loss or self-improvement solely as the cultivation of external legibility, Millie imagines her body itself as a site of molecular and cellular reorganization, where affective transformation is anticipated specifically through the manipulation of biological processes. As she observes while attempting to regulate her bodily discomfort, "I can feel the extra weight on my body bounce under my sweats, and the sweat begins to flow out of my skin, I'm able to think

of the bouncing flub on my body as becoming oxygenated by my blood flow, the fat cells heating and immediately shrinking. I imagine that over not too much time, the cells will completely disappear” (134). What is significant here is not merely the persistence of the weight-loss fantasy, but the epistemological register through which it is articulated: the body is no longer understood as a stable or unified surface to be disciplined, but—in line with posthuman feminist tenets—as an assemblage of metabolic, circulatory, and cellular processes that can be mentally re-scripted and imaginatively “re-engineered.” In this sense, Millie’s makeover project expands the neoliberal logic of self-optimization into a quasi-biological fantasy of control over matter itself, momentarily reaching its most interiorized form before being redistributed across the domains of her everyday routines and behaviors.

This transformative bodily labor, in fact, constitutes only one dimension of Millie’s broader commitment to self-betterment. Alongside the management of her appearance and biological processes, she subjects her everyday routines, relationships, and leisure activities to the same corrective logic. The novel is punctuated by long lists—sometimes even spanning several pages (50-51, 77-78, 82, 86, 90, 167)—through which Millie attempts to reform every aspect of her existence: “I should read a book, I should make some friends, I should write some emails, I should get some exercise, I should get a hobby” (50), or elsewhere “Take Sarah out to dinner to celebrate, join a book club, little steps, money to go out to the movies” (77). Rather than functioning as casual expressions of aspirations, these inventories produce a relentless catalogue of corrective actions aimed at reshaping every axis of her life. By framing even ordinary desires and social interactions as tasks to be planned, monitored, and completed, the novel reveals the extent to which Millie has internalized an entrepreneurial understanding of subjectivity, one in which everyday life itself becomes a site of continuous self-improvement.

The scope of this makeover project ultimately extends beyond appearance and behavior into the realm of emotional life itself. Both aesthetic and behavioral forms of self-management are incorporated into a broader attempt to escape the existential impasse in which Millie finds herself trapped and “do better this time [...], be better” (50). As much as her body requires transformation, so too does her mindset, as she strives to become “who I [always] wanted to be—calm, cool, self-assured, self-reliant, independent enough to attract people who could enjoy my company” (77). Self-improvement, thus, emerges as an all-encompassing project of self-fashioning in which even undesirable emotions, attitudes, and reactions become objects of intervention. Far from questioning the structural conditions that produce her disarray, Millie turns inward, treating her anxiety, her resentment, her loneliness, her anger—and, more broadly, her madness—as personal shortcomings to be corrected through greater self-discipline. “Behavior is changeable,” she insists. “I might not be able to change my thoughts and opinions, not at first anyway, but my behavior, that I can do” (82). Here, the distinction she draws between thoughts and behavior is significant because it reveals the persistence of her faith in self-transformation precisely when her inner life remains resistant to change. Although her psychological distress exceeds her capacity for self-management, Millie continues to believe that sufficient discipline will eventually bring her conduct, emotions, and even sense of self into alignment with the ideal subject she aspires to become. In doing so, she perfectly embodies the neoliberal entrepreneurial subject in its purest form, treating every aspect of the self as a potentially improvable project rather than recognizing the structural conditions that continually produce her depression.

What ultimately sustains Millie’s commitment to these projects of self-improvement is, in fact, the promise of a future—a happier and more fulfilled one—that always appears just within reach while being constantly displaced onto a temporal horizon that, little by little, recedes as she attempts to approach

it. The titular “new me,” then, exists primarily as a future projection, a version of herself that will supposedly emerge only *once* sufficient labor has been performed upon her body, habits, emotions, and career. Although Millie repeatedly reassures herself that fulfillment lies just ahead—as she predicts, “I’ll be grateful in the future, once I have my life together a little bit more” (123)—the promise of self-realization is never experienced directly, but continually deferred to an unknown future—*after* the promotion, *after* the savings account, *after* the healthier routine, *after* the next round of self-correction. Satisfaction, thus, is perpetually postponed in favor of a future optimization, producing a subject who understands herself not in terms of what she is in the present but in terms of what she might one day become. Read through Lauren Berlant’s (2011) notion of “cruel optimism,” Millie’s investment in a future self is sustained *precisely* by the promise of its apparent attainability, even as it remains perpetually out of reach, binding her more firmly to a regime of self-improvement that depends upon the perpetual deferral of fulfillment. Far from functioning as an attainable destination, the fantasy of becoming “the new me” thus—the novel seems to argue—is only a regulatory ideal, relocating happiness in a moment that, ultimately, never arrives. As such, Millie’s commitment to self-betterment encourages her to interpret her own mental disarray not as evidence of the limits of self-improvement itself, but as proof that *further effort* is still required—a conflation of bodily and psychic registers that further reinforces the novel’s depiction of mental distress as an embodied phenomenon, inseparable from the material practices through which the self is continuously managed and optimized.

The illusory nature of these promises of happiness is eventually revealed only in the final quarter of the narrative. Despite her unwavering commitment to these regimes of self-fashioning, Millie’s project of transformation ultimately fails both materially and psychologically, as neither the professional advancement she

desires nor the coherent subjectivity she seeks ever fully materializes. Rather than obtaining the promotion she believes will inaugurate her better life, Millie is dismissed from Lisa Hopper one week before her temp contract expires and, after months of tribulations and unemployment, secures a position at a call center that pays only \$7.50 an hour. Far from the trajectory of upward mobility she had so carefully envisioned for herself, the novel's bittersweet conclusion refuses any straightforward resolution, eventually leaving it up to the reader to interpret Millie's fate. Yet what the ending *does* make clear is the antiheroine's growing awareness of the fundamentally illusory nature of the neoliberal ideal that has sustained her throughout the narrative, her latest attempt at self-reinvention revealing itself as merely another violent shortcut—to paraphrase from the novel—toward a fantasy life that never fully becomes real.

Millie's trajectory, thus, demonstrates that the failure of neoliberal self-betterment does not arise from a refusal to participate in its demands but, paradoxically, from an *overinvestment* in them. Embedded within this system, she both internalizes its regulatory logic and *reproduces it affectively* through practices of self-interpretation and self-management, not only converting structural precarity into an individualized moral failure but also subjecting herself to escalating cycles of self-blame, self-scrutiny, dissatisfaction, and compulsive self-correction. More than any other catastrofemate examined in this dissertation, Millie faithfully embraces the belief that disciplined labor upon the self will eventually produce fulfillment and emotional stability; yet, *TNM* systematically dismantles this conviction, revealing that the future-oriented promises sustaining entrepreneurial subjectivity function less as pathways to happiness than as mechanisms for reproducing the protagonist's psychic distress. Crucially, the novel seems to illustrate that the problem lies not in Millie's inability to transform herself successfully, but in the very assumption that self-transformation *can* remedy forms of suffering that are fundamentally structurally

produced. By treating her precarious employment, economic insecurity, emotional exhaustion, and even social isolation as private failures requiring individual correction, Millie's project is doomed from its inception. Her tragedy, in fact, is not that she fails to work hard enough upon herself, but that the origin of the problems she seeks to solve is never located within herself to begin with. Far from curing her depression, the fantasy of becoming "the new me" merely ensures that the desired version of herself remains perpetually deferred—always waiting somewhere in the future, never arriving in the present. By exposing this perpetual deferral, Butler's novel eviscerates the neoliberal fantasy that wellness, happiness and psychological coherence can be achieved through sufficient self-management alone, revealing instead how such promises function to sustain the very forms of madness they claim to resolve.

Compared to *TNM*, Ottessa Moshfegh's *MYORAR* offers instead a more ambivalent exploration of the self-betterment trajectories that typically structure catastrofemal narratives. As the latter part of this section will show, while the protagonist's year of rest and relaxation appears to suspend neoliberal imperatives of aesthetic self-fashioning, it nonetheless reproduces the very logics underpinning such projects at a deeper level, albeit in a displaced form. Interrogating those critical readings that tend to interpret the unnamed narrator's project of hibernation as a *purely* political refusal of capitalist productivity (Cummins 2018; Kleeman 2018; Kreizman 2018; Tolentino 2018; Bernt 2021; Guleryuz 2024), this chapter also reads her withdrawal into sleep as another modality of self-improvement—an unconventional but legible variant within the broader spectrum of neoliberal self-making that catastrofemal narratives repeatedly subject to critique. From this perspective, the narrator's hibernating project emerges as the "darker" counterpart—the literal flip side of the same coin—to the recognizable regimes of aesthetic entrepreneurship that conventionally structure makeover trajectories, such as the one examined in

TNM. By staging two parallel and competing projects of self-renewal—Reva’s overtly normative one and the narrator’s apparently oppositional alternative—Moshfegh’s novel, then, demonstrates that neither strict adherence to dominant scripts of self-transformation nor their rearticulation through unconventional forms of withdrawal can ultimately secure the happiness and coherence they both seem to promise. Much like *TNM*, therefore, *MYORAR* exposes—through a more oblique and ironic mode of critique—the collapse of neoliberal fantasies of self-betterment from both *within* and *beyond* their normative boundaries.

It is within this dual structure that Reva emerges as the novel’s most legible embodiment of neoliberal femininity, not only recalling the self-fashioning trajectory previously traced through Millie in *TNM* but also rendering visible the very logic that covertly governs the narrator’s own year of rest and relaxation. Although highly intelligent, educated, and conventionally attractive, Reva is nevertheless presented by the narrator as a subject perpetually falling short of the standards through which postfeminist culture measures feminine success, always appearing only one step away—one successful makeover or promotion away—from becoming the woman she imagines herself capable of being. Dismissively described by the protagonist as “a slave to vanity and status” (Moshfegh 2018, 9), Reva appears trapped in what Susan Bordo (2004 [1993]) famously termed a “no-win game” (164), endlessly pursuing an elusive ideal of feminine perfection and effortless confidence that remains permanently beyond her reach. Convinced that her dissatisfaction originates in a deficiency located within herself rather than within the social structures that shape her life, Reva—much like Millie—approaches both her body and psyche as sites of continuous intervention, investing time, energy, and money in those practices of self-transformation that promise conformity and social recognition, beyond happiness. Her near-devotional commitment to cosmetics, dieting regimes, and luxury brands, together with her attachment to meditation, aspirational mottos,

“self-help books and workshops that usually combined some new dieting technique with professional development and romantic relationship skills” (Moshfegh 2018, 15), reveals the extent to which she has internalized the neoliberal conviction that personal dissatisfaction is rooted within the self and can, accordingly, be corrected through sufficient self-work. In Reva’s view, bodily discipline, emotional well-being, professional achievements and romantic fulfillment are indissolubly tied together within a single project of self-fashioning, each functioning as a mutually constitutive dimension of the same makeover logic. Becoming thinner, happier, more successful, and more desirable are, thus, not separate aspirations but interconnected outcomes of a broader entrepreneurial project of self-optimization.

Yet despite her unwavering faith in the possibility of disciplining herself into “liv[ing] up to [her] full potential” (ibid.), Reva’s efforts never produce the rewards they promise. Following the death of her mother, her affair with Ken—a married, middle-aged supervisor at her workplace—ends in abandonment when he learns of her pregnancy, leaving Reva to navigate both the abortion and its aftermath completely alone. The promotion that follows, ostensibly a reward for her professional commitment, is in reality little more than a convenient means through which Ken removes her from his immediate environment. However, even what initially appears to be the realization of the upward mobility she has so diligently pursued throughout the novel is immediately undercut by the narrative itself: her transfer to an office in the World Trade Center ultimately leads her to her death during the September 11th attacks, transforming what seemed to be a moment of professional advancement into the condition of her own destruction. In retrospect, the narrator’s early observation that Reva had “despite her hard work, simply failed to get what she wanted—no husband, no children, no fabulous career” (14) reads almost as a foreboding prophecy governing her entire trajectory, condemning Reva’s project of self-improvement,

much like Millie's in *TNM*, to remain fundamentally unfulfilled within the narrative arc of the novel.

The abruptness of her death—and the fact that it results from forces entirely beyond her capacity to anticipate or control—radically undermines the neoliberal fantasy that sufficient discipline can secure stability or mastery over one's future. The significance of this failure lies, of course, not in any personal deficiency on Reva's part, as the novel makes clear, but rather in the nature of entrepreneurial self-making itself. Requiring endless labor while perpetually deferring fulfillment, these regimes of self-management, Moshfegh suggests, offer neither genuine resolution nor protection from the social and historical catastrophes that continue to shape individual lives. As such, Reva's trajectory is particularly significant for the novel's broader critique of neoliberal scripts of happiness: the fact that she—the character who most faithfully adheres to the normative model of entrepreneurial femininity, investing tirelessly in the bodily, emotional, and professional labor that contemporary culture presets as the pathways to self-realization—ultimately fails to attain any form of realization by the end of the story reiterates the novel's central claim, namely that such promises of fulfillment remain structurally unattainable even for those subjects who appear best positioned to achieve them.

Set against Reva's highly visible and rigorously performed alignment with postfeminist self-improvement, the narrator's project of hibernation—characterized by a slow, yet steady descent into abjection and madness—has often invited critical interpretations that read the millennial antiheroine's journey as an uncompromised refusal of the disciplinary regimes governing contemporary forms of aesthetic labor. From the opening pages of the novel, the protagonist's programmatic rejection of basic hygiene and grooming—demarcated by her resolution to take “a shower once a week at most” and entirely abandon the tasks of “tweezing, bleaching, waxing, brushing [her] hair,

[...] moisturizing or exfoliating, [and] shaving” (2)—signals a deliberate pivot toward corporeal neglect, rather than maintenance, that promptly appears fundamentally incompatible with the imperatives of self-discipline underpinning the neoliberal order.

By disengaging from these self-care rituals and reducing her body to its lower, “mechanical function[s]”—“like sneezing or shitting or bending at the joint” (25)—the narrator apparently stages an outright withdrawal from the demands of neoliberal performance and, beyond that, a broader estrangement from capitalist productivity itself, resisting, through sleep, the logics of consumption and labor that organize late-capitalist existence. Within a system that, as Jonathan Crary has famously argued in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013), seeks to eliminate every temporal interruption that might hinder the uninterrupted circulation of capital, the protagonist’s year of rest and relaxation, as such, appears as an attempt to exit the social order altogether—a final, desperate gesture to become exempt from the regimes of productivity and accumulation by, in her own words, “grow[ing] less and less attached to life” itself (Moshfegh 2018, 84). It is precisely this totalizing strategy of non-participation that places Moshfegh’s protagonist at the most extreme point of the spectrum of catastrofemal slackness: even more so than Millie in *TNM*—whose self-sabotaging tendencies merely stall her individual productivity at her workplace—the narrator of *MYORAR* finds in sleep the means to completely shut her body down, apparently leveraging the radical passivity of hibernation to disrupt or short-circuit the socio-economic and biopolitical structures that govern contemporary feminine life.

Yet, while her withdrawal into sleep can plausibly be read as an act of disengagement from the demands of labor and self-maintenance, the narrator’s hibernation nonetheless remains—this chapter contends—firmly anchored in the very logics and rhetorics that govern the more visible projects of self-fashioning

discussed throughout this section. By investing sleep itself with the promise of salvation from psychic disintegration—a fantasy that directly recalls the nineteenth-century medical practice of the rest cure⁶¹—the protagonist consistently frames her year of rest as a deliberate process of self-renewal. Throughout her trajectory, from her initial periods of sedation to her later Infermiterol-induced blackouts, the narrator repeatedly conceptualizes hibernation as a transformative process, one capable of producing a new and improved version of herself: for instance, insisting that her withdrawal is “the opposite of suicide,” she maintains that her project is “self-preservational,” designed to “save [her] life” (7) and allow her to “reappear,” once out of the slumber, “in some new form” (84); or elsewhere, by imagining a future in which she will emerge “healed,” “immune to painful memories” (137), and finally able to “live easy, [...] think easy” (252), she recasts sleep as an aspirational investment in a happier and more manageable future self. Taken together, these recurring declarations demonstrate that the narrator actually understands her year of rest and relaxation as a transformative process, one that—much like the self-help manuals, wellness regimes, and makeover projects embraced by Reva—holds out the promise of overcoming existential dissatisfaction and attaining the personal fulfillment that has thus far remained beyond her reach.

What makes this fantasy of renewal particularly significant is that, much like in Millie’s and Reva’s case, it rests upon the conviction that emotional well-

⁶¹ The narrator’s project of hibernation, of course, recalls the nineteenth-century “rest cure” developed by Silas Weir Mitchell, a treatment frequently prescribed to women diagnosed with nervous disorders such as hysteria or neurasthenia. Combining prolonged bed rest, enforced inactivity, isolation, and overfeeding, this cure sought to restore both physical and mental health through withdrawal from ordinary social life. Feminist critics and writers have long noticed the gendered assumptions underpinning this treatment, most famously exposed in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), where enforced rest becomes the **engine** of the protagonist’s slow descent into madness. Moshfegh’s novel reworks this historical tradition in a contemporary register, transforming confinement into a self-imposed and chemically-induced project of renewal. This thematic revisiting of the rest cure not only situates the novel within a longer literary genealogy of female madness but, as already established, may also help illuminate the novel’s front cover image.

being can be *repaired* through intervention upon the body—a logic already encapsulated in the narrator’s stated desire to “escape the prison of [her] mind and body” (18). The narrator’s insistence that she will emerge from this process “renewed and reborn,” with “every one of [her] cells regenerated enough times [that] the old cells were just distant, foggy memories” (51), together with her later desire to “clear [her] mind,” “refresh and renew the cells in [her] brain, [her] eyes, [her] nerves, [her] heart” (263) exposes the degree to which psychological suffering is privatized and reimagined as a problem of *somatic* “re-engineering.” These biomedical fantasies of cellular regeneration, in fact, are significant not only because, as already established, they reinforce the novel’s depiction of madness as an embodied phenomenon, but also because they reproduce a central tenet of contemporary self-help and wellness culture: the belief that—as both Christina Scharff (2016) and Rosalind Gill (2016) have maintained—emotional well-being can be *actively manufactured* through the proper and continuous management of bodily processes. As such, hibernation appears to function less as an escape from the makeover imperative than as its radical internalization, relocating the uninterrupted work of self-transformation from the visible, cosmetic surface of the body to its hidden, supposedly regenerative biological depths.

This apparent shift from visible, “external” self-fashioning to internal, biological regeneration does not, however, dismantle altogether the underlying logic of discipline and labor that usually sustains traditional makeover projects; rather, it merely displaces these forces into the space of the protagonist’s hibernation. Despite constituting a retreat from capitalist rhythms and imperatives, the narrator’s year of rest and relaxation is actually turned, paradoxically, into its own form of labor, a meticulously organized project, structured around strict routines of maintenance and monitoring that directly mirror those very regimes of discipline and productivity that it claims to

suspend. This re-inscription of labor becomes subtly visible in the way the narrator first schedules her sleeping hours and then her blackouts, tracks and recalibrates her heavy pharmaceutical intake, and obsessively assesses whether her chemically-induced sleep is delivering the desired therapeutic results. As such, what initially presents itself as a radical suspension of capitalist rhythms and demands gradually seems to take the form of an alternative regime of regulation and performance—one *still* governed by cycles of adjustments and optimization. Sleep, in other words, is never allowed to be *just* rest. Instead, it acquires its own rigorous metrics, its own schedules, its own expectations, reproducing the exact logic of measurable self-improvement that defines the market order outside the protagonist's apartment.

The narrator's highly calculated approach to her hibernation, however, also reflects a broader cultural and economic reconfiguration of sleep as a central, profitable venue within the wellness industry. Indeed, while the act of sleeping may, in principle, represent the negation of capitalism, more recent scholarship has instead drawn attention to how sleep itself is, in fact, part of this system, fully integrated into its circuits of production and even giving rise to a full-fledged "sleep economy." Building on the work of Laurent De Sutter (2018), Matthew Fuller (2018), and Arwa Mahdawi (2020), Rosi Braidotti (2022) has aptly pointed out how sleep has become one of the latest frontiers of neoliberal capitalism, now incorporated into a self-care industry that monetizes *even* rest under the guise of creating a healthier, more functional subject. Within this framework, sleep is understood as a site of investment and optimization in its own right, generating entire markets devoted to enhancing its quality through commodities—such as high-tech mattresses, performance-oriented sleepwear, digital sleep-tracking devices, and the broader psycho-pharmaceutic industry—that promise improved mental health and heightened productivity in exchange for "better" rest. Rather than existing outside capitalist rationalities, sleep is thus itself

transformed into *yet another* commodity, an object of regulation and maximization.

Significantly, this logic is subtly but firmly inscribed within *MYORAR*, manifested not only in the financial capital the protagonist pours into her chemically-induced hibernation, but also in the language she uses to validate it: “This was good, I thought. I was finally doing something that really mattered. *Sleep felt productive*. Something was getting sorted out” (Moshfegh 2018, 51, my emphasis). As clearly inferable from this passage, this formulation—through the vocabulary of “feeling productive” and “sorting things out”—reintroduces the exact evaluative, metric-driven language the narrator a couple of pages earlier associates with her former life at the art gallery, dismissed as “unnecessary labor” when compared to her now fruitful sleep (49). The quote, then, exposes a profound irony: the protagonist’s attempt to slack and escape the market order unexpectedly leads her to turn sleep itself into a job in its own right, rendering the radical passivity of her body into a site of industrious psychological manufacturing. The boundary between rest and work is, therefore, not dissolved but insidiously reconfigured, as sleep itself becomes meaningful only *insofar as* it performs utility and promises psychological rewards. In this sense, the narrator’s hibernation appears to remain fully tethered to a capitalist epistemology, where existence is only validated through productivity, even when *that* productivity is displaced onto the domain of rest.

This inscription of hibernation within capitalist and neoliberal logics is further corroborated by the somnambulistic actions carried out by the narrator during her Infermiterol-induced blackouts—episodes that, despite their significance, have received little to no sustained critical attention. Rather than enabling a clean break from the regimes of consumption and self-management she consciously attempts to suspend, these blackouts instead reveal the persistence of the very practices of aesthetic labor the protagonist ostensibly

renounces at the outset of the story. Indeed, while her conscious self insists upon a total withdrawal from beauty culture—vehemently rejecting the routines of feminine self-maintenance that structure Reva’s existence—her *unconscious self* repeatedly returns to them, “[making] appointments to get waxed” and “book[ing] time at a spa that offered infrared treatments and colonics and facials” (86). Instead of marking a rupture with postfeminist femininity, these actions suggest the extent to which such practices of aesthetic self-fashioning have become embodied habits that persist, within the protagonist, *even* beyond her conscious intention, thereby revealing the narrator’s continued implication within the very structures of desire and self-fashioning she seeks to escape.

This tension between conscious refusal and unconscious compliance is reinforced by the narrator’s broader account of her somnambulistic behavior, where consumption itself becomes seamlessly re-integrated into her unconscious routine: “Sleepwalking, sleeptalking, sleep-online-chatting, sleepeating—that was to be expected, especially on Ambien. I’d already done a fair amount of sleepshopping on the computer and at the bodega. I’d sleepordered Chinese delivery. I’d sleepsmoked. I’d sleeptexted and sleeptelephoned” (115). The fact that these *unconscious* actions revolve exactly around the forms of consumption and bodily maintenance she *consciously* disavows suggest both the depth of their internalization and their continued reproduction through embodied, automated practice, leaving her body caught—almost against her will—within the socio-economic circuits it intends to elude. Even under total chemical sedation, these desires and routines seem to persist as somatic automatisms, revealing the extent to which neoliberal consumer logics operate *independently* below conscious intention. Shattering the fantasy of a sovereign subject capable of simply opting out of the neoliberal order, these sequences reveal how the protagonist’s body remains deeply entangled within broader material, affective, and ideological forces that shape her life, consistently frustrating her own pursuit of total

liberation. As such, Moshfegh seems to suggest that neoliberal logics cannot be cast off through a mere act of refusal, since they are *already* embedded within the ordinary, sub-intentional routines—the muscle memory and even cellular activities—through which the protagonist inhabits the world.

Bearing this in mind, the narrator's hibernation project may be understood as fundamentally ambivalent rather than purely oppositional, insofar as it oscillates between *withdrawal from* and *reproduction of* the very logics of self-fashioning it appears to suspend. Far from abandoning the imperative to improve herself, the protagonist, in fact, merely substitutes one mode of self-optimization for another: whereas Reva—and Millie in *TNM*—pursue transformation through visible, disciplined forms of aesthetic labor, *MYORAR*'s catastrofemal redirects this same logic into the domain of unconsciousness and biological "renewal." What fluctuates is not the teleological goal—that is, the production of an improved self capable of overcoming unhappiness and psychological distress—but merely the *process*, the *modality* through which said transformation is pursued. As such, Reva's highly legible labor of self-fashioning and the narrator's apparent refusal of it function, within the architecture of the novel, not as antithetical trajectories but as structurally interdependent articulations of the same neoliberal imperative, in which withdrawal itself becomes a paradoxical technique of self-making. If Reva renders normative scripts of entrepreneurial femininity visible, the narrator's hibernation does not negate them; instead, it only intensifies and displaces them into a less visible, but not less regulatory form.

It is not surprising, then, that the comparative trajectory between the two women converges on a shared and disquieting endpoint, as *MYORAR* *also* stages the collapse of the narrator's illusion of renewal in the aftermath of the attack on the Twin Towers. Whereas the narrator completes, by the end of the penultimate chapter, her project of hibernation, emerging apparently cured from her

prolonged sleep—"My sleep had worked," she admits, "I was soft and calm and felt things" (288), like "a newborn animal" (278)—this apparent achievement of restoration is immediately destabilized by the novel's final temporal rupture. Closing on the events of September 11th, the narrative, in fact, not only abruptly cuts short Reva's trajectory of upward mobility, but also retroactively undermines the logic underpinning the narrator's own project, dismantling the possibility that self-betterment can secure any form of stability—material or psychological—in a world structured by violence that exceeds individual control.

In this sense, the narrator's final awakening exposes the fragility of neoliberal projects of optimization, exposing how the fantasy of suspended suffering ultimately depends upon the exclusion of the very historical and structural conditions that return to interrupt it. Unlike Millie and Reva, whose projects of self-betterment remain perpetually deferred and never reach their imagined completion, Moshfegh's narrator appears to bring hers to an endpoint, only for that endpoint itself to collapse under the pressure of an external catastrophe that cannot be incorporated into regimes of individual self-management. What *MYORAR* ultimately reveals, therefore, is not the efficacy of hibernation as an alternative to neoliberal self-fashioning, but the impossibility of any form of self-direct renewal to secure immunity from the structural and historical conditions that exceed it. In this final gesture, Moshfegh's novel, then, reasserts the central claim of this section: that the fantasy of a "new self" persists not because it is attainable, but because its failure can always be reinterpreted as *yet another problem* of the self, rather than as an effect of the world it inhabits.

Taken together, *TNM* and *MYORAR* thus offer a devastating diagnostic of the contemporary feminine condition: caught between two incompatible imperatives, these catastrofemales can neither successfully optimize themselves into happiness nor enact a clean refusal of the neoliberal order that structures that desire. Whether they exhaust themselves in the hyper-visible, disciplinary

regimes of aesthetic entrepreneurship and affective self-management, as in Millie's and Reva's compulsive projects of makeover and professional self-fashioning, or attempt to withdraw from these demands altogether, the neoliberal order remains capable of reabsorbing, reformatting, or even neutralizing such gestures of self-transformation, continually displacing the promise of an "ideal self"—and the attendant feelings of fulfillment and happiness—just beyond reach.

By displacing structural and material conditions of disaffection onto the level of individual psychology, these narratives expose how neoliberalism secures its persistence through the privatization of distress, which traps subjects, like these young women, within an interminable loop of self-blame and deferred repair. At the same time, however, if madness in these novels can be read as one of the final affective residues of this internalization, it also registers, however fleetingly, an excess that resists complete instrumentalization: a form of disintegration that exceeds the language and logic of optimization and self-management, and thus signals the persistence of forms of affective life *beyond* the limits of productivity, legibility, and ultimately curability that underpin the neoliberal order. In its refusal to be smoothed over by skincare routines, corporate advancement or even intense self-medication, this fictional madness becomes a stubborn, recalcitrant register of distress, an unassimilable reminder that exposes the limits of a system that demands total psychological compliance.

Yet the very possibility of undertaking these projects of self-betterment—whether through aesthetic entrepreneurship, professional self-fashioning, or even radical withdrawal—depends upon forms of privilege that have thus far remained largely implicit within this discussion. If the catastrofemales examined in this chapter ultimately fail to transform themselves into happier and more coherent subjects, they nevertheless possess access to fantasies of reinvention that are not equally available to *all* women. The antiheroic trajectories mapped across

TNM and *MYORAR*, then, emerge from positions of privilege, namely whiteness and economic security—conditions that profoundly shape the strategies these characters can mobilize in an attempt to “cure” their madness. Dependent upon significant reserves of time and money, the labor of self-improvement remains, as Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine (2008) have argued, unevenly distributed across intersecting hierarchies of gender, class and race. Bearing this in mind, the two novels under discussion, when read comparatively, reveal that the most “available” forms of self-transformation are also the most materially dependent, while practices of withdrawal presuppose still greater reserves of economic surplus. In *MYORAR*, this becomes particularly visible, as the narrator’s ability to suspend work and responsibility altogether relies *precisely* on such privileges, namely on the inherited wealth that enables her withdrawal. As Reva acutely observes, subtly mapping the socioeconomic distance between herself and the narrator: “Lucky you. I wouldn’t mind taking time off from work to loaf around, watch movies, and snooze all day, but I’m not complaining. I just don’t have that luxury” (Moshfegh 2018, 12). Even slacking, self-making, and withdrawal, thus, emerge as classed modes of possibility, dependent upon positions within intersecting hierarchies of race and class, and ultimately sustained by the very economic asymmetries that neoliberal capitalism produces.

For this reason, if this chapter has traced a series of “traditional” white catastrofemal trajectories—structured around the experience of madness, withdrawal, self-betterment, and eventual failure—the subsequent chapters will turn to ask what happens when this narrative architecture is inhabited from positions that are not structurally entitled to the fantasy of exit and makeover it presupposes. In other words, what becomes of slacking, withdrawal, and psychic disintegration when they are no longer anchored in the relative security of whiteness and class privilege? And how closely, under such conditions, can subjects ever approximate the postfeminist model of femininity historically

constructed through their exclusion? Where the novels examined here remain largely within the orbit of white, middle-class femininity—even as they expose its fragilities—later chapters will shift toward figures for whom neither withdrawal nor self-optimization is available as a viable strategy of survival. In contrast to Millie’s disciplined self-making or Moshfegh’s narrator’s disengagement, racialized catastrofemales such as Candace Chen in Ling Ma’s *Severance* (2018) and Edie in Raven Leilani’s *Luster* (2020) do not pursue exit from neoliberal structures but instead inhabit their contradictions from within, negotiating precarity, disaffection and fragmentation while forging alternative modes of belonging and resistance within a system that continues to render them intermittently visible and persistently marginal.



Figure 3 Stephen Shore, from *Early Work* (1960 ca.).

Chapter 3. Cartographies of Unbelonging: The Catastrofemale Reconfigured in *Severance* (2018) by Ling Ma

3.1 Islanded Amid the Crowd: Reconfiguring the Catastrofemale through Urban Loneliness in *Severance*

Published in July 2018 in *Harper's Magazine*, Kevin Baker's feature story "The Death of a Once Great City" bitterly catalogued—as the title suggests—the downfall, or rather the sudden disappearance, of New York City as we once knew it. For centuries the most-renowned harbor to the New World, and quintessentially the place for ambition and overachievement, New York, despite having become "wealthier, healthier, cleaner, safer, less corrupt, and better-run" than ever before (25), suddenly appeared, to Baker's eyes, unexpectedly empty. Accompanied by striking, nostalgia-infused photographs, the article poignantly traced this sudden emptiness to the severe housing crisis that, at that time, was beginning to take the city by storm, accelerating the slow but steady gentrification of its five boroughs.

Yet, lying beneath this diagnosis was also the suggestion of a deeper cause—the sense that New York's sudden decline was also but one symptom of a broader moral and social erosion that had begun to plague Western societies everywhere. Indifference and carelessness—understood as the privilege that allows individuals to go on about their days undisturbed not only by distant suffering, but also when, much closer, "fellow human beings are picked off [the streets] by the monsters living among us" (46)—stood, in Baker's account, at the root of this transformation, facilitating the consolidation of power while also disintegrating communal life from within. Seen in this light, the sudden emptiness of New York exceeded the city's material fabric, not only

encompassing shuttered businesses or vacant luxury apartments owned by an absent elite, but also—and even more significantly—the widening emotional distance developing between those who were left behind, each individual abruptly transformed into a self-contained “planet” whose isolation, paradoxically, became most acute and visible amidst a crowd.

Such a paradox, unsurprisingly, has long been explored within the world of fine arts. While mainstream media continues to mythologize New York as a site of cultural vitality—simultaneously elusive and yet perpetually within arm’s reach for the protagonists of coming-of-age narratives—a parallel counter-discourse has long exposed the city’s constitutive fractures and failures, while underlying, most of all, its inability to dispel loneliness from within it. Though feelings of isolation and loneliness might seem antithetical to urban living—being consistently clamped amidst masses of other human beings—cities like New York actually make us, as cultural critic Olivia Laing (2016) has observed, “hyper-alert to the gulfs between people, to how it can feel to be islanded amid a crowd” (6). Much of the art engaging with the entity that is New York City—across paintings, photography, film, and literature—has indeed returned to this conundrum: how physical proximity can coexist with solitude, and how an absence of connections or kinship can co-occur even when surrounded by millions of people at all times.

A particularly resonant example of this is the black-and-white photograph by Stephen Shore opening this chapter. Part of his *Early Work* series, now exhibited at the MACK Foundation, the photo captures an unremarkable New York street-scene set at the beginning of the 1960s, when the photographer was a mere teenager. While his later—and probably more renowned—production traditionally lacks any sustained interest in human subjects, this earlier work firmly relies on the presence and centrality of common people wandering around New York City, “consumed,” in Victoria Gonzalez (2025)’s words, “in a world of

their own.” The three figures at the center of the composition—a man searching his pocket, and two women standing still nearby in front of a tobacco shop—occupy the same spatial frame yet appear to the viewer as three separate entities: part of the ever-flowing rhythm of the city but, at the same time, each a detached “island” of its own, absorbed in a private elsewhere. Their gazes, distant and unreciprocated, refuse both the viewer and one another, directed instead toward something unknown outside the frame. The tangible empty spaces between the photographed bodies, thus, come to epitomize and materialize the paradox of urban life itself, staging the coexistence of physical proximity and emotional estrangement, and rendering visible those “gulfs between people” to which Laing refers. In doing so, Shore’s work participates in a broader aesthetic investigation of urban loneliness as an experience of exposure to distance—an affective condition that proves central not only to visual culture but also to its literary counterparts, including twenty-first-century novels centered on catastrofemales.

As stated in the opening chapter of this dissertation, large cosmopolitan cities, in fact, consistently function as alienated and disaffected backdrops to the spiraling trajectories of the antiheroines populating these narratives. More often than not an invisible presence,⁶² urban settings such as aseptic apartments, overexposing office cubicles, or overcrowded subway cars, together with the attendant feelings of isolation or estrangement produced by these late-capitalist environments, set the affective tone of these texts while also providing the conditions for the mental disarray their characters experience. It is from within—and often *because of*—these enclosed, impersonal spaces that the protagonists of these novels linger on their experiences of urban estrangement, gradually realizing how the atomization and emotional withdrawal they endure on a daily

⁶² As already discussed in Chapter 1, the majority of these novels feature protagonists enclosed within domestic or interior spaces rather than moving ‘out and about’ through busy city streets.

basis have become normalized modes of being within contemporary urban contexts rather than fleeting or exceptional states. This dynamic is evident, as discussed in the previous chapter of this dissertation, in both *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *The New Me* (hereafter *MYORAR* and *TNM*): deeming themselves unfit to live in the “normal” world of repetitive nine-to-five labor, their protagonists retreat into their respective apartments, temporarily cutting themselves off from the inauthentic politeness, ill-concealed pretenses, and performative interactions that structure their workplaces. In doing so, both characters embrace an extreme form of isolation that becomes materially and spatially emblematic of their affective and existential solitude, the cold emptiness of their domestic interiors operating as an allegory for the emotional vacancy they experience amid crowds of indifferent others.

Cutting oneself off completely from the world is, however, a privilege that only few catastrofemales can afford in this day and age: both the unpleasant protagonist of *MYORAR* and the misanthropic Millie of *TNM* benefit from inherited wealth, a steady and effectively limitless source of income that enables them to go the distance in their projects of withdrawal and self-bettering outside the constraints of mainstream social and economic life. The non-white protagonists of Ling Ma’s *Severance* (2018) and Raven Leilani’s *Luster* (2020), by contrast, are not granted the same latitude; Candace and Edie’s fictional experiences of isolation and estrangement unfold instead *within* the represented coercive conditions of racial capitalism,⁶³ a structural regime that, within their

⁶³ The concept of racial capitalism, first articulated by Cedric J. Robinson in his foundational work *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983), posits that capitalism is inherently racialized, with racial hierarchies and exploitation constitutive of its development and expansion rather than incidental byproducts. As Robinson wrote, “the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions” (2), such that “racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism” (14). Challenging classical Marxist perspectives, Robinson contended that capitalism extended and reconfigured preexisting racial hierarchies rooted in European feudalism’s cast-like systems, thus giving rise to a new world order underpinned by “slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide” (15).

stories, disproportionately subjects both racialized subjects to damaging and often unattainable demands of productivity, respectability, and self-regulation. Unlike the white antiheroines of *MYORAR* and *TNM*, opting out altogether—retreating into a protected bubble of comfort and detachment—never fully presents itself as a viable possibility for Candace and Edie. Any attempt to go against the current—namely, to resist or deviate from these imperatives—carries tangible costs, as both characters remain acutely aware of the very narrow margins within which their disaffection, slackness, or misbehavior is tolerated within the racist social order they belong to.

Read together, then, *Severance* and *Luster*—while sharing many of the thematic and formal features of catastrofemal narratives—offer a crucial intervention into how the experiences of urban estrangement and alienation are fundamentally reconfigured when filtered through racialized subjectivities. As the present chapter on *Severance* and the one that follows on *Luster* will demonstrate, in these novels, the affective and existential alienation that characterizes life in the contemporary metropolis no longer translates into elective (and privileged) self-retreats from a hostile world; instead, it takes shape as an isolating and overexposing condition endured from *within*, and *in constant negotiation with* the presence of others. If the represented systems of power that circumscribe Candace and Edie's lives are largely responsible for their erasure and isolation—namely, of feeling cut off—then their persistence within everyday social and urban spaces emerges as a constrained yet politically charged mode of inhabitation: one that, despite its alienating effects, asserts Candace and Edie's stubborn claim to presence and belonging within systems designed to render them invisible. Methodologically, this shift from withdrawal to endurance signals a deliberate move in this dissertation: from reading urban alienation primarily as a site of failure to understanding it as a productive ethical and

affective register through which catastrofemales can negotiate relationality and spatiality in twenty-first-century cosmopolitan cities.

Among the narratives examined in this dissertation, *Severance* offers the most sustained and multifaceted mediation of urban estrangement, tracing how such isolation and alienation can persist across both overcrowded and vacant cityscapes. Much like Kevin Baker's feature story, the novel similarly poses the question, "What is one supposed to do when New York City as we know it suddenly disappears?" Written almost prophetically shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic,⁶⁴ *Severance*, in fact, stages the gradual emptying of America's largest city, imagining an alternative future in which New York is hollowed out by Shen Fever, a fictional fungal pandemic originating in Shenzhen, China, that reduces its victims to zombie-like automatons compelled to repeat the routines of their former lives until death.

Recounted from the vantage point of one of the immune survivors,⁶⁵ the novel follows Candace Chen, a 1.5-generation⁶⁶ Chinese American millennial, as she retraces the events leading to the slow but steady collapse of social and infrastructural life in the United States. Interweaving the narrative of New York City's breakdown with Candace's deeply personal memories and experiences of

⁶⁴ Although the novel was already met with considerable critical acclaim upon publication—winning the renowned Kirkus Prize and receiving multiple award nominations—it nevertheless experienced a renewed surge of attention among the general public in the aftermath of Covid-19, largely due to its seemingly prescient portrayal of pandemic conditions. However, despite the striking similarities between the novel and the later realities of Covid-19, the text bears no direct correlation to those events. For further discussion, see Hu (2020); Helmy (2022).

⁶⁵ As such, Candace may be aligned with what Marco Caracciolo (2022) defines a "posthuman narrator" (1100), insofar as she recounts her story from a temporal and experiential perspective situated beyond the collapse of human civilization.

⁶⁶ The "1.5 generation" refers to migrants who are born in one country but relocate during childhood or early adolescence to another, where they undergo part of their socialization and formal education, resulting in a liminal positionality between first-generation (foreign-born, fully socialized elsewhere) and second-generation (native-born) identities. This category is often used to capture the in-between experiential and cultural status of individuals who are neither fully 'immigrant' nor fully 'native,' but instead occupy an intermediary space shaped by partial linguistic, education, and affective incorporation into the host society. On this, see Rumbaut (2004).

dislocation, estrangement, mental disarray, and unresolved questions of belonging, *Severance* unfolds across two alternating timelines: the post-apocalyptic present, roughly situated in early 2012, and the preceding year, detailing Candace's life in Manhattan before leaving the city in late 2011, a section further interspersed with flashbacks to earlier years. This structural alternation, which juxtaposes past and present, together with the scaffolded nature of the narrative, allows readers to trace connections between multiple moments in time, revealing continuities and echoes—as Aanchal Saraf (2019) has already noted—between the two storylines, and thereby rendering the novel formally more complex than other catastrofemale narratives, which generally favor a more linear progression. A brief reconstruction of the novel's narrative arc and alternating timelines is therefore necessary in order to clarify how these questions of urban belonging and unbelonging are articulated at the level of the plot.

When we first meet her in 2011, Candace is stuck in a years-long state of inertia. Employed as a production coordinator at Spectra, a Manhattan-based publishing house, she has spent six years working in the company's Bibles division supervising the overseas production of extravagant and elaborately designed Bibles at outsourced printers in Southeast Asia. Having long set aside her earlier aspirations of becoming a Stephen Shore-esque photographer intent on capturing—as shown in the snapshot opening this chapter—the textures of urban life, Candace appears resigned to the recursive rhythms of her white-collar labor. Her monotonous existence, punctuated by the recurring refrain “I got up. I went to work in the morning. I went home in the evening. I repeated the routine” (Ma 2018, 154, 155, 163), paradoxically continues largely uninterrupted even when Shen Fever starts spreading through New York. As the majority of residents start fleeing the city, Candace remains behind, incentivized by a lucrative contract to keep Spectra's main office operational. As the city's infrastructure gradually deteriorates, she eventually begins documenting the

city's decline through her anonymous blog, *NY Ghost*, capturing the decaying urban landscape that stands as a visual remnant of a life once structured around consumption and labor. Only when she realizes that she has unknowingly fulfilled her contract does she finally decide to leave, departing as one of the city's last inhabitants.

Running parallel to this narrative is the traditional post-apocalyptic timeline, which follows Candace as she joins a group of immune survivors travelling toward the Facility, a supposed safe haven on the outskirts of Chicago. Along the way, the group routinely embarks on "stalks," scavenging abandoned houses for food and supplies, and executing any fevered individuals they encounter. Upon reaching the Facility—revealed to be an abandoned shopping mall—their journey culminates in Candace's imprisonment, following a failed attempt at escaping the group. In the novel's closing movement, Candace manages to free herself, escape the Facility, and drive toward Chicago, the hometown of her former boyfriend. The novel, then, ultimately concludes without stable resolution, gesturing only tentatively toward the possibility of attachment—even amidst a hollowed-out landscape—through Candace's pregnancy and her imagined future in Chicago. In doing so, *Severance* ultimately stages a sustained and nuanced investigation of belonging and unbelonging, tracing the experience of being cut off—*severed*, as the novel's title suggests—from stable sites of attachment, whether national, social, temporal, or affective, while probing the precarious human capacity to reestablish such connections through memory, art, and childbearing.

The centrality, within the economy of the novel, of this ongoing negotiation between belonging and estrangement (or displacement) is, however, not entirely surprising. The strenuous story of immigration and tentative assimilation that unfolds through the multiple analeptic sequences nested within the pre-collapse timeline reiterates many familiar themes and tropes of the Asian

American immigrant storyline.⁶⁷ Yet, much of the scholarly attention devoted to *Severance* since its publication has not focused primarily on this more predictable dimension of the novel.⁶⁸ Rather, as already anticipated, scholars have largely examined the text in relation to its post-apocalyptic strand, foregrounding the sustained dialogue between the two timelines and exploring how they articulate a mirrored and complementary critique of global capitalism (Grady 2018; Quassdorf 2019; Saraf 2019; Robitaille 2023). Of course, this critical emphasis on the echoes between the two timelines is well justified not only because the immigrant storyline and the post-apocalyptic scenario are thematically compatible, but also because they appear formally aligned, both conventionally structured around a logic of “Before” and “After”—in one instance precipitated by the departure from one’s homeland, in the other by the onset of societal collapse, as Ling Ma herself has observed in an interview with the *Asian American Writers’ Workshop* (Lue 2019). Even though these parallelisms and similarities across the novel’s timelines do not constitute a central concern for the present chapter, the core critique emerging from this recent scholarship (Quassdorf 2019; Saraf 2019; Gullander-Drolet 2021; Robitaille 2023) nonetheless remains foundational to, and simultaneously informs, my own reading of *Severance* as part of the emerging catastrofemal canon. It is my intention to argue, in fact, that the novel’s sustained interrogation of global and racial capitalism cannot be

⁶⁷ On the tropes and themes of the Asian American immigrant narrative, see Sohn (2014); Srikanth & Song (2016); Ling (2023).

⁶⁸ Ma’s juxtaposition of these narrative strands reflects a conscious resistance to the ‘traditional’ immigrant narrative that, at the time the novel was conceived, was expected of her both by the creative writing class she was attending and, more broadly, by the demands of the publishing market. While Asian American literary history was founded upon the consolidation of this trope—defined by themes of cultural estrangement and the (often fraught) processes of assimilation—recent scholarship has identified a clear shift toward its reconfiguration. As Pamela Thoma (2014) and Jinqi Ling (2023) have observed, contemporary Asian American writing increasingly subverts these conventions through genre hybridity and new thematic orientations, and as such, Ling Ma’s work can be situated within these recent interventions. At the same time, it is not surprising that most of the critical attention devoted to the novel has moved beyond questions of identity and assimilation, instead privileging an analysis of its post-apocalyptic dimension and its allegorical resonance with the logics of global capitalism.

reduced to mere contextual background—something external to Candace’s interior life—but instead constitutes a fundamental dimension of the novel’s portrayal of her embodied *and* embedded “mad” subjectivity.

Even though largely unaddressed by current criticism, *Severance* can also be read, in its own peculiar way, as a narrative of millennial aimlessness and psychological distress. Worn down by grief and depression, its protagonist appears to the reader—consistent with the other antiheroines examined in this dissertation—as a disillusioned and emotionally adrift twenty-something woman, resigned to a life devoid of genuine ambition or satisfaction, and seemingly destined for solitude. Having lost, in close succession, both her youthful aspirations as a photographer and her parents—her last tangible connection to her homeland—Candace finds herself confronted, as soon as she moves to New York, with the ever-pressing imperative of “becoming an adult.” It is at this juncture that she is forced to reckon with the unsettling realization that, despite having always dutifully followed the rules of the game in line with the model minority myth, neither happiness nor success is guaranteed to her—the prosperous future once confidently promised by her immigrant parents dissolving into a mirage under the pressure of an unforgiving socioeconomic reality.

Passively accepting her banishment to the Bibles department of Spectra, fearful of becoming “the lazy, disaffected daughter [...] gobbl[ing] up and squander[ing] the fruits of [her] immigrant father’s lifelong efforts” (Ma 2018, 54), Candace slowly yet steadily sinks, over the span of five years, into an enduring emotional slump, a protracted condition in which aspirational self-making is replaced with a muted, nearly imperceptible process of psychic erosion, leaving her wishing “to disappear down the drain” (163). As such, while *Severance* can readily be categorized as an outbreak novel or an immigrant narrative (also see Day 2018; Hitchens 2018; Schaub 2018; Gullander-Drolet 2021;

Schaab 2022; Lee 2023; Park 2023), this novel—it is my intention to contend—equally adheres to the catastrofemal canon insofar as it centers and stages the experience of mental disarray endemic to the late-capitalist present both on a thematic and formal level.⁶⁹ Much like in the other catastrofemal narratives, Candace’s mental distress—her “madness,” in a broader sense—is not staged as a momentary rupture or a spectacular breakdown, but emerges instead as an ongoing, embodied and embedded phenomenon: an affective internalization of, *and* simultaneous response to, a multilayered condition of estrangement that is constitutive of her racialized subjectivity.

As expected, Candace’s Chinese Americanness reconfigures and complicates the affective, aesthetic, and political stakes of her unraveling, marking a critical point of departure from the white antiheroines examined thus far. Much like her white counterparts, Candace’s experience of mental disarray is, of course, inscribed both in mind *and* flesh, emerging as a by-product of the alienating imperatives of corporate capitalism. Yet, as will be further explored in the next section of this chapter, her madness cannot be disentangled from the psychic and material burdens of immigration, assimilation, and racialization which fictionally shape her as an Asian American subject, positioned simultaneously within local regimes of power and transnational circuits of racial capitalism. Candace’s body, however, should not be read as an inorganic or passive entity—that is, as a metaphor for the abstract processes of capitalism, as traditional cultural-materialist readings might suggest (Lye 2005; Day 2016). Rather, within the narrative, her body *and* mind together operate as a dynamic, generative site through which global and local socio-cultural and political pressures are internalized, metabolized, and re-expressed, producing legible and tangible manifestations of pain, despair, and anger. Following recent new

⁶⁹ For further discussion, see Sections 1.2 and 1.3.2 of this dissertation.

materialist theorizations of the body (Braidotti 2022), her corporeality is, then, best understood as an ontological site of becoming—at once affective and material, relational and signifying, and always entwined with shifting dynamics of power. In this sense, Candace’s madness comes into view as an embodied and embedded phenomenon, revealing how her racialized experiences of estrangement and displacement unfold across intertwined physical and psychic, as well as local and global, registers.

By tracing how Candace’s embodied and embedded distress emerges at the intersection of racial capitalism, corporate alienation, and diasporic melancholy, the sections that follow examine how *Severance* not only reproduces but also significantly reconfigures the catastrofemal model beyond its predominantly white configurations. Filtered through a Chinese American subject position, the novel reshapes familiar concerns with millennial failure, psychological disaffection, and slackness into a more precarious negotiation of productivity and (un)belonging, while simultaneously gesturing toward alternative modes of inhabiting a fragmented—and eventually collapsing—world. It is precisely this tension between continuity and divergence from earlier catastrofemal narratives that structures the present chapter, particularly insofar as Candace’s racialized positioning transforms urban unbelonging from a condition of withdrawal into one of sustained and often uneasy negotiation with surrounding social and spatial environments.

Focusing primarily on the novel’s corporate timeline—a dimension comparatively underexamined within existing scholarship—the first part of the analysis traces how Candace’s condition of unbelonging crystallizes, much like the other catastrofemal narratives, as a form of alienating depression endemic to the late-capitalist present. Here, madness functions as the embodied and embedded effect of Candace’s entanglement within transnational circuits of racial capitalism and normative regimes of subject formation that simultaneously

demand productivity and foreclose stable forms of belonging. However, unlike the privileged withdrawals enacted by the white antiheroines examined in the previous chapter of this dissertation, *Severance* reconfigures over-productivity itself as a form of self-destructive endurance, whereby Candace's racialized body becomes the primary site through which structural violence is first internalized, then metabolized, and ultimately rendered materially legible.

Building on this corporeal and affective foundation, the second part of the analysis shifts its focus outward to the novel's spatial configurations, examining how unbelonging is not only experienced but also spatially articulated across the urban and transnational environments Candace inhabits. By following her movements through New York, Shenzhen, and Hong Kong, the chapter demonstrates how affective displacement and urban space are mutually constitutive, insofar as the perceived homogenization of the built environment comes to mirror—and intensify—Candace's own condition of estrangement. At the same time, however, these cityscapes are not reducible to passive reflections of psychic disintegration; rather, they function as dynamic environments continuously shaped through Candace's embodied, perceptual, and affective engagement with them, even as they simultaneously structure the conditions through which she comes to apprehend herself. Within this framework, unbelonging is not only projected onto space but also continually reconstructed through spatial encounter itself.

Significantly, Candace's relationship to these urban environments ultimately exceeds a purely diagnostic mapping of alienation. In contrast to the self-isolating projects that characterize novels such as *MYORAR* and *TNM*, *Severance* instead emphasizes how wandering through the city and photographic documentation allow Candace to remain materially and affectively engaged with the world around her, even while experiencing profound estrangement from it. Her urban drifting and her efforts to capture the city's "true essence" do not

resolve unbelonging but nonetheless complicate the clear distinction between withdrawal and active participation, suggesting more ambivalent modes of inhabiting urban space under late capitalism. Spatial estrangement is therefore reconfigured not only as a condition to be endured, but also as a site through which minimal forms of presence and visibility can still be articulated.

The chapter concludes by briefly returning to the novel's post-apocalyptic strand, where the tension between belonging and unbelonging reaches its clearest point. While *Severance* refuses any stable or restorative resolution, Candace's pregnancy and tentative movement toward Chicago gesture toward a fragile horizon of futurity grounded in her refusal to disappear. Far from functioning as a form of narrative closure, this final movement recasts the "islanded" condition of the Stephen Shore photograph—originally a site of detached alienation—as a site of stubborn, singular endurance. If Candace begins the narrative as one of many separate entities absorbed in a "private elsewhere," she concludes it by reclaiming that very isolation as a generative mode of presence, even amidst societal collapse and within a hollowed-out urban landscape. In this sense, the novel not only unsettles the dominant, teleological scripts of futurity anchored in motherhood—something that, as we will see in the next chapter, *Luster* will dismantle altogether—but also, and most importantly, reframes unbelonging not as a condition that can be fully overcome, but as an unstable yet potentially generative mode of inhabiting the fractured realities of the twenty-first century.

3.2 The Productivity of Madness: Transnational Unbelonging, Melancholy and the Compulsion of the Model Minority Script

Across the novel's multiple shifting spatial configurations, the affective plane of unbelonging emerges in *Severance* as the prevailing—albeit metaphorical—terrain Candace consistently inhabits throughout the narrative. Unfailingly portrayed as absorbed in a world of her own, Candace here occupies a condition of estrangement that exceeds mere spatial dislocation, crystallizing instead as an alterity marked by a form of sustained psychological erosion and insulation that is consistent with the catastrofemal canon at the heart of this dissertation. Specifically, this chapter reads this condition as an alienating depression endemic to the late-capitalist present, a state of affective apathy—or more broadly, madness—that emerges not as an individual pathology but as the embodied and embedded effect of Candace's racialized positioning within the intersecting logics of global capitalism. Within this catastrofemal narrative, the protagonist's mental disarray is, in fact, shown to be more explicitly structured by the diffuse and branching mechanisms of racial capitalism, which situate her within transnational circuits of labor, and by dominant regimes of normative subject formation that concurrently demand and foreclose the character's possibility of belonging. Materially entangled within these overlapping structures, Candace's body—both her disordered mind and her abject, sick flesh—functions as the primary site through which such forces are first internalized, reproduced, and then rendered legible, thereby producing a condition in which psychological distress and bodily vulnerability become inseparable expressions of the same structural violence.

Within the economy of the novel, shaping and consistently re-producing Candace's condition of “mad” unbelonging—particularly in the corporate timeline—is the very logic of repetition underpinning the late-capitalist order within which the main character herself is inscribed. Through Candace's daily

routines, looping movements across the urban landscape, and repetitive activities both *at work* and *outside of work*, the novel, in fact, portrays and posits recursiveness as a structural and experiential principle of late-capitalist life, not only organizing the character's experience of time as a cyclical loop of labor, but also generating—as Mark Fisher (2009) theorized—affective spirals of depressive stasis that materialize the extent to which the capitalist system colonizes and penetrates the very rhythms of life for subjects situated within its order. Out of this representation, then, repetition emerges as a lived condition *within* and *through* its main character's body, as Candace's experience of psychological disarray and corporeal depletion is governed by, mirrors, and re-produces the same iterative logics that dictate global circuits of production and exploitation. As a result, *Severance* encodes repetition within the very fabric of its narrative form, adopting it as a structuring, thematic, and linguistic principle of the novel: as the following analysis will show, it informs not only its recursive temporal architecture but also the depiction of Candace's labor practices, her affective life, and the embodied experience of her madness, as well as the very language through which these routines are narrated.

At the level of narrative structure, recursiveness is structurally encoded within the split movement between pre- and post-collapse timelines: their symmetry, in fact, consolidates the novel's anticapitalist critique, with the latter strand of the narrative extending and intensifying the dynamics already operative within Candace's corporate life. The fevered, zombie-like creatures of the post-apocalyptic present, are depicted as trapped in compulsive loops of repetitive gestures, performed until the loss of consciousness and eventual death. As such, these figures function as grotesque metaphors for the contemporary worker's condition, with their mechanical reiterations literalizing and materializing, as both Aanchal Saraf (2019) and Sixta Quassdorf (2019) observe,

what late capitalism demands at the level of abstraction: bodies disciplined into endless cycles of productivity, stripped of agency and futurity.

As scholars have noticed (Saraf 2019; Quassdorf 2019; Schaab 2022), *Severance's* post-collapse world, then, does not constitute a rupture with capitalism, but rather its exaggerated continuation that renders visible the logics that had long structured Candace's pre-pandemic existence while remaining naturalized and mostly imperceptible. The novel's mirrored temporal design therefore clarifies how recursiveness and circularity operate not merely as motifs but as organizing principles of its narrative framework. At the same time, the structural symmetry of the narrative prepares the ground for a shift in scale, through which repetition, initially established as a formal principle, re-emerges as a lived condition embedded within the material realities of labor. In this transition, the recursive logic that governs the novel's temporal architecture is displaced into the sphere of Candace's daily work, where repetition is no longer merely structural but infrastructural, organizing the global circuits of production and circulation in which the character is implicated. As the following part will demonstrate, this repetition is neither neutral nor uniformly experienced but instead acquires specific social and material inflections that shape both Candace's position within these systems and their psychological effects upon her.

Candace's work in the Bibles department is, in fact, fundamentally organized around repetition: embedded within an alienating and exploitative production chain that profits from the underpaid labor of Chinese workers, she is tasked with overseeing endless iterations of the same product—that very object that, as she herself observes, has historically functioned as a colonizing instrument used “to propagate Christian Euro-American ideologies” across the globe, including in her homeland (Ma 2018, 88). The absence of creativity conventionally associated with such work, however, only partially accounts for her growing frustrations and discontent with her position at Spectra. Indeed, as

Aanchal Saraf (2019) argued, the publishing house constitutes, at its core, “alienation from labor made manifest” (14): by tracing the circulation of these Bibles—from manufacturing sites in Shenzhen, through global shipping routes, to the corporate office in Manhattan where Candace supervises their final form—the novel exposes Spectra as an active participant in the operations of global racial capitalism, extracting value from the labor of racialized Asian workers whose exploitation remains obscured by the commodity form of the sacred text (Saraf 2019; Park 2023). Within this transnational network, a heterogeneous set of figures—factory workers exposed to hazardous materials that result in chronic illnesses, precarious contractors managing production logistics, and Candace herself, moving between the United States and China to sustain corporate relations—are all implicated and *physically absorbed* by a system that depends upon repetitive cycles of their labor and circulations. Crucially, Candace’s position within this system is defined by a profound sense of estrangement: while she occupies a relatively privileged role, she remains acutely aware that her employment is predicated upon her otherness, as her “Chineseness” is instrumentalized to sustain Spectra’s transnational operations, even as she is perceived as culturally foreign in China. It is this repetitive condition of simultaneous implication and displacement—neither fully aligned with the exploited workers nor fully integrated into the corporate structures she serves—that determines the gradual erosion of her psychological well-being.

This tension surfaces explicitly in a key passage of the novel, where she confesses:

At least you get to work on challenging projects in Art. *It’s not like Bibles, where you work on the exact same thing over and over again. [...] I couldn’t work in Bibles forever. I’d go crazy.* I couldn’t keep having nightmares of thin Bible paper ripping on web presses. I couldn’t keep explaining clients the working conditions of Chinese laborers, things that I couldn’t understand myself, I couldn’t keep converting yuan to dollars, the exchange rates wildly fluctuating, flailing like a drowning swimmer (Ma 2018, 157-158, my emphasis).

This passage effectively foregrounds the novel's sustained articulation, at the thematic level, of the relationship between reiterative labor, implication within capitalist structures of exploitation, and the forms of embodied depletion they engender for subjects embedded within its system. Candace's admission that she would "go crazy" if subjected indefinitely to such conditions, in fact, gestures toward the cumulative psychic and embodied effects of repetitive labor, insofar as existence within this temporal loop of capitalist production generates, as Mark Fisher (2009) argued, a depressive stasis for those workers constrained within its order. Yet, as the passage makes clear, Candace's mental strain cannot be simply attributed to corporate alienation alone but instead emerges from her structurally unstable racial positioning within local and global systems of power.

Her repeated attempts to explain the working conditions of Chinese laborers to exacting and often indifferent clients—conditions she admittedly cannot fully comprehend—alongside her continual negotiation of fluctuating exchange rates articulate her precarious positioning between incompatible economic and cultural frameworks, neither of which she ultimately fully belongs to. It is this position of structural unbelonging that crystallizes the novel's representation of her madness. Understood as an embedded phenomenon arising at the intersection of corporate alienation and racial capitalism, her mental disarray—manifested across both psychic and somatic registers—emerges as a legible and tangible expression of distress in response to the internalization of converging local and transnational pressures acting upon her racialized body. In this respect, Candace's Asianness is far from incidental, as it fundamentally reorients the novel's political scope by extending the anticapitalistic impulse characteristic of catastrofemal narratives. As such, the novel foregrounds how capitalist structures generate forms of affective and psychological depletion inscribed upon the body, while simultaneously relying upon the systemic expendability of Asian labor within global circuits of capital, thereby revealing—

in line with posthuman feminist tenets—how subjectivity itself is produced through and inseparable from these entangled material and relational systems.

The same passage, through its anaphoric insistence of “I couldn’t keep,” also draws attention to how the novel performs this reiterative logic at the formal level, as linguistic structure itself comes to reproduce the monotony it describes. More broadly, *Severance* presents, throughout the pre-collapse timeline, a series of reiterative passages that stage Candace’s entrapment within an endless cycle of going *to* work and getting *off* work—of, in her own words, “repeating the routine”—thereby mirroring the recursive temporal rhythms of capitalism:

Five years pass working for the same company. I worked the same job, albeit under a new title and with an increased salary.
I went to work in the morning. I went home in the evening. I repeated the routine (Ma 2018, 154).

I emptied myself, lost myself in the work. I got up, I went to work in the morning. I went home in the evening. I repeated the routine (155).

I got up. I went to work in the morning. [...] It was still summer (ibid.).

I went to sleep. Then I got up. I went to work in the morning. I went home in the evening. I repeated the routine (163).

I got up. I went to work in the morning. I got on the shuttle bus and looked out on the emptying streets, the unused subway tracks on the Williamsburg Bridge (249).

The repetition of this syntactic pattern, with only minimal variation, produces a form of textual circularity that formally mirrors the affective—and even physical—entrapment Candace experiences within what Fisher (2009) describes as the temporality of capitalism. The temporal horizon that unfolds before her is not one of possibility or rupture but one of relentless reiteration, wherein endless cycles of daily tasks gradually erode any sense of linear progression—a condition reflected in Candace’s admission that five years pass by without her fully registering their duration.

This sense of entrapment is further reinforced by the expansion of the temporal logic of labor beyond the workplace, as it comes to reorganize

Candace's life in its entirety, structuring even her leisure time and social relations according to the rhythms of corporate productivity. Outside the office, in fact, Candace retreats into an equally repetitive cycle of isolation and inactivity, withdrawing from social contact and "tunneling" progressively "deeper in solitude" (Ma 2018, 136): as she recounts, "It was either office or home, home or office. My habits on the weekends were sedentary. I did some household chores, ate sandwiches, watched TV [...] I didn't see anyone" (ibid.). Notably, this stasis is signaled by the abandonment of her photography—a practice that, prior to her tenure at Spectra, functioned both as a mode of creative escape and, intrinsically, as a means of asserting an individual gaze upon the world. As her life is subsumed by the recursive rhythms of labor, the camera—once an instrument of self-expression and perceptual framing—is relegated to obsolescence, her photographs now appearing "clichéd and trope-y," no longer worthy of her own attention (17). Candace's physical (and artistic) immobility—both within and beyond the workplace—thus mirrors her emotional stagnation within a persistent loop of depressive stasis; even when momentarily released from the immediate demands of the production chain, she lapses into a state of inertia that, in *Severance*, signals her gradual surrender to burnout.

The novel, specifically the pre-collapse timeline, therefore, formally enacts this anguishing stasis through syntactic repetition, transmitting to the reader a palpable sense of constraint, as though narrative movement itself were caught within the same temporal logic that governs Candace's existence. Through this convergence of structural form, thematic content, and linguistic repetition, *Severance* ultimately frames Candace's depression and alienation—or, more broadly, her madness—as an experiential condition lived *through* and *within* the body, not as an internal psychological state but as a condition produced through the subject's ongoing entanglement with material, economic, and racialized systems. Yet, to frame this condition of stasis as universally experienced would

be to overlook the uneven ways in which the recursive logics of capitalism are distributed and lived. As the novel suggests, repetition does not operate as a neutral or homogeneous structure but is instead mediated through the differential positions subjects occupy within racialized and transnational systems of labor. What appears, at first glance, as a generalized condition of entrapment thus demands further qualification: who, precisely, can afford to imagine an exit from these cycles, and under what conditions?

Indeed, one might easily ask why Candace, in contrast to the two catastrofemales analyzed in the previous chapter, does not seek a “way out” of the recursive rhythms of capitalism—why she does not pursue a form of personal salvation within the safe confines of her apartment, but instead appears to acquiesce to a detrimental condition of stasis, remaining embedded and engaging with the capitalist system around her. The novel itself provides a clear answer to this question: within the current order of things, opting out does not constitute a materially viable alternative, but rather amounts to an illusion of freedom or transgression available only to a small, privileged—and often white—minority. This becomes particularly evident when Candace’s acquiescence in the pre-collapse timeline is juxtaposed with her white boyfriend Jonathan’s narrative arc, whose withdrawal from what he perceives as mainstream society is framed, by the character, as both ethical and self-affirming. After holding an office job in Chicago for three years, Jonathan, in fact, idealistically decides to abandon the rhythms and demands of white-collar productivity in favor of a minimalist lifestyle sustained by intermittent freelance work which, while allowing him to make ends meet, permits him to devote most of his time to writing fiction. In his view, this decision situates him on a moral higher ground than Candace, whose continued participation and compliance with a system reliant on the exploitation of foreign labor appears, to him, ethically reprehensible and compromised.

Yet, what remains entirely obscured to Jonathan is the extent to which his supposed withdrawal is itself contingent upon, and sustained by, the very structures he claims to reject. Despite his idealized self-positioning outside the range of action of global capitalism, he *actually* remains fully imbricated within its logics, still dependent upon its economic infrastructures and governed by its socio-economic constraints. Candace, by contrast, is acutely aware of this contradiction: “In this world, money is freedom. Opting out is not a real choice,” she observes with a mixture of pragmatism and resignation (210). The necessity of earning a stable income—rather than pursuing artistic aspirations that “don’t pay the bills” (78)—is what enables access to even modest forms of comfort: a slightly larger apartment, consumer goods once desired by her mother but never bought, and the possibility of providing a more secure future for her yet-to-be daughter.

As long as the capitalist order remains intact, *Severance* seems to suggest, there can be no ethical “outside.” The apparent moral pursuit of disengagement from the capitalist order, in this sense, merely conceals a privileged investment in a romantic anticapitalist ideology which, as Iyko Day (2016) has convincingly argued, operates as the inverse—but not the negation—of capitalism itself, with both logics ultimately working in tandem to reinforce the same racial and colonial structures upon which the system depends. The ability to bracket or abstract the violences of global capitalism as a faraway, immaterial evil force, thus, emerges as a form of entitlement, one that remains inaccessible to those whose lives are already structured and disenfranchised by its inequalities. Unlike the white antiheroines discussed in the previous chapter, Candace cannot afford the illusion of isolation Jonathan is trying to sell her on: living in this apparently idealized isolation, rather than locating one *outside* the system, merely displaces one to its margins, “scrimping and saving,” moving “in circumscribed circles [...] peripherally, on the margins of everything” (Ma 2018, 209-210). But when one is

already positioned at those margins, what meaning could opting out possibly hold?

It is precisely at this juncture that the racial dimension of the novel becomes central, subtly reorienting the catastrofemal paradigm. Candace's decision to "play by the rules of the game"—her acquiescence to the repetitive logics of capitalism rather than her withdrawal from it—can be read not as passive compliance but as a claim to presence and legibility within structures that consistently render minority subjects like her invisible. Her lifelong commitment to "make use of [her]self, no matter what" (194) must therefore be understood in relation to her condition as the daughter of immigrants, for whom the promise of prosperity was predicated upon sacrifice and displacement. To fail in this regard would constitute, as she suggests, a betrayal of her parents' expectations and efforts—particularly those of her father Zhigang, whose migration to the United States was animated by the hope of upward mobility. This inherited imperative "to be of use," then, translates into a demand for productivity and efficiency within a broader racialized economy of value that extends beyond the individual, insofar as such expectations are unevenly distributed and differentially imposed across racialized subjects. As a result, Candace experiences productivity not as a personal choice but as an obligation inscribed upon her body through the logics of racialization, whereby her Chineseness is stereotypically already aligned with a performance of diligence and discipline.

Significantly, Candace's employment is itself predicated upon such assumptions: she is hired for being stereotypically "organized and meticulous" (80), and described by her colleagues as "capable," "diligent," and "prolific" (20)—qualities that, while ostensibly neutral, resonate with long-standing racialized stereotypes framing Asian American subjects as a model minority within the U.S. context. As Yoonmee Chang (2010) argued, this myth is in fact grounded in the belief that Asian Americans possess "unique, productive

cultural values and ethics, such as of hard work, devotion to family, and commitment to education,” that both distinguish them from other racial groups and, simultaneously, elevate them to a form of conditional “honorary” whiteness (5). At the same time, this construction serves an ideological function: by portraying Asians Americans as traditional, apolitical, and self-reliant, it positions them *outside* of the structural inequalities that actually shape their experiences (Lee 1999; Chang 2010; Ling 2023), with the calculated purpose of “denying,” as Peter Feng (2002) observed, “the existence of structural inequities that systematically disenfranchise people of color” within American capitalism (2). Central to this myth, therefore, is the equation of assimilation with economic efficiency, whereby productivity becomes the primary condition for social belonging, and any deviation from this norm comes at the cost of intensified marginalization from the dominant social order (Lye 2005). Candace’s desire to be “of use,” then, must be situated within this framework of racialized ideality, as part of a broader process of identity formation within the Asian American racial imaginary. Her orientation toward productivity, rather than slackness, does not simply reflect personal ambition but constitutes a necessary response to the pressures of assimilation, shaped by her own condition *a priori* as other, or what Anne Cheng (2000) describes as “the reality of that always-insisted-on difference” (7). In this sense, her labor becomes a site of negotiation between competing demands: the imperative to conform to an idealized model of racialized success, and the lived experience of persistent unbelonging that renders such conformity both necessary and unattainable.

By investigating these tensions, *Severance* brings to light the painful psychological costs of navigating the disjunction between ideality and lived reality, ultimately arguing that *both* complying with *and* refuting this harmful model of perfection risk one’s emotional and psychological well-being, leaving the subject cut off and estranged from the dominant social order *regardless of*

attempts at assimilation. This clearly emerges in the narrative, as Candace feels “damned”—namely severed—both when she plays by society’s rules and when she does not. Her brief juvenile embrace of slackness, characterized by her aimless wanderings through city boroughs and avenues upon her first arrival in New York, is revealed to be psychologically detrimental, retrospectively framed as a guilt-tripping betrayal of her immigrant parents’ sacrifices. Similarly, her immersion and internalization of corporate labor leave her emotionally drained, physically and affectively exhausted by a relentless and demanding system that renders her a functional component within an exploitative system that values her primarily for her output or the color of her skin.

Both when slacking and overworking, Candace remains tethered to an ideality of productivity and diligence that, though viable and achievable on paper, is soon revealed to be, if not completely unattainable, at least only feasible at the cost of one’s mental and physical well-being. This persistent failure to reconcile ideality and the lived experience of alterity ultimately shapes her condition of disaffect, reflecting a melancholic or mourning negotiation, to borrow from Anne Cheng’s (2000) and David Eng and Shinhee Han’s (2003) vocabulary,⁷⁰ with a normative model of subject formation that remains structurally inaccessible to her. The gap between the ideality encapsulated within the model minority myth and Candace’s personal and private experiences of unbelonging and otherness, thus, reconfigures the novel’s portrayal of mental disarray, further complicating, through a specifically racialized lens, the typical representation of catastrofemales’ madness. For this reason, within this framework, Candace’s overzealous overinvestment in work is posited not as the

⁷⁰ Recent Asian American scholarship has increasingly addressed the psychological repercussions of racialized identity formation. In this regard, Anne Cheng’s formulation of a politics of melancholia (2000) and David L. Eng and Shinhee Han’s articulation of a politics of mourning (2003) provide productive frameworks for reading Candace’s psychological fragmentation and her disaffective relation to normative subject formation.

ideal means of fulfilling the self-bettering parable of success reinforced by neoliberal ideals, but rather as a form of self-destructive coping, comparable—though distinct—to the compulsive behaviors exhibited by other catastrofemales as means of shutting down and tuning out emotion.⁷¹ The more she submits to the routines of corporate labor, the more thoroughly capitalism colonizes her affective life, tunneling her into a deeper apathy, “a trance,” akin to “burrowing underground,” where, as Candace suggests, the deeper she burrows, “the more the nothing feeling subsumed me, snuffing out any worries and anxieties” (Ma 2018, 70). Repetition, then, emerges as both detrimental and inescapable: while it is inscribed within her body through affective depletion and psychic stasis, it simultaneously constitutes the very condition through which Candace secures legibility and negotiates belonging within a racialized capitalist order that affords her no available alternative.

Bearing all this in mind, these interlocking dynamics reveal how *Severance* constructs repetition not merely as a formal or thematic device, but as a structuring principle that operates simultaneously across narrative, economic, and affective registers to articulate and reproduce the underlying mechanisms of capitalist life. Significantly, however, the novel demonstrates that this recursive logic is neither homogeneous nor evenly distributed but is instead mediated by the racialized and transnational structures that organize access to labor, mobility, and the possibility of withdrawal. Within this framework, Candace’s position is defined by her simultaneous implication in and exclusion from the systems she inhabits, a contradiction that effectively forecloses any meaningful outside while nonetheless demanding her participation. Mental disarray, then, rather than

⁷¹ On comparable self-destructive coping mechanisms in other catastrofemales narratives, see, for example, the protagonist of *MYORAR* and her compulsive self-medication, Millie’s binge-eating in *TNM*, or Edie’s unsafe and often violent sexual encounters in *Luster*. Across these novels, such behaviors can be read as parallel, though not strictly equivalent, strategies for shutting down or displacing emotional excess under the pressures of neoliberal subject formation, which demand, particularly of women, continuous self-regulation and propriety.

being simply equated to corporate alienation, emerges as the necessary outward, affective response to the internalization of multiple, intersecting forces that structure life under late capitalism. Materially entangled within the networks of global racial capitalism, transnational labor, and racialized norms of subject formation, Candace's body—both mind and flesh alike—functions as the primary site through which these forces are registered, internalized, and ultimately made legible. Repetition, in this sense, does not function as an abstract formal principle but as the lived condition of structural embeddedness, insofar as Candace's subjectivity is continuously constituted through her entanglement in overlapping systems of capitalist production, racial signification, and affective exhaustion. As a result, the representation of madness at the core of this catastrofemal narrative, when read through a posthuman feminist lens, must be understood as the embodied manifestation of inhabiting—namely, of being embedded within—the intersecting systems of oppression shaping Candace's contemporary life. While this condition has thus far been examined primarily in its structural dimension, the remainder of this section turns to its corporeal expression.

Indeed, beneath the apparent stillness of burnout, the novel intimates a more turbulent interiority, as though the quiet exterior of exhaustion concealed a body unsettled by invisible and incessant activity. Candace's emotional withdrawal, in fact, rather than boiling down to mere apathy, still entails a form of moodiness and restlessness that renders her "angry one moment, despairing the next" (163), surfacing not only in her disordered mind but also within—and through—the material processes of her body. It is precisely here that the embodied dimension of her madness comes into play: by rendering legible Candace's psychological distress through the body's smallest units, the novel suggests, in line with the broader catastrofemal canon, that madness is an embodied condition that unfolds within the very substance of the character's

body, revealing how the pressures of late-capitalist existence *penetrate* corporeality and operate at the level of cellular activity itself. Accordingly, within the narrative, mental disarray also manifests as somatic sensations: nerves pulsing, cells dividing—microscopic yet visceral reactions that appear to operate beyond the subject’s control and foreground the body’s molecular composition. By mapping these intersecting systems of oppression onto this molecular scale, *Severance*—in line with posthuman feminist tenets—disrupts any clear division between subject and environment, framing bodily interiority as an already relational and materially entangled field in which external socio-economic forces are continuously registered, reworked, and biologically reproduced. What emerges here is a crucial shift in the novel’s logic of repetition: whereas, in the preceding analysis, repetition structured Candace’s experience at the level of temporal routines, labor cycles, affective stasis, and narrative and linguistic circularity, it now reappears within the body itself, as a cellular and neurological process. Repetition, in other words, is no longer simply something that governs what Candace does, but something that animates what her body does *from within*, as the rhythms of late-capitalist life are internalized and biologically reproduced at the levels of the nervous and cellular systems.

This embodied dimension becomes particularly evident in one of the central passages of the novel, where Candace recounts sleepless nights in her Bushwick apartment, during which her inner turmoil, concealed behind her exhaustion, gives way to a heightened awareness of the body’s internal rhythms:

Summer nights in my Bushwick studio, when it was so hot with no air conditioning, [...] and I just lay there, trying to pass the hours before I had to get up and go to work, which was impossible when the night was so loud. My neighbor’s electric air conditioner, the bass pumping from other people’s cars. They were all converging together to say one thing: You are alone. You are alone. You are alone. You are truly and really alone.

Such a sound is mesmerizing. *It comes into your body. Your breath syncs up with its rhythm. You can feel cells struggling, breaking down, or otherwise proliferating with overcompensating energy, engaging in mitosis and dividing and dividing. [...]* The feeling of

these cells overreacting is one of pins and needles, like what happens when your foot falls asleep, except all over my entire body.

It started in the back of my head, then spread from there. The pins and needles pulsated, squeezed me like a fist, performed the Heimlich, issued lashings of pain, masticated me, palpitated me, pummeling me with crashing waves of nausea. My body was falling asleep. I needed to wake it up, I needed to wake my body up (134-135, my emphasis).

This passage effectively brings together several of the central concerns developed thus far in this section. The excerpt, as a matter of fact, foregrounds estrangement and unbelonging—here encapsulated by the refrain “You are alone”—as one of the primary sources of Candace’s existential and affective distress, while simultaneously revealing the somatic dimension through which this psychological condition is experienced. The repetition of this mantra-like statement underscores the depth of the character’s isolation at this point in the narrative, articulating a condition of existential severance that is registered most acutely *within* and *through* the body. The passage, in fact, vividly illustrates how the novel renders psychological disarray not simply as an abstract mental state but as an embodied phenomenon unfolding within the body’s internal processes. Beneath the apparent immobility of her body—“I just lay there, trying to pass the hours before I had to get up and go to work”—a frenetic activity takes place beneath the surface: cells “struggling, breaking down, proliferating with overcompensating energy, engaging in mitosis and dividing,” as though the warning “you are alone” reverberated through the very substance of her organism. Resonant with posthuman feminist conceptualization of embodiment, the passage refuses any strict separation between mind, body, and environment, instead presenting Candace’s subjectivity as a dynamic and distributed field produced *through* their continuous interaction. The sounds of the city, the affective experience of isolation, and the body’s own cellular and neurological processes operate not as distinct domains, but as *mutually constitutive* forces converging within the protagonist’s lived experience. Her distress, then,

materializes across multiple scales of embodiment, from large socio-economic conditions to the granular processes of cellular division, nervous sensation, and affective intensity. The connection between the character's emotional strain and her *repetitive* cellular breakdown—cells “breaking down” and “dividing and dividing”—thus frames Candace's psychological fragmentation not merely as a mental state of disarray but as a material inscription of distress, where biological processes appear to echo the gradual collapse of her emotional balance and reproduce the same recursive logic that structures Candace's existence. As a result, Candace's body emerges as the primary site in which madness becomes perceptible and legible.

Stillness, then, is revealed to be only a deceptive surface concealing both mental and corporeal disintegration: while her body is described as “falling asleep,” Candace's mind remains hyper-aware of the turmoil coursing through it, producing a paradoxical state in which a *surface-level* numbness coexists with heightened *internal* bodily consciousness. Candace's final desperate declaration—“I need to wake my body up”—further intensifies this dynamic: the desire to wake the body can, in fact, be read metaphorically as a yearning to break free from the immobility and isolation imposed by the capitalist routines of her daily life. In this sense, sleep, immobility, and bodily shutdown—unlike the restorative sleep sought by the unlikeable protagonist of *MYORAR*—are perceived by Candace as threatening or oppressive states, signaling a deeper loss of agency rather than a redeeming escape from the status quo. The fact that this immobility is endured rather than voluntarily chosen is reinforced by the language used to describe the painful sensations Candace experiences: the imagery of being “squeezed,” “masticated,” “palpitated,” and “pummel[ed] with crashing waves of nausea” conveys, through visceral and sensorially-oriented unsettling metaphors, the sense of being physically assaulted beyond one's control. Through these disturbing images, the body emerges as a porous and

unstable site open to corporeal distortion, thereby anticipating the more explicit grotesque turn of the post-collapse timeline (with its abject, deteriorating bodies infected by Shen Fever), while still aligning Candace's experience with the broader aesthetics of the catastrofemal canon.

Within the pre-collapse timeline, in fact, this turn toward bodily abjection often materializes through the semantic register of sickness, as the invocation of physical illness becomes the primary framework through which Candace attempts to interpret her psychological condition and render it intelligible to others. In other words, sickness provides the conceptual vocabulary through which the character both apprehends her inner turmoil and seeks to make that condition legible within the social world around her. This persistent association between perceived bodily illness and mental disarray—while not uncommon in catastrofemal narratives—acquires particular resonance within *Severance*, as it simultaneously evokes and subverts traditional literary tropes that associate Asian American bodies with sickness.

Unquestionably, illness and the prospect of contamination occupy a crucial role within the novel. Shen Fever, a fungal infection presumably originating in Shenzhen, not only mirrors Candace's existence bound to repetition under the strain of late capitalism but also evokes the historical "Yellow Peril" narrative,⁷² which has long cast Asian bodies as sites of danger and contagion. As Anne Cheng (2000) has observed, Asian American literature has often responded to such tropes through depictions that take the form of racialized hypochondria, wherein fears of contamination reflect both the external projection of racist anxieties and their internalization by racialized subjects.

⁷² On the historical trajectory of the "Yellow Peril" discourse within Western racial imaginaries, see, for example, the construction of Asian and Asian American subjects as inscrutable, secretive, and potentially dangerous—figures whose perceived opacity has functioned as a site for racialized anxieties and projection within U.S. cultural narratives. For foundational discussions regarding this trope and its persistence in shaping representations of Asian alterity, see Lowe (1996); Lee (1999); Lye (2005); Ling (2023).

Within this framework, sickness becomes tied to origin and questions of belonging, as mysterious illnesses are typically imagined as emerging directly from the character's place of origin—namely, from home. This literary strategy, then, functions primarily as a means of questioning the possibility of assimilation for Asian Americans, revealing how cultural integration risks compelling racialized bodies to “take on cultural meanings and bear constant vigil over inflections of normality and infirmity” (Cheng 2000, 95).

Bearing this in mind, it becomes clear why the recurring imagery of sickness is far from incidental within *Severance*. Yet, both the corporate narrative and the post-apocalyptic timeline revisit these very tropes in order to destabilize them, proposing alternative ways of conceptualizing the relationship between Asian American bodies and illness within contemporary Asian American literary fiction. If the post-apocalyptic timeline reveals, as we will later see, how the novel revisits and subverts the conventional association between Asian American bodies and contagion—suggesting immunity is grounded in *severance from*, rather than integration into, the logics of assimilation and cultural belonging—the corporate timeline, by contrast, offers an equally illuminating yet contrasting exploration of this relationship.

Challenging the stereotypical literary trajectory that would have Candace embrace the ideal of “the healthy body,” culturally defined through the renunciation of her ethnic or maternal origins (Cheng 2000, 66), within *Severance*, sickness, instead of wellness or self-improvement, provides the interpretative lens through which Candace tries to render her inner turmoil intelligible to herself and others. Indeed, although her awareness of her “freaking, grotesque self” (Ma 2018, 225) may emerge in private moments of self-observation, particularly in front of mirrors—thus reproducing a familiar pattern within catastrofemale narratives—this recognition remains completely imperceptible to those around her. As a result, sickness and bodily deterioration operate as the

primary codes through which Candace gives form to an otherwise elusive internal disturbance, paradoxically coming to identify, both affectively and linguistically, with her condition of illness rather than with the alluring normative ideals of wellness or recovery pursued by her white counterparts in the novels analyzed in the previous chapter. In this context, images that grotesquely zoom in on “eyes clustered with puffiness and dark bags” (20), the dry, tight, washed-out skin of her face (56; 67; 106), “the shallow, panicky [...] dry and sobless” breathing coming out her mouth (52), or “the residual bile in [her] mouth” (37) emerge as key visual markers within the novel’s representational paradigm of illness, crystallizing Candace’s body as exhausted, nauseated, and persistently unwell. Amongst the characters populating the pre-collapse timeline, Candace then appears as the *only* individual willing to acknowledge and inhabit her own condition of sickness, recognizing its presence and tracing its manifestations in her bodily appearance, while those around her—despite being implicated in the same system that produces her distress—continue their routines largely undisturbed. For this reason, within this portion of the narrative, Candace’s sick body—both mind and flesh—functions as a material surface upon which the intertwined histories of racial, familial, and gendered marginalization articulated throughout the novel are ultimately rendered explicit.

These dynamics are already evident in one of the opening scenes of the corporate timeline, where Candace, reflecting on her position and performance at Spectra, observes:

I looked like I was sick, my eyes clustered with puffiness and dark bags. At work, they knew me to be capable but fragile. Quiet, clouded with daydreams. Usually diligent, though sometimes inconsistent, moody. But also something else, something implacable: I was unsavvy in some fundamental, uncomfortable way. The sound of my loud, nervous laugh, like gargling gravel, was a social liability. [...] They kept me on because my output was prolific and they could task me with more and more

production assignments. When I focused, a trait I exhibited at the beginning of my time there, I could be detail-oriented to the point of obsession (19-20).

This passage, through the subtle tension it stages between Candace's self-perception and the evaluative gaze of her colleagues at the publishing house, accurately captures how her self-understanding is articulated through a lexicon of corporeal depletion and perceptible fragility, with sickness emerging as the dominant interpretative framework through which her internal state and external legibility are negotiated. From the opening assertion, "I looked like I was sick," the emphasis falls on the *visibility* of illness, on its inscription on the surface of the body, thereby recoding what would otherwise appear as an unassuming exterior into a legible sign of distress, one that precedes, and perhaps even substitutes for, any coherent articulation of interiority. The more visible physical components she enumerates—the puffiness of the eyes, the dark bags, the fragile constitution, even the nervous laughter—function as cues that make her distress intelligible only insofar as it is translated into somatic distortion. At the same time, her self-description—here summarized as being "clouded [...] inconsistent, moody"—extends this logic inward, collapsing affective and psychological disturbance into the register of bodily exhaustion, and confining the apprehension of interiority to the language of physical deterioration. In this sense, the passage enacts a recursive collapse between mind and body, whereby mental distress is not simply represented as embodied but instead becomes thinkable only *through embodiment itself*, a dynamic that is particularly characteristic of catastrofemal narratives, in which madness is consistently inscribed in the corporeal components of the protagonist.

Yet, whereas Candace's self-narration gravitates, in its account of both her physical appearance and her mental condition, toward the semantic field of corporeal illness and exhaustion, the passage simultaneously exposes the external illegibility of this internal disintegration within corporate settings,

insofar as distress is consistently subsumed under productivity. Her colleagues' assessments—while drawing on well-established stereotypes of Asian Americans as the model minority—are shaped by a logic of managerial readability that selectively isolates traits only as long as they remain compatible with labor extraction, thereby rendering psychological or bodily ailments secondary to economic function. This disjunction between internal experience and external recognition is further reinforced through the passage's rhythmic reliance on juxtaposition, where evaluative binaries ("capable but fragile," "quiet, clouded," "diligent, though inconsistent, moody") perfectly stage a tension between Candace's external legibility as an efficient, high-performing worker and her own perception of herself as estranged, altered, and unstable. Even an evident sign of excess, such as her grotesquely "loud, nervous laugh, like gargling gravel," is neutralized, in the eyes of her colleagues, by her perceived productivity and obsessive attention to detail, reaffirming how affective irregularities are tolerated, and even absorbed, so long as they do not disrupt the imperatives of output and efficiency. As a result, this passage highlights how what remains structurally illegible within the corporate setting is precisely the affective and somatic breakdown that Candace herself registers as foundational, prompting her to turn to illness as a provisional vocabulary through which internal unease can ultimately be made socially communicable.

This desire for recognition, and its constitutive failure, becomes even more pronounced in a later episode in which, intoxicated and disoriented at a party, Candace repeatedly solicits strangers to confirm the legitimacy of her condition:

One night, I ended up at Lane's SoHo loft [...] I had directed strangers to this forehead all night. Feel this, I slurred, leaning against the bar. *Am I sick? I wanted them to be complicit in agreeing that I was indeed sick, that I should've stayed home that day. Because I felt unhealthy, not myself, nauseated.* But they all laughed. You're fine, one guy assured me. A million palms had touched my forehead, now the dirtiest, most bacterial part of me (156, my emphasis).

In this scene, the fact that Candace's body becomes a site of public verification—an actual surface upon which she attempts to externalize her internal unease through physical confirmation—demonstrates, once again, her need to anchor an otherwise ungraspable affective condition in the shared authority of bodily sensations. Her insistent repetition of the question “Am I sick?” signals the difficulty, if not impossibility, of translating a psychological malaise—here condensed into the sensations of feeling “unhealthy, not myself, nauseated”—into recognizable social categories without recourse to corporeal evidence. Her depiction of her forehead as “the dirtiest, most bacterial part of me” operates within this same logic of somatic externalization, reconfiguring internal disturbance as bacterial contamination, as though her unease could be traced through the microscopic colonization of her body at the molecular level. As such, illness emerges for Candace as a compensatory language, one that seeks to render legible, as already contended, a form of internal disturbance that otherwise resists recognition. Yet, her invocation of sickness within the pre-collapse timeline does not function solely as a metaphorical translation of an “abstract” mental distress into more tangible physical terms; rather, it discloses the extent to which such distress is already *experienced* as corporeal—as a form of bodily disintegration that collapses the distinction between psychic and somatic registers. Read alongside the previous passage, this moment underscores how the novel persistently mobilizes the language of physical illness to articulate Candace's madness as an embodied phenomenon, emerging, in line with posthuman feminist tenets, through the continuous interaction of mental, affective, neurological, and bodily processes. In doing so, the novel reveals how, within its affective economy, psychological distress is conceived as inseparable from processes of bodily disintegration and molecular contamination.

Taken together, the analyses developed in this section have traced how *Severance* portrays Candace's condition of unbelonging not as a purely interior

psychological disturbance, but as a materially grounded and structurally determined form of mental disarray, embedded within the intersecting logics of racial capitalism, transnational labor, and normative regimes of subject formation. Through a sustained emphasis on repetition—at the levels of narrative structure, temporal organization, linguistic patterning, and embodied routine—the novel reveals late-capitalist life as a recursive system that both organizes and erodes subjectivity, producing a form of stasis that is at once affective, corporeal, and infrastructural. Importantly, this condition does not manifest uniformly: Candace’s racialized positioning within global circuits of production complicates any generalized account of capitalist alienation, foregrounding instead the uneven distribution of productivity and the divergent possibilities of opting out. In this light, madness, as it emerges across the pre-collapse timeline, is not reducible to individual pathology, but rather registers the embodied effects of being differentially located within systems that demand efficiency while simultaneously foreclosing the very conditions necessary for legible forms of belonging.

At the same time, this embedded condition of mental disarray is, as argued, inseparable from its articulation through the body, as Candace’s psychological fragmentation repeatedly surfaces in somatic form, collapsing the distinction between psychic disturbance and corporeal vulnerability. Whether registered through the repetitive rhythms of daily labor or the microscopic imagery of cellular activity, repetition operates as the shared logic through which subjectivity is both produced and destabilized, inscribing structural violence directly onto the flesh. Ultimately, this embodied state of unbelonging cannot be contained within the subject’s interiority, as it finds expression through a transformative and mutual process of “becoming with” surrounding environments, continuously *absorbing* and *spilling over* into the material world Candace inhabits.

The analysis must, therefore, shift its focus outward, moving from these corporeal and mental symptoms to the urban configurations that both mirror and distort them. If the previous discussion centered on the body as a site of instability, the following pages trace how this condition is projected onto the novel's spatial imaginaries. Here, the logic of estrangement is no longer confined to the psychosomatic rhythms of Candace's body but is amplified by the dissonant landscapes of contemporary cosmopolitan cities. As such, *Severance* provides a profound meditation on this entanglement, illustrating how affective displacement and urban environments are inextricably linked. By following Candace's trajectory through New York, Shenzhen and Hong Kong, the novel demonstrates that alienation is not a localized incident but a product of expansive, globalized logics that permeate the built environment. Far from serving as a mere backdrop for the narrative, these cityscapes function as active, co-constitutive mirrors of the mechanisms of late capitalism, rendering the abstract flows of capital into a perceptible, material reality that constantly negotiates and imposes itself upon Candace's lived experience.

3.3 Mapping Unbelonging through Transnational Cityscapes

New York—*Severance* seems to suggest—can harbor profound feelings of unbelonging. Whether drifting through its avenues, absorbed into crowds of indifferent people, or cooped up in one's own apartment, far removed from the relentless chaos unfolding in its streets, individuals are easily liable to disappear, all alone, into the cracks of the vast urban landscape—isolated by their estrangement, and unable to bridge the invisible gap that separates them from others. That this mode of unbelonging has become so insistently associated with New York City—and with Manhattan in particular—is hardly accidental. The

city's geographical configuration itself seems to invite such metaphorical projections: an island densely populated, at once connected to and severed by water from the surrounding mainland, it materializes the existential paradox—captured in Stephen Shore's photograph at the opening this chapter—of proximity without connection, of relentless adjacency without intimacy.

It is perhaps for this reason that New York has become one of the most common backdrops for narratives featuring catastrofemales, insofar as its presence—whether more or less explicit—actively intensifies, through its recurring spatial configurations, the depiction of urban estrangement and alienation that comes to structure such contemporary tales of madness, mirroring—much like Shore's lens—the atomization of the subjects who inhabit its streets. Among the novels analyzed in this dissertation, *Severance* undoubtedly offers the most compelling interrogation of the protagonist's co-constitutive relationship with the urban environment, particularly in its sustained exploration of how spatial dislocation and affective unbelonging are mutually produced. By tracing Candace's movements across both New York City and a series of transnational urban locations, the novel reveals how contemporary experiences of alienation are not simply embedded within specific places but are structured by broader spatial logics that exceed national boundaries. As this section will argue, these urban environments—far from functioning as passive settings—emerge as dynamic sites through which the operations of late capitalism become materially and perceptually legible, shaping, and *being reshaped by*, Candace's embodied experience. Significantly, however, this spatial estrangement does not unfold as a neutral or universal condition; it is instead differently mediated by Candace's specific positionality, through which racialized identity shapes how she inhabits and interprets the urban landscapes she encounters. It is precisely at this juncture—where spatial estrangement reveals its racialized and political

dimensions—that the intervention of Asian American literary traditions becomes essential.

It is not surprising that, out of the four stories discussed here, *Severance*—a novel written by a Chinese American writer about a Chinese American woman—most clearly opens up a reflection on the significance of urban space within the catastrofemal canon, as the Asian American literary tradition has long been invested in interrogating the often invisible dynamics of racialization embedded in American cityscapes (Zhou 2014). Cities—the emblematic sites of encounter with what is constructed as different or other (Tajbakhsh 2001)—are fundamentally contested spaces: while they constitute privileged locations for the emergence and consolidation of ethnic communities, they are also, paradoxically, the “key sites,” as Saskia Sassen (2003) has argued, “for the spatialization of power projects” invested in the segregation of minority groups (16), processes that, within the American urban context, have historically reproduced and sustained racial hierarchies (Cross & Keith 1993). Chinese residents, for instance, were subjected to segregating laws restricting their movements and confining their lives and businesses to designated areas of the cityscape, effectively severing them from the broader social, economic, and cultural fabric of the city. As a result, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cultural representations unequivocally depicted Chinatowns across the United States as self-contained yet densely populated ethnic ghettos, exotic and/or abject foreign terrains that did not belong and threatened to contaminate the surrounding American city and, by extension, the nation-state itself.

Asian American literature, and Chinese American writing in particular, has, from its inception, sought to resist these narratives—and the attendant political rhetorics underpinning such projects of racial exclusion—by reimagining and re-representing American urban spaces as contested sites in which racialized subjects, though often marginalized or rendered invisible, were

nonetheless able to inhabit the segregated space *otherwise*. Out of many of these literary representations, in fact, emerged the idea that the American city, and Chinatown in particular, functioned, as Xiaojing Zhou (2014) has observed, as “a battleground where the boundaries of race and nation-state [were] drawn and policed, as well as transgressed and redefined” (11). While these literary works clearly addressed the impact of spatially enforced isolation on Asian American subject formation, they also testified to the possibility of contesting and reworking these processes of marginalization through everyday practices of inhabitation across both ethnic enclaves and ostensibly “Americanized” urban spaces. As such, this tradition provides the conceptual groundwork for understanding *Severance*’s reconfiguration of spatial politics, as the novel both inherits and reorients this framework by shifting attention from nationally bounded practices of racial exclusion to the diffuse, transnational operations of late capitalism.

Rather than foregrounding the earlier friction between the nation-state and the segregated racialized Other, *Severance*, in fact, maps the disorientating interaction between the Chinese American woman at the center of the narrative and the abstract operations of global capitalism as they materialize across the multiple spatial configurations she traverses and inhabits. Indeed if, as previously argued, the novel traces how power circulates, entangles and operates across multiple scales—personal, local, regional, and even global—the urban locations it depicts, both within and beyond the United States, render visible how these scales become embedded within the built urban environment, transforming spatial arrangements into co-constitutive expressions of late capitalism’s shifting demands. As a result, through its translocal mapping⁷³ of New York City, Hong Kong, and Shenzhen as comparable sites of capital flow, labor exploitation,

⁷³ For further discussion on the concept of translocal mapping, see Hsu (2017), Mattheis (2018; 2021), and Lanigan (2023).

consumerist culture, and aspirational mobility, *Severance* tightly draws together geographically distant urban locations to expose the hidden global circuits of capital and the resulting homogenization of space.

The narrated cities within the novel, however, cannot be simply reduced to passive containers or interchangeable backdrops upon which the story unfolds; rather, they constitute, as literary urban criticism suggests (Ameel 2023a), an active and dynamic presence within the narrative economy, a lived environment with which Candace interacts physically, cognitively, and affectively in an ongoing process of mutual and transformative becoming. Such a relational understanding of space resonates strongly with the posthuman feminist framework underpinning this dissertation, which conceptualizes subjectivity as a relational assemblage, contingently constituted through continuous material and affective intra-actions with human and non-human surroundings (Braidotti 1994; 2011; 2022). Candace and the urban spaces she traverses can be, thus, understood as entangled within a dynamic process of co-constitution: while the built environment shapes, as argued in the previous section of this chapter, her material and affective condition, she, in turn, actively re-signifies the cities she inhabits through her own embodied engagement with them. As she moves across multiple spatial locations, Candace surrenders herself to the incoherent flow of material impulses emanating from her surroundings and, once absorbed through her body, *actively* interprets, reconfigures, and reorganizes them into a subjective spatial mapping that is grounded in her cognitive, affective, and sensory experience.⁷⁴

Accordingly, the subjective cartography that emerges from the pre-collapse section of the novel—which registers a deeply personal mode of

⁷⁴ On the relational and co-constitutive dynamics between subject and environment, see Grosz (1995); Zhou (2014); Ameel (2023b). For this understanding of cognitive mapping, also see Lanigan (2023).

experiencing contemporary life—gives rise to a series of spatial configurations onto which Candace’s own sense of unbelonging is projected. As this section will demonstrate, both American and transnational locations are represented as saturated by the homogenizing aesthetics of late capitalism, a spatial logic that symbolically registers and intensifies Candace’s fraught negotiation of unbelonging between the pressures of cultural assimilation and the demands of global capitalism. In cities such as Hong Kong and Shenzhen, this condition materializes in landscapes increasingly stripped of their Chinese specificity, as Westernized luxury boutiques, sprawling malls, and grandiose hotels progressively overwrite the preexisting urban landscape. In New York, this same logic manifests in a built environment that functions as an overstimulating epicenter of consumerism, where billboards and advertisements proliferate across a concrete landscape of office buildings and department stores, working to colonize and suppress any trace of the natural world. Taken together, the novel’s urban locations, as experienced through Candace’s embodied and sensory perception, become the basis for the disorienting and alienating cognitive map sketched within the pre-collapse timeline of *Severance*, in which the perceived flattening and phony quality of the inhabited cityscapes serves to materialize the otherwise abstract logics of global capitalism.

Out of the various locations Candace traverses that globally operate as legible signifiers of quintessential New York iconography—overcrowded Manhattan avenues and subway stations, 7-Elevens and corner family-owned bodegas, yellow taxi cabs zig-zagging through traffic jams, Wall Street office buildings, and even the now-closed Henri Bendel department store on Fifth Avenue—Times Square stands out as the most compelling site within the novel’s spatial economy.⁷⁵ As such, it provides a particularly productive lens through

⁷⁵ Times Square functions as a pivotal site within the novel’s spatial economy, insofar as its shifting and iterative representations across the narrative allow the reader to trace how both the space itself and the broader perception and resignification of New York City are transformed

which to examine how the novel portrays New York, specifically within the corporate timeline, not as a vibrant metropole, but as an alienating environment: “tedious and boring,” with “charms as illusory as its façade of authenticity” (Ma 2018, 13). By framing New York City through Candace’s lens of disillusionment, the narrative re-signifies the urban landscape as a symbolic site of late-capitalist consumption. This dynamic is evident in one of its earlier descriptions within the narrative, where Candace and her boyfriend Jonathan are inadvertently caught in traffic:

He [Jonathan] made a wrong turn and, suddenly, we were caught in Times Square. There was a traffic jam, and it was like being ensnared in the center of a spiderweb. Horns trumpeted and cabbies yelled, angry, belligerent. Maybe there had been an accident. I could smell exhaust and hot dogs and candied nuts. I could feel the aggressive blasts of air-conditioning from all the stores and theaters. [...] The sun was setting, and as the sky dimmed, the billboards and advertisements and flagship stores around us gradually became brighter, unnoticeable at first and then completely blindsiding us in their brilliance as the traffic began to move and we crawled, inch by inch, out of Times Square. An entire office building was vacant, leased out as a supporting platform for billboards. It was a dream space, a collision of brand worlds, floating in a vacuum (138-139).

As clearly emerges from this passage, the representation of Times Square as a key site of capitalist consumerism is grounded in Candace’s intra-active relation to her surroundings, in which embodied experience and sensorial attunement underpin her cognitive and affective remapping of space. This co-constitutive relation between environment and character becomes immediately apparent in her immersion in the sensory field of the scene: the cacophony of horns and shouted insults of cab drivers (sound), the mingling smells of “exhaust and hot dogs and candied nuts” (smell), the intrusion of “aggressive blasts of air

over time. Initially figured as a site of promise and possibility, it appears to materialize immigrant fantasies of arrival and upward mobility upon Candace’s first encounter with the city. In the corporate timeline, however, it becomes reconfigured as a space of consumption and estrangement, as explored in this section. Finally, in Candace’s later projected futures following the Shen Fever outbreak, it is recast as a landscape of decay and simultaneous ecological renewal, where nature gradually reclaims urban infrastructure.

conditioning” (touch), and the blinding light of the billboards all around (sight) collectively produce a condition of sensorial overload that grounds her reconstruction of Times Square as a site of disorientation and estrangement, materializing in her surroundings her own condition of alienation. In particular, this layered exploration of unbelonging—as both a spatial *and* an affective condition—is most clearly crystallized in her description of feeling like “being ensnared in the center of a spiderweb” in Times Square. This metaphor of entrapment, in fact, not only conveys the character’s spatial immobilization within traffic, but also evokes a structure designed to capture and hold its prey (i.e., the spiderweb), thereby framing Times Square as a space that is both inescapable and fundamentally inhospitable.

The culminating portrayal of Times Square as “a dream space, a collision of brand worlds, floating in a vacuum” further intensifies this logic of perceptual estrangement, as the heart of the city is suddenly recast, through Candace’s perspective, into an unrecognizable environment, namely a decontextualized and placeless urban landscape overtaken by a mixture of brands and advertisements. The overwhelming saturation of the cityscape by billboards and signs—also evidenced by the leasing and conversion of a vacant office building into a platform for advertising—underscores the alienating transformation that contemporary urban landscapes undergo under consumerist and capitalist regimes, which privilege the repurposing of space in favor of a homogenized aesthetic centered on consumption rather than functionality or habitability. Times Square—and, by extension, New York City—thus appears, with its oversaturated visual field of blinding billboards, as subsumed under this homogenizing aesthetic logic, erasing, in Candace’s perception, any remaining recognizable features of the landscape in favor of continuous visual imperatives to purchase and consume. As such, Times Square emerges as the epicenter of consumption, a site that “lulled you into thinking that there were so many

options, *but most of the options had to do with buying things*,” as Candace observes in a later scene: “dinner entrées, cocktails, the cover charge to a nightclub. Then there was shopping, big chain stores open late, up and down the streets, throbbing with bass-heavy music and lightning” (162, my emphasis). In this sense, consumerist logic is not merely embedded in the city but inscribed onto its very fabric, as the urban environment Candace encounters is structured, both *spatially* and *experientially*, through constraining circuits of consumption that shape how urban space is navigated and inhabited.

The spatial pervasiveness of the consumerist order is further underscored by the logic of spatial and perceptual colonization underpinning Candace’s mapping of Times Square, as the “blindsiding” lights of billboards symbolically overtake the natural elements of the landscape in front of her. Indeed, the substitution of artificial light for natural light across the urban environment highlights the extents to which capitalism colonizes not only urban space but also natural elements—and, consequently, natural rhythms—even at the level of visual perception. If, in a later passage of the post-apocalyptic timeline, Candace notices that “now that the city no longer lit up as brilliantly with electricity, I could see the stars” (265), the inability to perceive natural light in this earlier scene—due to the blinding effect of billboards—reveals how, within her present cognitive map, the natural world appears completely subordinated to the colonizing logic of capitalism. In this sense, this restructuring of urban space operates as a material correlate of Candace’s own subjection, translating and inscribing her condition of entrapment within capitalist rhythms into the very fabric of the environment she inhabits. In line with posthuman feminist conceptualizations of embodiment and embeddedness, the novel thus refuses to treat subjects and environment as discrete entities, presenting them instead as mutually constitutive formations. As a result, Times Square emerges not simply as an overstimulating urban site, but as a paradigmatic instance of the novel’s

broader critique of the capitalist system, a space where subject and environment are continuously transformed through ongoing processes of intra-action.

This logic of spatial and perceptual colonization structuring Candace's portrayal of Times Square, however, does not remain confined to the physical site itself, but instead extends outward to the broader cityscape of New York. Through this expansion, adjacent locations—and even natural spaces within the urban environment—are gradually represented as sensorially and materially absorbed into the same regimes that govern Times Square, effectively enhancing the cognitive map underpinning the novel's spatial imagination, which materializes in the represented urban spaces the pervasive logics of capitalism. In another passage, Candace in fact observes these dynamics, while looking out from her office at Spectra:

My office was small, the size of a supply closet, with a tiny window. I could close the door and shut out all views of Times Square, though its sounds still penetrated. [...] Sometimes I could still hear their phantom hysteria in the afternoons. The one window was a small circular thing, as if I were aboard a submarine. If I squinted and craned my neck a certain way, I could see Bryant Park. Before the fashion shows moved to Lincoln Center, I would gaze out at the clutter of white tents popping up in the park like umbrellas. The spring collections showed up in September. The fall collections in February. In this way, five years passed (25-26).

Candace's rendering of the view from her office window reveals two interrelated manifestations of spatial colonization. On the one hand, Times Square, despite being visually occluded, is portrayed as continuing to assert its overwhelming presence within the character's perceptual field, as its auditory intensity spills into even Spectra's "entombed" headquarters (196). This sensory intrusion seems to suggest that the site's consumerist logic—previously registered in its blinding billboards and signs—can exceed its physical boundaries, penetrating adjacent environments and potentially New York City as a whole, through its "phantom hysteria." Read alongside the previous passage, then, Times Square starts to emerge as a central spatial and sensorial node, capable of extending its material

and perceptual force outward and slowly incorporating its surroundings. In this sense, its resignification as a colonizing force within the urban landscape advances the spatial logic underpinning Candace's subjective cartography of New York, wherein the site's sensorial diffusion symbolically mirrors the pervasive reach of capitalist and consumerist regimes. On the other hand, a second, more material form of colonization emerges in the transformation of Bryant Park, where the seasonal installation of white tents signals, for Candace, the onset of yet another Fashion Week. Rather than functioning as a space of leisure, the park is reconfigured as a platform for the display and circulation of luxury commodities and is thereby integrated, within Candace's interpretative framework, into the same circuits of production and consumption that structure nearby Times Square. In this way, natural elements within the urban landscape, as mapped by Candace, appear not as merely displaced but as actively absorbed into the broader economy of spectacle and commodification sustaining capitalist spatiality.

Taken together, these two dynamics—the sensorial diffusion of Times Square and the material reconfiguration of Bryant Park—foreground this logic of spatial and perceptual colonization as integral to Candace's spatial experience, revealing how urban environments and subjective perception are mutually implicated in the reproduction of capitalist (spatial) orders. This dynamic extends into the closing sentences of the passage, where it comes to structure not only Candace's representation of space but also her perception of time. As in the previous passage, Candace's rendering of the urban landscape registers the gradual subsumption of the natural world into the artificial structures of the built environment, displacing even the ecological rhythms that would ordinarily ground her temporal experience. Here, the passage of time is, in fact, no longer anchored in seasonal cycles but reorganized through the periodic recurrence of fashion collections. By re-framing September—when the spring collection is

presented—as spring and February as fall, temporal experience itself appears, for Candace, entirely detached from its organic referents, recalibrated instead according to the recursive temporality of capitalist production. Candace’s closing remark—“In this way, five years passed”—condenses this temporal dislocation, suggesting a lived experience of time that unfolds—as already argued in the previous section of this chapter—through repetition rather than progression, aligned with the abstract, repetitive cycles of capitalism. As the novel elsewhere suggests, “[t]o live in a city is to live the life it was built for, to adapt to its schedule and rhythms” (289), and Candace’s experience of New York City exemplifies precisely this process of attunement. When read through a posthuman feminist framework, what becomes visible in *Severance*, then, is not simply a transformation of urban space and time, but a relational configuration in which environment, embodied perception, and psychic life are continuously co-constituted, allowing capitalist spatial and temporal logics to permeate both the subject’s affective and experiential horizons and, consequently, the material texture of the represented city. Crucially, this reconfiguration is not limited to New York but rather extends across the novel’s transnational map, where similar representational strategies underpin Candace’s readings of the international urban formations she encounters, in order to foreground the global reach of the same capitalist processes.

Indeed, if, in Candace’s mapping of New York, the city appears oversaturated with consumerist spectacle, where capitalist spatial logics produce both perceptual excess and aesthetic uniformity across the urban landscape, this same logic structures the novel’s transnational imaginary, as Chinese cities such as Shenzhen and Hong Kong, are portrayed as colonized by Westernized aesthetic codes that progressively erode their geographical and cultural legibility. In moving from New York to Chinese locations, the novel therefore rearticulates the same spatial logic of colonization across multiple, albeit diverse, contexts,

thereby exposing that what might initially appear as a localized experience of urban alienation and unbelonging is, in fact, constitutive of a broader transnational regime of capitalist (spatial) production.

This becomes particularly evident in Candace's portrayal of the Grand Shenzhen Moon Palace Hotel, the luxury establishment where she and her colleague Blythe stay on each work trip to Shenzhen. Here, both the hotel's name and its interior design reveal, as they are apprehended and interpreted through Candace's perspective, a space that appears largely detached from its local referential context, recast instead as a self-contained enclave of commodified global luxury calibrated to Western expectations. Rather than being grounded in its specific geographical location, the hotel emerges within Candace's resignification of the cityscape as an urban site shaped by the homogenizing aesthetics of global capitalism, which standardizes urban experience according to recognizable scripts of luxury and consumption. The representation of the Grand Shenzhen Moon Palace Hotel, thus, foregrounds a spatial configuration in which the built environment is so thoroughly shaped by these logics that it becomes, for Candace, almost paradoxically impossible to recognize as Chinese. The suggestion that "you wouldn't know from staying there that it is located anywhere remotely in Shenzhen, let alone in China" (83), then, does not merely register unfamiliarity; rather, it signals a deeper destabilization of spatial referentiality within Candace's perceptual and interpretative framework, as the geographical location ceases to function as a stable epistemic anchor altogether.

This process is intensified through Candace's sensory engagement with the hotel, as her perception of its grounds is mediated through a series of artificial stimuli that collectively produce an atmosphere of aesthetic—and consequently, experiential—dislocation. The observation that the place "smelled like fake, sweet peach candy" (84) immediately situates her olfactory perception within a logic of manufactured artificiality, where scent is instantly registered as

inauthentic, even though peaches are, in reality, historically native to China. The artificial reproduction of a culturally grounded product, then, destabilizes sensorially any straightforward distinction between authentic and inauthentic, reinforcing Candace's broader sense of detachment from locally grounded referents. This sensory falsification, moreover, extends to her tactile experience of the establishment, as the description of the carpeting as "so plush and springy that I felt as if I were on another planet, one with weaker gravitational pull" (ibid.) effectively recasts, through the use of this interplanetary simile, her embodied perception as a state of displacement from her material surroundings. The hotel, therefore, is not simply visually unfamiliar but, through Candace's physical immersion, is reconstituted as an environment that actively disrupts the body's capacity to orient itself within stable spatial coordinates.

This sense of estrangement is further reinforced, from Candace's perspective, by the hotel's internal composition, where a logic of "international" consumption seems to serve as the structuring principle of its spatial design. The presence of "an upscale European bistro, an Asian tapas lounge, and an Italian trattoria" (ibid.) fails, in fact, to reflect genuine cultural plurality, signaling instead the reduction of authentic cuisines into interchangeable aesthetic units skillfully curated for Western consumers. In particular, the concept of "Asian tapas" most effectively validates Candace's reading of the space as a site where cultural objects are severed from their specific spatial origins. This hybridized form—fusing geographically distinct culinary traditions into a seemingly "Asian" product—reveals a commodifying process central to the Western capitalist order, where cultural specificity is first exploited and then flattened into a bland, globalized final product ready for consumption. Even the gift shops selling "silk ties and jade paperweights" alongside "Hong Kong souvenirs, even though we weren't technically in Hong Kong" (ibid.) follow this same logic of consumerist dislocation, as Hong Kong itself becomes a floating signifier,

completely detached from its geographic referent and available for purchase regardless of the tourist's actual location.

The architectural environment of the hotel corroborates this logic through its deliberate incorporation of Westernized landscape aesthetics, most notably in the "English-style rose garden" and the presence of "tennis courts" and "a rolling golf course" within the establishment's "feudal iron gates" (83). In Candace's reconstruction of the hotel, these elements, in fact, coalesce into a spatial configuration that appears oriented toward a cosmopolitan elite, where practices of leisure and curated nature are reshaped according to recognizable Western bourgeois models. The visibility of "white businessmen in polo shirts and khakis" (84) playing golf in the distance further anchors this environment within a racialized and economic structure of global corporate mobility, suggesting not only the accommodation of Western visitors but the active reproduction of a spatial order calibrated to their expectations and comforts. Indeed, when Candace moves beyond the controlled perimeter of the hotel, the rupture between this aestheticized enclave and its surrounding environment becomes even more visible. Yet, paradoxically, it does not restore spatial legibility in any way. Her observation that "[i]t didn't feel like China. I didn't feel like I was anywhere" (ibid.) marks, in fact, the culmination of the perceptual destabilization described throughout the Shenzhen chapter of the novel: not only is China rendered unrecognizable here, but spatial location itself loses ontological grounding altogether. Significantly, Candace's perception does not simply register this condition but actively consolidates it into a subjective spatial map, through which the homogenizing effects of global capitalism render both the built environment and national belonging increasingly illegible as stable epistemic categories.

This same spatial logic acquires a further inflection in Candace's portrayal of Hong Kong, where the pervasive reach of global capitalism does not simply

render the space unrecognizable, as in the “non-place” of the Shenzhen hotel, but instead collapses the city into a hyper-saturated visual and spatial regime of consumption. Indeed, if Shenzhen appears, through Candace’s mapping, as a site completely devoid of geographic referentiality—an inauthentic pastiche of disparate cultures and locations—Hong Kong, by contrast, emerges as an overstimulating urban environment structured entirely around the imperatives of the market: the compulsion to purchase, to eat, and to consume. As her colleague Blythe remarks, “the only things you can really do in Hong Kong are shop and eat,” a statement Candace validates and reframes by suggesting that the city distills life “down to its bare essentials” (104). Yet, what is presented here as “essence” does not signal a return to cultural authenticity in any way; rather, it posits a condensation of urban experience into the same repetitive circuits of consumption that already define Candace’s life in New York City. Hong Kong, in this mapping, thus functions as the Asian correlative to Manhattan—a space where geographic specificity is traded for commercial density. As the following passage illustrates, this shared aesthetic of consumption is the primary thread binding these two global hubs together:

We went to boutiques and malls, which *were just like the malls in the States*, except more expensive and grandiose. [...] *The shopping wasn’t all that different from shopping in New York*. I probably could have found the same merchandise back home or ordered it online. What surprised me in Hong Kong, however, was how many iterations of the same thing were available. [...] Nowhere else was there such an elaborate gradient between the real and the fake. Nowhere else did the boundaries of real and fake seem so porous (104-105, my emphasis).

Candace’s detailed account of the Hong Kong retail landscape—here summarized in its most significant parts—immediately foregrounds a transnational logic of sameness that effectively collapses the vast distance between these two primary locations within the novel’s spatial imaginary. This shared logic is articulated through Candace’s sensory immersion in its nocturnal cityscape, where her perception is mediated by a hyper-saturated field of

artificial stimuli that mirrors the frantic energy of Manhattan. The city at night manifests as “an aching stream of billboards and advertisements” (107), a formulation that does not merely echo the visual landscape of Times Square but replicates its specific affective strain—a physical and psychological weariness born of overstimulation. This visual saturation, defined by a neon-lit environment advertising “Japanese whiskeys, Macau casino-resorts, and skin-whitening creams for women” (ibid.), composes an urban landscape of commodified images where geographically diverse products are flattened into a singular, uninterrupted stream of consumerist desire. Through Candace’s gaze, these advertisements do not simply populate the urban environment, but rather come to define it, reorganizing her spatial perception around a globalized circulation of signs that effectively displaces any stable sense of locality.

Yet, as already anticipated, this recognition does not merely register a surface-level aesthetic similarity, but it exposes the underlying operations of a global capitalist regime that, much like in New York, standardizes urban space into a series of predictable, commodified scripts, even across seemingly diverse geographical contexts. Crucially, however, Candace’s perception moves beyond passive recognition, engaging instead in a sophisticated interrogation of the material ontology of her surroundings. By observing the “elaborate gradient between the real and the fake,” she reconfigures the apparent uniformity of the urban space she encounters—and of Hong Kong more broadly—into a complex analysis of the porosity of authenticity itself within a global capitalist order.

In this hyper-commodified landscape, the “Chinese” element is not so much absent as it is subsumed within an infinite loop of iterations, where the distinction between a cultural original and its mass-produced facsimile becomes functionally irrelevant. Even the street-level vitality of the night-market—“a neon blur of stalls selling jade bracelets, scarves, fortune-telling services, massages, animals, assorted tchotchkes” (107)—fails to reintroduce a genuine

local specificity. Though such a space might appear to offer a reprieve from globalized commerce, it is immediately internalized by the same perceptual logic of sensory excess and indistinction characterizing the passages depicting Times Square. Rather than serving as an authentic counter-space, the night market, with its accumulation of traditional objects and services, coupled with the mingling of locals and tourists, is re-signified as yet another iteration of the broader commodified environment Candace is depicting, where cultural difference is rendered purely aesthetic. By performing a version of “Chineseness” tailored to tourist expectations, the market then provides a curated authenticity that is, at the end of the day, a standardized product of the global market. As such, Candace’s portrayal of Hong Kong signals a shift in her mapping of Chinese spaces: she no longer seeks a “real” China, as she did in Shenzhen, but instead navigates an urban landscape that is defined by continuous variations within a singular, globalized sameness, wherein the traditional landmarks that once anchored cultural identity are altogether supplanted by what she perceives as a shifting, “porous” boundary between the authentic and the simulated.

Taken together, the portrayals of Shenzhen and Hong Kong do not merely reflect a process of global homogenization but rather disclose a total erosion of distinctions—between here and elsewhere, original and copy, authentic and simulated. These spaces do not simply replicate the consumerist logic of New York City but intensify it, emerging as paradigmatic sites in which the global operations of capitalism render spatial authenticity itself increasingly unintelligible as a category of urban experience. This collapse of geographic and cultural specificity provides the essential stage for Candace’s subjective cartography—a map not of locations, but of estrangement. The spatial configurations that emerge from Candace’s reading of China, in fact, become the very screens onto which her own sense of unbelonging is projected. Her struggle to find a “real” China mirrors her fraught relationship with American cultural

assimilation and the elusive nature of her own cultural identity, already traced in the preceding section of this chapter.

Crucially, this dynamic unfolds through the same co-constitutive process described earlier, as the foreign urban landscapes she traverses do not simply impose meaning upon her perception but are actively reconfigured through her embodied, affective, and cognitive engagement—even as they simultaneously shape the conditions through which she comes to apprehend herself. As a result, just as Shenzhen and Hong Kong offer a curated authenticity that is ultimately revealed to be a standardized product, Candace's own identity is often mediated through the performance of what others expect her "Chineseness" to be. The porosity she identifies in the Hong Kong cityscape becomes a metaphor for her own porous sense of self, a state where the boundaries between her heritage and her American reality are as blurred and unintelligible as the gradient between a luxury original Louis Vuitton bag and its mass-produced facsimile. In this light, her cartography of China is less a discovery of her roots and more an encounter with the same logic of displacement that defines her life in the West, ultimately cementing her position as a perpetual outsider in both *here* and *elsewhere*.

As this section has demonstrated, Candace's subjective reconfiguration of both New York City and the Chinese locations she traverses functions as a spatialized articulation of unbelonging, insofar as the perceived homogenization of the built environment and the erosion of cultural specificity mirror—and materially register—her own estrangement within the spaces she inhabits. Yet while the novel undeniably constructs a coherent cartography of alienation that resonates with the affective and psychic condition outlined in the previous section, Candace's embodied engagement with these urban environments ultimately exceeds a merely diagnostic function. Rather than operating solely as a passive mapping of dislocation, her navigation of both national and transnational cityscapes within the corporate timeline emerges as a sustained,

albeit fragile, practice of negotiating unbelonging and asserting a right to presence within conditions of systemic marginalization.

Such a reframing—from passive inscription to active negotiation—allows for a critical reorientation of the traditional catastrofemal trajectory. In contrast to narratives such as *MYORAR* and *TNM*, where withdrawal from the social world is posited as a failed or illusory response to urban alienation, *Severance* gestures toward a more ambivalent yet potentially generative horizon, one that does not seek escape from the world but insists instead on inhabiting its contradictions. Although this trajectory becomes more explicitly legible in the post-apocalyptic timeline—which, as the final section of this chapter will argue, intimates a fragile form of futurity through Candace’s pregnancy and relationality through her photography—it is already prefigured within the pre-collapse narrative. Here, Candace’s seemingly aimless movements through the city—her lingering and wandering—function less as symptoms of inertia than as subtle practices of endurance that resist total erasure from *within* the system itself.

The spatial practice of drifting is thus resignified not as an act of aimlessness, but as an embodied and situated mode of experiencing the city through the simple act of *being there* and *being present* within it. As Heidi Liedke (2023) contends, such practices constitute a “state of mind” (45), a fundamentally subject-oriented way of interacting with foreign or familiar spaces grounded in cognitive, sensorial, and affective apprehension rather than in any supposed objective coherence. Although the figure of the *flâneur*, as theorized by Walter Benjamin (1938; 1999), has historically presupposed a position of privilege—often entangled with voyeuristic and appropriative modes of urban observation (Walkowitz 2002; Zhou 2014)—its contemporary reconfigurations, particularly when mediated through racialized and gendered subjectivities, open up alternative and politically inflected modes of spatial engagement (De Certeau 1984; Zhou 2014; Melodia Festa 2025). Within this framework, Candace’s

wandering does not reproduce the detached gaze of the *flâneur* but instead enacts a precarious yet persistent claim to visibility and presence from within the very structures that seek to render her peripheral.

For a protagonist who persistently occupies the margins, her wandering and sustained engagement with surrounding cityscapes constitute a form of self-affirming negotiation of dislocation—a tentative yet enduring mode, to borrow from Rosi Braidotti’s (2022) vocabulary, being *with* the world. In this regard, her engagement with the urban environment can be productively read through a posthuman feminist ethics as a practice of being-in-the-world, one that sustains an ethical openness to relationality and an embodied intimacy with “our terrestrial milieu” (8), and that ultimately reaches its culmination in the post-apocalyptic section of the novel. Far from signaling withdrawal, Candace’s drifting movements enact a minimal yet significant resistance to “the Western gaze” (Ma 2018, 45), one that insists on inhabiting—rather than abandoning—the spatial and affective landscapes of the late-capitalist present. In doing so, Candace’s pre-collapse urban experience already lays the groundwork for the novel’s subsequent and more visible reconfiguration of the catastrofemal trajectory, preparing the conditions for a less pessimistic—though still precarious—imagining of endurance and futurity, even amidst societal collapse and dislocation.

3.4 Negotiating Unbelonging: Towards Alternative Forms of Relationality and Futurity at the Horizon of Collapse

Underlying this chapter has been the attempt to trace a complementary cartography of unbelonging, one that unfolds simultaneously across the urban spaces Candace traverses and her own interiority, such that spatial dislocation

and affective estrangement become mutually constitutive registers through which the character comes to understand her existence. If there is a gentrification that is happening to cities, there is also, as Olivia Laing (2016) observed, a corresponding “gentrification that is happening to emotions too, with a similarly homogenizing, whitening, deadening effect” (280)—a two-fold process that *Severance*, out of all the catastrofemal narratives discussed in this dissertation, most forcefully articulates. What emerges most clearly from this novel is, then, the recognition that the affective atomization produced under late capitalism cannot be disentangled altogether from the spatial *and* emotional homogenization that is reshaping contemporary urban life everywhere. Unbelonging, therefore, appears—throughout the corporate timeline—not as an exceptional condition but as an *ordinary mode of inhabitation*, a structuring logic through which Candace negotiates her visibility within a city that continuously demands both assimilation and self-erasure.

It is precisely through this framework that *Severance* reconfigures the catastrofemal narrative. Unlike the protagonists of Ottessa Moshfegh’s *MYORAR* and Halle Butler’s *TNM*, whose whiteness secured the material and affective conditions for their elective withdrawal into the insulated spaces of their apartments, Candace’s madness is, on the other hand, structurally underprivileged and persistently exposed to the presence of others. While she initially attempts to reproduce similar scripts of slacking and detachment, such refusals of productivity and propriety remain ultimately unavailable to a subject haunted by the perceived obligation to honor the sacrifices of her immigrant parents. Caught, as a result, between the demands of neoliberal professional femininity and the assimilatory logic of the model minority myth, her investment in work and escalating productivity functions less as a vehicle of self-realization than as a compensatory strategy for managing incompatible regimes of expectation. By thus reconfiguring the catastrofemal paradigm through its racial

axis, the novel demonstrates how racialized unbelonging forecloses the possibility of withdrawal without alleviating the coercive pull of assimilation. If slacking is not a viable exit, compliance likewise fails to yield belonging: indeed, the closer Candace comes to approximating the demands placed upon her, the more intensely she experiences alienation from both herself and her surrounding environment. In *Severance*, therefore, productivity devolves into a form of self-sabotage in its own right—an automated mode of compliance that tunnels the protagonist ever deeper into her isolation rather than resolving it. Candace’s madness, then, crystallizes at the intersection of global racial capitalism, corporate alienation, and diasporic melancholy, exposing the structural impossibility of securing recognition through either neoliberal labor or narratives of successful assimilation. Unbelonging, in this sense, is not a condition that can be escaped from the outside but must be, rather, *inhabited* and *negotiated from within* the very systems that produce it.

This condition, however, undergoes a decisive transformation once the narrative shifts into its post-apocalyptic register. While unbelonging initially manifests within the novel as a painful experience of exclusion and affective dislocation, the collapse of the social order unexpectedly reveals also its generative potential. Unlike the stagnant or more nihilistic horizons offered by Moshfegh and Butler, *Severance*, instead, gradually reimagines unbelonging as *the very premise* of survival. Freed from the mnemonic, consumerist, and ideological attachments that trap others within the fatal loops of Shen Fever, Candace’s severance from stable structures of belonging—both in China and, most importantly, in the United States—becomes paradoxically the very reason for her immunity and persistence beyond collapse. This structural displacement fundamentally disrupts the representational expectations of post-apocalyptic survivalism, enabling Ma to shift the coordinates of the narrative by engaging with conventional genre tropes precisely to dismantle them from *within*.

Drawing on the established tropes of the survivalist frontier (Slotkin 1993; Kollin 2007; Keeler 2018), *Severance* configures its post-collapse world around familiar genre oppositions: insiders versus outsiders, the immune versus the contaminated, and safety versus threat. These exclusionary logics are most clearly instantiated in Bob's authoritarian community, whose rituals of surveillance and violence reproduce—as Aanchal Saraf (2019) and Katharine Schaab (2022) have argued—the very structures of hierarchy, exceptionalism, patriarchal extraction, and domination that already organized the pre-collapse world. Bob's insistence that the survivors have been divinely selected because of their apparent immunity—in his words, “We’re selected. The fact that we’re immune [...], that’s pretty special. And the fact that you’re still here, it means something” (Ma 2018, 35)—exposes, moreover, how readily post-apocalyptic narratives can reinscribe fantasies of sovereign entitlement and exclusion into the very foundations of alternative community-building. Yet Ma stages this logic not to validate its claims to exceptionalism, but to show how easily the survivalist frontier reinstates the coercive structures from which the apocalypse appears to offer escape, thereby reframing collapse not as a “true” rupture of order, but as a mechanism through which existing regimes of power are reproduced only under intensified conditions.

While these survivalist tropes are heavily mobilized throughout the post-collapse timeline, the narrative, however, systematically dismantles them by proposing alternative modalities of futurity anchored in relationality rather than competitive individualism. The novel's most radical intervention emerges, in fact, through its treatment of contagion itself: whereas conventional post-apocalyptic narratives typically secure the future by maintaining a rigid boundary between the healthy survivor(s) and the contaminated other(s), Ma destabilizes this distinction. Although the novel initially appears to mobilize familiar anxieties associated with the historical trope of the “Yellow Peril,”

linking the origin of the disease to the East, it ultimately refuses the xenophobic and exclusionary logic that underpins such narrative formations, inviting empathy toward the Fevered rather than the conventional revulsion. Indeed, instead of responding with horror or unease, Candace recognizes in their repetitive movements a distorted reflection of her own pre-apocalyptic existence, observing “But what is the difference between the Fevered and us? [...] *And our days, like theirs, continue in an infinite loop. We drive, we sleep, we drive some more*” (160, my emphasis). Through this recognition, the boundary between the living and the infected becomes increasingly unstable, allowing repetition to transcend its function as a marker of monstrous alterity and emerge instead as a shared embodied condition produced by the afterlives of late-capitalist labor. The Fevered are, thus, unmasked not as a radically alienated “other,” but as the most visible manifestation of an automation that already structured everyday life before the collapse. By undermining the ontological distinction between self and other upon which survivalist belonging depends, *Severance* develops its broader investment in unbelonging as an ethical orientation grounded in relationality rather than exclusion, reconfiguring immunity less as a biological exception than as the culmination of the novel’s sustained revaluation of estrangement.

Consequently, the illness acquires its full thematic significance when Shen Fever is revealed as a literalized pathology of attachment and nostalgia. Although transmitted through fungal spores, the disease is psychically activated by an inability to relinquish idealized relationships to the past—whether those attachments are directed toward domestic routines, consumer habits, cultural myths, or familiar places. In this sense, the infection literalizes a form of immobilizing belonging, trapping its victims within endless repetitions of what has already been lost. Far from approaching the infected through the exclusionary lens of survivalist self-preservation, Candace encounters them with a degree of intimacy and compassion that resists the violent logic of sovereign

immunity, recognizing them as tragic monuments to a social order that had already hollowed out subjectivity long before the biological infection occurred.

It is therefore deeply significant that Candace—the character who has spent the entire novel suspended between cultural, national, and social worlds—ultimately proves to be immune. As Heejo Park (2023) aptly wonders, “If she is indeed uninfected, is it due to chance or her immunity to the disease?” (55). The novel suggests that these possibilities are not entirely separable. Within its metaphorical framework, Candace’s immunity derives *precisely* from her condition of severance, predicated on her being “a rootless person” (Ma 2018, 286), as she herself puts it. Unlike the Fevered, she remains fundamentally untethered from stable structures of belonging, neither fully at home within the United States nor able to recover an authentic relationship to China. If throughout the corporate timeline this rootlessness appeared as a source of alienation—or madness—within the post-apocalyptic world it is unexpectedly transformed into the very condition of her survival. What had previously functioned as a deficit transforms, then, into a form of openness, enabling Candace to persist where all others remain trapped within the gravitational pull of memory, ultimately preparing the ground for alternative forms of attachment organized not around the mourning of “what is lost,” but the potentiality of “what is yet to come.” If immunity frees Candace from the immobilizing attachments of the past, pregnancy becomes the narrative site through which this openness is redirected toward the future

This recalibration of futurity finds its primary expression in Candace’s pregnant trajectory. While post-apocalyptic narratives are traditionally preoccupied with preserving a future amidst societal collapse—a project that inevitably raises the question of *whose* future is being secured and at whose expense as Aimee Bahng (2018) has rightfully contended—*Severance* dislodges

the traditional expectations associated with reproductive futurity that deploy the heteronormative figure of “the Child” as the ultimate guarantor of social continuity and moral restoration within a white, hetero-patriarchal order.⁷⁶ Rather than presenting gestation as the guarantee of a restored social order, Ma constructs pregnancy as another site through which unbelonging is transformed. Detached from the teleological certainties of patriarchal maternity and racialized reproductive futurism—which historically rely on forms of racialized surrogation to the secure the futures of privileged subjects at the expense of marginalized women—Candace’s pregnancy becomes an ambivalent form of embodied potentiality. When read through a posthuman feminist and xenofeminist lens (Hester 2018; Van der Waal 2018; Braidotti 2022), gestation is reconfigured as a site of embodied futurity, one rooted not in restoration or renewal but in openness, vulnerability, and an active engagement with the “always not-yet of the world” (Van der Waal 2018, 369). Acknowledging that reproduction can function, for marginalized subjects like Candace, as a form of stubborn somatic resistance rather than mere ideological complicity (Hester 2018), the pregnant body becomes a space where life persists in a state of suspended becoming—a future neither fully determined by existing power structures nor entirely foreclosed by the collapse of the old world. By withholding any narrative closure around the eventual birth, *Severance*, thus, posits—through Candace’s pregnancy—a horizon of potentiality that refuses both the comforting closure of reproductive teleology and the absolute foreclosure of anti-futurity, signaling instead a tentative, ethical openness toward embodied intimacy and connection with what is yet-to-come.

⁷⁶ For influential discussions of reproductive futurity and the ideological centrality of the figure of the Child as the guarantor of social continuity, national belonging, and heteronormative reproduction, see in particular Berlant (1997), Edelman (2004); Muñoz (2009), and Bahng (2018).

The same non-possessive orientation that structures the novel's treatment of gestation also emerges in Candace's photographic practice, which models how an unmapped, post-apocalyptic reality might be *actively inhabited* once inherited structures of meaning have, once and for all, been dissolved. Her tentative answer to this post-collapse void, Candace's photos, published on her anonymous blog *NY Ghost*, document the slow deterioration of the evacuated city, preserving traces of ordinary existence that would otherwise vanish into oblivion. Rather than merely recording urban decay, these images constitute a new mode of relation to the world, one that is grounded in attention over ownership, and witnessing over mastering. Unlike the repetitive automatism of the Fevered, whose actions endlessly reproduce the past, photography requires—as the Stephen Shore photograph opening this chapter demonstrates—a sustained, situated presence, manifesting as a relational way of looking, of *being-with* the world, that is grounded in attentiveness and care. Significantly, it is precisely through her “work of documenting” the deterioration of the city (Ma 2018, 258) that Candace finally encounters New York in its truest form, stripping away for the first time the ideological mystifications of the global metropolis: as she recounts, “I have always lived in the myth of New York more than its reality. It is what enabled me to live there for so long, loving the idea of something more than the thing itself. But toward the end, in those weeks of walking and taking pictures, I came to know and love the thing itself” (ibid.).

This realization—namely, what the “thing itself” is, and learning to love it—marks the culmination of the alternative cartography traced throughout the novel. If the corporate city had rendered Candace invisible through the homogenizing logics of racial capitalism, and if the apocalypse had severed her from the structures through which belonging was conventionally imagined, photography allows her to *remap both the city and the self*, through practices of embodied attention. Photography, therefore, does not merely document the

collapse of urban space but actively dismantles the ideological fantasies that once organized Candace's relationship to that space, displacing the distant mythologized New York that sustained her alienation with an encounter precariously grounded in the city's fragmentary, contingent reality. By framing fragments of the world through her lens, she inscribes herself into an environment that had previously appeared indifferent to her existence, transforming documentation into a tentative form of world-making. This practice, thus, becomes the novel's most fully developed articulation of alternative relationality through unbelonging, demonstrating how attachment might persist *even* without possession, mastery, or the promise of stable belonging. If beforehand her alienation stemmed from an attempt to belong to a mythologized space, it is only when she is severed from her corporate identity—and the environment itself is severed from the mechanisms of global capital—that the unvarnished reality of the world can finally emerge.

Ultimately, the originality of *Severance* within the contemporary catastrofemal canon lies in its refusal to resolve the tensions it so carefully constructs. Far from offering either the sovereign autonomy promised by neoliberal individualism or the restorative closure promised by survivalist futurity, the novel imagines unbelonging as an unstable yet generative mode of inhabiting the world. Through Candace's immunity, her pregnancy, and her photographic practice, severance itself is transformed from a condition of loss into the ground upon which new forms of attachment become imaginable. Taken together, these interconnected elements trace the novel's central argument: that unbelonging, far from representing a failure of attachment, can sustain ethical modes of relation that resist the exclusionary logics of both neoliberal individualism and normative belonging. Art and gestation consequently emerge as parallel, non-teleological forms of female generativity that remain detached from both neoliberal productivity and patriarchal domesticity. What survives the

apocalypse is, therefore, neither a restored social order nor an autonomous individual subject, but a fragile openness toward vulnerability, attentiveness, and embodied connection. In this respect, *Severance* concludes not with reconciliation but with the possibility of partial attachments—forms of relation that remain necessarily incomplete, yet nonetheless capable of sustaining life amid ongoing catastrophes without requiring the fantasy of wholeness of permanent belonging.

This question of alternative female generativity, and of how artistic and corporeal forms of creation might be disentangled from the demands of neoliberal femininity and patriarchal reproduction, will remain central to the following chapter on Raven Leilani's *Luster*. Yet where *Severance* ultimately requires the speculative rupture of the apocalypse to expose these possibilities, *Luster* forecloses even that horizon of escape. Refusing both withdrawal and collapse as organizing frameworks, Leilani's novel relocates the negotiation of intimacy, race, and relationality entirely within the suffocating conditions of the contemporary present, demanding an even more immediate confrontation with the structures from which Candace, however precariously, is finally severed.



Figure 4 Raven Leilani, *Self-Portrait* (2020).

Chapter 4. Going Off Script: The Aesthetics of Failure and the Black Catastrofemale in *Luster* (2020) by Raven Leilani

4.1 The Black Catastrofemale: Reconfiguring Madness and Failure in *Luster*

Painted in warm hues of blue, brown and black, Raven Leilani's self-portrait offers the onlooker an intimate, yet enigmatic depiction of the artist. Framed even more tightly than conventional self-portraiture—with naked shoulders and bust almost entirely excluded from the frame, and the nose and mouth towering over the other asymmetrical, askew facial features—the composition grants access not to the composed, statuesque figure familiar from professional headshots accompanying interviews, articles, or literary profiles, but rather to a stripped-down, vulnerable version of Leilani, one that may even register as uncomfortably close—too raw or too private in its immediacy. This visual proximity is nonetheless counterbalanced by the subject's emotional distance—her gaze distant, averted, and fixed somewhere beyond the frame, rather than directed at the viewer. The painting, then, ultimately performs a subtle but powerful negotiation between intimacy and elusiveness, mirroring, in many ways, the narrative logic of *Luster* (2020), Leilani's debut novel. Preserving the warm tones of Leilani's self-portrait—though rendered primarily in shades of orange and brown—the front cover of the Picador edition, with its exaggerated focus on a slightly parted female mouth, visually echoes the painting's delicate balance between uneasy proximity and ambiguity, subtly foreshadowing the novel's sustained preoccupation with how black femininity becomes visible only through conditions that simultaneously destabilize the possibility of coherent representation.

Published in 2020 to widespread critical acclaim, *Luster* follows Edie, a disillusioned and gradually unraveling black woman in her twenties, navigating the harsh and unrelenting rhythms of New York City. Caught between her frustrated ambition to become a painter and the suffocating routines of a demoralizing, dead-end corporate job in publishing, Edie inhabits a world marked by economic precarity, hazardous sexual encounters, and emotional detachment, where long commutes on overcrowded subway cars punctuate a life defined by instability and exhaustion. This monotonous existence—each day repetitively structured by her relentless efforts to make ends meet amid a lack of viable alternatives—is disrupted when Edie meets Eric, a significantly older white man in a recently open marriage, through a chance encounter on a dating site. Yet the precariousness of Edie’s situation only intensifies as the story unfolds: dismissed from her job for professional misconduct and evicted from her bleak apartment, she begins to drift between a string of menial, occasionally dangerous temp jobs, before—almost inexplicably—finding herself living, at least temporarily, with Eric’s family in their seemingly idyllic suburban home in New Jersey. Within this unfamiliar domestic space, where every comfort appears to be within arm’s reach, Edie becomes entangled in a charged relationship with Eric’s high-achieving but carefully guarded white wife, Rebecca, and their adopted black tween daughter, Akila. Yet, the novel’s significance does not merely lie in the unfolding of this narrative trajectory as such, but in the ways in which it persistently resists conversion into a legible story of antiheroic downfall or redemption. What initially appears as a familiar contemporary arc of precarity and mental unraveling is instead structured around the refusal of developmental resolution, as well as the systematic suspension of any teleological movement toward coherence or transformation.

While early critical responses to *Luster* have predominantly emphasized Edie’s sexual autonomy and the liberatory potential of her desire (Obaro 2020;

Sehgal 2020; Thomas 2020; Vinson 2020; Anderson 2022; Bradley 2023), and more recent scholarly work has shifted the focus towards the novel's belonging within a broader corpus of "millennial fiction" (Berrington 2025), this chapter intends to argue that *Luster* should be understood as belonging to the emerging catastrofemal canon at the heart of this project. Not only does Edie embody many of the defining traits of the antiheroines of the new millennium investigated in this dissertation, but the novel—as anticipated in the first chapter of this thesis—also displays key thematic and formal features characteristic of the broader corpus of catastrofemal narratives, including those under current examination. Much like the anonymous protagonist of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (hereafter MYORAR), Millie in *The New Me* (hereafter TNM), or Candace in *Severance*, Edie emerges as a contemporary catastrofemal: a disillusioned and emotionally adrift young woman, caught in her attempts to come to terms with her dissatisfying precarious reality, with corporate work and depression slowly eroding her artistic sensibilities and ambitions. Edie's inner unraveling not only constitutes one of *Luster's* central themes but, rather intuitively, also operates as a formal structuring principle. Surfacing obliquely through parentheticals, narrative elisions, and sardonic commentary laced with deflected dread, her madness threads itself through the very fabric of the narration, animating the central juxtaposition between self-corrective composure and vulnerable overexposure to the reader. That madness simultaneously shapes both the theme and form of this narrative is unsurprising, given that one of the defining features of contemporary narratives centered on catastrofemales lies precisely in the chronicling of mental distress not as a momentary rupture, but as an ongoing, embodied and embedded condition, endemic to the late-capitalist present. Yet, while this experience of corporate alienation helps unify catastrofemal narratives thematically, Edie's blackness introduces a critical layer of difference that reconfigures and complicates the affective, aesthetic and

political stakes of her character, inflecting the narrative with a distinctively racialized embodiment of failure and madness that resists tragic or fatalistic closures, and instead gestures toward subversive—or perhaps fugitive—modes of being that unsettle normative teleological temporalities of healing or redemption typical of our contemporary cultural landscape.

This chapter therefore begins from a methodological and conceptual problem: what does it mean to read Edie as a “mad” antiheroine? To do so, one must first acknowledge that the association of blackness and madness usually entails a significant representational risk, insofar as it threatens to invoke or reproduce enduring racist paradigms that have historically conflated blackness with irrationality, deviance, or pathology. This discursive regime, perpetuated by the epistemic violence of white supremacy, has in fact long naturalized madness as a condition of black existence, deploying it to mark black subjects as ontologically aberrant and fundamentally unfit for reason—effectively positioning them as non-human others (Pickens 2019). And yet, as Therí Alyce Pickens (2019) insightfully argued, the critical convergence of blackness and madness may also carry transformative potential, insofar as these categories, while historically entwined within systems of racial violence and disenfranchisement, possess the capacity to jointly destabilize “the twin pillars of whiteness and sanity” that underpin Western intellectual and cultural traditions (15). Drawing on the work of Sami Schalk (2017) and focusing on black speculative fiction, Pickens specifically contended that madness—both metaphorically and experientially—can function as a site of radical alterity, enabling a nuanced exploration of the material and, even more crucially, historical consequences of systemic oppression for black subjects (Pickens 2019, 6).

Building on these insights, this chapter contends that the representation of black madness within *Luster* demands a rearticulation that exceeds both

pathological and purely symbolic readings. Rather than framing mental deviance as a merely aestheticized device, the novel invites us to conceptualize it not only as a subversive expression of resistance to the contradictions of contemporary American life, but also as a material and affective manifestation of interlocking systems of violence—a condition shaped by the recursive interplay between embodied subjectivity and social embeddedness. If, following Rosi Braidotti's (2022) posthuman bodily materialism, the body is understood as an ontological site of becoming—simultaneously affective and enfleshed, relational and signified, and always implicated in shifting power relations—then Edie's body emerges not as a surface passively molded by external forces, but as a dynamic, generative entity that unfolds outward, producing legible and tangible expressions of pain, desire, and despair in response to the internalization of sociopolitical and historical pressures. As a result, *Luster* does not reduce Edie's body to a passive receptacle through which the catastrophes of the present and the intergenerational traumas of the past are only recorded or contested; rather, it reframes her madness—inscribed in both mind and abject flesh—as a visceral, outward affective response to the long history of racialized and gendered violence endured by black women, as well as to the cumulative, embodied strain of navigating late-capitalist life. In this context, madness is neither simply thematized nor aestheticized, but rendered as an embedded, embodied, and historically saturated condition, wherein blackness operates as a foundational structuring force.

From this starting point, the chapter argues that *Luster* reconfigures the catastrofemal figure by introducing blackness as a force that destabilizes the genre's dominant narrative and affective economies. While catastrofemal narratives are often structured around inertia and failed self-fashioning within neoliberal regimes of productivity and wellness, *Luster* intensifies these dynamics by foregrounding how racialized visibility produces a double bind

between hypervisibility and erasure. Edie's condition is, therefore, not simply one of corporate alienation or affective exhaustion, but one shaped by the sedimentation of violence across generations, where psychic distress is inseparable from histories of racialized and gendered dispossession that cannot be resolved through individual transformation.

The chapter is structured around four interrelated trajectories that together trace how the novel dismantles dominant scripts of selfhood, futurity, and repair. It first examines the entanglement of corporate precarity, racialized labor, and psychic disintegration as conditions that produce Edie's suspended subjectivity. It then turns to the genealogies of inherited trauma and dispossession, showing how madness, within the architecture of the novel, operates as both embodied and transmitted condition within black female kinship structures. The third section analyses the novel's sustained dismantling of reproductive futurity and the maternal script, arguing that *Luster* refuses the notion of pregnancy as a redemptive temporal rupture. Finally, the chapter considers Edie's artistic practice as an alternative mode of relation and perception, in which fragmentation, abjection, and partial visibility become the basis for non-teleological forms of aesthetic and ethical engagement.

Across these trajectories, what ultimately emerges is not a narrative of recovery or overcoming, but a sustained refusal of the redemptive logics that govern both neoliberal subject formation and its feminist counter-discourses. In contrast to earlier catastrofemal narratives in which suspension may still be read as a prelude to withdrawal or self-reinvention, *Luster* displaces the very premise that subjectivity must culminate in coherence. Edie remains suspended not as failure of development, but because development itself is revealed as an inadequate framework through which to think black female life under contemporary conditions. The significance of this gesture extends beyond Edie as an individual figure. By refusing any pre-scripted archetypes through which

black women are routinely rendered legible across media—whether as resilient subjects, symbolic victims, or figures of moral endurance—Leilani constructs a protagonist defined by contradiction, instability, and affective excess. It is precisely this refusal of pre-determined scripts of representation that allows *Luster* to articulate a more radical proposition: that black female subjectivity need not be stabilized in order to be recognized, and that illegibility itself may function not as absence, but as a different mode of presence.

4.2 “Hypervisible and invisible, black and alone”: The Politics of Black Visibility Within Racial Capitalism

Much like the other catastrofemal narratives examined in this dissertation, *Luster* revisits familiar concerns regarding millennial aimlessness and alienation, yet it does so through a specifically racialized inflection of blackness that fundamentally reconfigures the stakes of such affective states. Just as Candace Chen in *Severance* (2018) or Millie in *TNM* (2019), Edie’s mental distress similarly emerges from her immersion within corporate labor structures that demand continuous self-regulation, affective coherence and productive legibility. However, where *Luster* diverges most significantly from these adjacent catastrofemal configurations is in its sustained attention to how racialization intensifies and stratifies these conditions of burnout, producing not only alienation but a specifically embodied crisis of visibility. By organizing Edie’s experience around a continuous modulation between hypervisibility and invisibility—articulated in the novel’s own phrasing as being “both hypervisible and invisible: black and alone” (Leilani 2020, 99)—*Luster* situates her psychic and bodily disintegration within a longer genealogical and cultural history of black embodiment, one already theorized within African American literary and critical

traditions from Ralph Ellison onwards. In this sense, the novel does not simply represent alienation as an individual psychological condition but instead refracts it through the structural abstractions of racial capitalism, rendering them as a concrete continuum of somatic regulation that is lived directly through the texture, weight and exhaustion of the flesh. Within such a system, predicated upon legibility and affective discipline, Edie's increasing slackness and refusal of professional composure do not register as subjective failures within the novel, but rather emerge as a fugitive and unstable modes of "going off script," a way of inhabiting the limits of what can be performed within the regulatory grammar of corporate life.

Edie's apathy and sense of arrested development are, in this regard, inseparable from her sustained dissatisfaction with labor itself and her inability to derive meaning, coherence, or even minimal affective investment from the cultural script of work. Although employed in a publishing house, she occupies a position structurally misaligned with her artistic identity, working in the children's editorial department despite identifying herself as an artist. Her repeated attempts to transfer into the company's art department are persistently denied under the ostensible rationale of inadequate "basic figure drawing skills" (26), a justification that gradually reveals itself as less a neutral assessment of competence than a mechanism of institutional gatekeeping that reproduces existing hierarchies of cultural capital. Denied entry, in fact, on multiple occasions, Edie comes to understand her exclusion as symptomatic of a broader system in which access is not governed by skill or merit but by inherited proximity to networks of legitimacy. Her sardonic self-description as having graduated from "an indistinct community college" with "what is arguably a more useless degree" (53) further underscores how she recognizes institutional value as being distributed unevenly along lines of classed and credentialized recognition, rendering her permanently adjacent to but *never fully within* the

sphere of cultural production she aspires to inhabit. This exclusion is further intensified by the presence of Mark, the department's supervisor, whose own mediocrity—despite being a “hack” who “only draws four-fingered hands” (28)—remains structurally unremarkable within the institutional hierarchy. That Mark retains authority while simultaneously mocking Edie for not being “as good as [she] could be” (77) exposes the fundamentally asymmetrical distribution of cultural legitimacy within her workplace, a distribution structured not only by gendered hierarchies but also by racialized economies of recognition that determine whose incompetence is excusable and whose ambition is foreclosed in advance.

Within this configuration, Edie's inability to access the art department is not simply a professional disappointment but the material articulation of a more fundamental foreclosure: the recognition that her artistic trajectory is not merely delayed but *structurally rendered impossible* within the institutional logics that organize the cultural production in the world she inhabits. This sense of foreclosure is subsequently crystallized in her artistic paralysis, which the novel explicitly situates as beginning at the exact moment of her employment at the publishing house. As she reflects, “It has been two years since I painted anything [...]. The last time I painted, I was twenty-one” (17), a temporal rupture that is later reiterated in her admission that “Whenever I have tried to paint in the last two years, I have felt paralyzed” (27). Artistic stagnation, thus, becomes inseparable from labor itself, suggesting that corporate employment does not simply displace creativity but *actively arrests its possibility*.

This arrested development is further amplified through the novel's recurrent imagery of physical inertia, which renders her psychological depletion—much like in the other catastrofemale narratives discussed here—as a distinctly embodied condition rather than an abstract interior state. Edie's confession to Eric that “during the weekends, sometimes I lie in one spot and

don't move until I have to go to the bathroom or to work" (32) reframes immobility not as recuperative rest—unlike the one sought by the protagonist of *MYORAR*—but as involuntary surrender to the demands of exhaustion. In this sense, psychological disarray is consistently translated into corporeal terms, such that incapacity to move, desire, and most significantly to create becomes the primary register through which burnout is both experienced and narrated. Within a capitalist order that values bodies primarily according to their capacity for productivity, Edie's body is, then, repeatedly reduced to its most minimal biological and economic functions—eating, urinating, working—thereby exposing the extent to which systemic exhaustion operates not as exception but as structural condition. It is at this point that the novel's engagement with corporate labor begins to articulate a broader critique of how black subjectivity itself is reorganized under neoliberal regimes of productivity. Within such a system, Edie's dissatisfaction cannot be understood as an individual failure but, more appropriately, as the affective corollary of a structure that demands continuous self-optimization while simultaneously withholding the conditions under which such optimization might be meaningfully sustained. Her refusal of finding coherence within work, then, emerges not as resistance in any straightforward sense but as a destabilized mode of being that exceeds the available scripts of professional fulfillment.

However, *Luster* complicates this trajectory of burnout by embedding it within a specifically racialized economy of visibility. Within the novel, the corporate environment does not merely discipline Edie through demands of productivity but also produces her as a *hypervisible* subject, whose presence is continuously overdetermined by institutional frameworks of interpretation. Indeed, as Nicole Fleetwood (2011) has argued, hypervisibility "simultaneously announces the continual invisibility of blacks as ethical and enfleshed subjects," producing a paradoxical condition in which black subjects are *excessively seen*

while *remaining* fundamentally *unrecognizable* (16). Within this paradox, visibility does not confer recognition but instead only intensifies regulation, whereby the black female body, in particular, is rendered *perpetually legible* yet *never fully intelligible*. As a result, Edie's embodied paralysis and her structural hypervisibility emerge not as distinct phenomena but as mutually constitutive processes through which her psychic exhaustion is produced. Her inability to sustain coherence is inseparable from the conditions under which she is made visible, as the demand for legibility simultaneously produces the impossibility of inhabiting that legibility without fragmentation. In this sense, *Luster* refuses any clear separation between internal breakdown and external constraint, instead demonstrating how black female subjectivity itself is constituted through the *recursive entanglement of visibility and exhaustion*.

Within the publishing house, this regime of hypervisibility intersects with longstanding structures of racial respectability which, as Shirley Anne Tate (2017) conceptualized, have traditionally functioned as a practice of efficiency, disciplining black women into continuous self-surveillance and affective modulation to maximize their productivity. Edie's labor is, then, not only evaluated according to her output but also according to her capacity to remain aesthetically and affectively non-disruptive—a requirement that clearly extends beyond professional competence and enters the realm of embodied comportment. As a consequence, within this order, every minor deviation from expected behaviors or appearances can be magnified and interpreted as evidence of deficiency. This pressure to remain palatable is registered most acutely in Edie's increasingly unstable attempts to inhabit the role of the “good” employee, as her reflections on the propriety expected at her workplace reveal the impossibility of sustaining such a performance without immense psychic costs: “Maybe the problem is that I am weak and overly sensitive. Maybe the problem is that I am an office slut” (Leilani 2020, 23). The oscillation between self-

accusation and irony registers, rather than a simple expression of self-doubt, an internalization of a disciplinary gaze that converts a structural form of constraint into a personal form of failure. Within this economy of visibility, Edie's subjectivity is continuously split between *how she appears* and *how she fears she is read*.

This fragmentation is further intensified through Edie's interactions with Aria, the only other black woman in her department, whose presence within the economy of the novel exposes the narrow spectrum of racialized legibility the two women have available within the corporate environment of the publishing house. Aria is described as "the prettier, more docile model" (79), someone who "plays the game well [...] better than I do" (22), thereby embodying a mode of professional coherence predicated upon restraint, compliance and strategic self-effacement. This legibility is, of course, not neutral: trapped in a racialized double bind that compels her to be read either as the hyper-competent superwoman or as the lazy, under-performing subordinate, Aria actively performs respectability as a survival strategy within a system that permits black visibility only insofar as it conforms to recognizable codes of propriety. Edie's position, by contrast, is defined by an unstable unreadability that oscillates between refusal and stereotype, eliciting continuous acts of interpretation that cannot be stabilized within existing frameworks. The novel, thus, stages a sustained interrogation of how racialized subjects are compelled to negotiate between overperformance and perceived slackness, neither of which offers genuine escape from the demands of legibility.

This instability is rendered even more explicit in scenes where Edie temporarily withdraws from social environments in an attempt to negotiate the widening disjunction she perceives between her profound interior exhaustion and the external performance of composure expected of her. Although the imperative for affective discipline presents itself as universal—as demonstrated

throughout the previous chapters of this dissertation—*Luster* reveals how blackness fundamentally intensifies and reconfigures the stakes of this demand. Within the racialized economy of the workplace, Edie is expected not only to regulate her emotions but also to render them continuously legible according to dominant white norms of professionalism and emotional restraint. Her repeated efforts “to be merry and keep a conversation light” (54), therefore, do not simply reflect ordinary workplace etiquette but register the immense affective labor involved in sustaining a version of herself that remains reassuring, non-disruptive and perpetually readable to those around her. Rather than alleviating her psychic distress, however, this constant modulation of affect progressively widens the distance between her lived experience and the socially acceptable self she feels compelled to perform.

The unsustainability of this emotional performance becomes particularly evident during a social gathering, when Edie retreats into the bathroom in search of temporary relief from the exhausting demands of sociability. Yet even this brief withdrawal fails to provide genuine respite. Confronted by her reflection, she reflects:

I have come to the part of the night where I am incapable of any uppersense emotion. [...] It usually helps to take a moment alone in the bathroom, though the inevitable presence of a mirror can complicate things. There is something about looking into someone else's mirror, something that always gives me more information than I need. In the past three years, I have tried to turn lemons into a lemonade by reciting old Tumblr affirmations into these mirrors, but it hasn't helped. 'I am happy to be alive. I am happy to be alive' (58-59).

Significantly, Edie does not enter the bathroom in order to recover an authentic or coherent sense of self. Instead, the scene reveals how thoroughly the disciplinary demands of corporate respectability and racialized visibility have become internalized. Even in solitude, removed from the immediate scrutiny of colleagues and acquaintances, she remains unable to escape the regulatory gaze that structures her everyday existence. The mirror consequently ceases to

function as a privileged site of self-recognition and instead becomes a relay through which socially sanctioned expectations of emotional and aesthetic coherence are continually reproduced. What it reflects back is not simply Edie's appearance but the accumulated weight of those normative ideals against which she persistently measures—and inevitably experiences—herself as inadequate. Her admission that she is incapable of experiencing “any uppercase emotion,” therefore, reframes her apparent apathy not as an absence of feeling but as the exhaustion of the emotional grammars available to her. The distinction between ordinary feeling and “uppercase emotion” is particularly revealing, suggesting not emotional emptiness but an inability to perform those recognizable expressions of enthusiasm, resilience, confidence and optimism through which neoliberal subjects are expected to demonstrate psychological health and professional competence. Her affective life has not disappeared; rather, it has only become unintelligible according to the dominant emotional vocabulary demanded by both corporate professionalism and contemporary wellness culture.

The irony of responding to this crisis by mechanically repeating *Tumblr*-era affirmations—“I am happy to be alive. I am happy to be alive”—further exposes the limitations of neoliberal therapeutic discourse. Far from producing genuine consolation, these affirmations function as ritualized exercises in self-regulation, revealing how contemporary wellness culture relocates structural forms of exhaustion onto the individual psyche by demanding that subjects continuously repair themselves through positive thinking rather than interrogate the social conditions that produce their suffering. Instead of restoring coherence, the ritual merely intensifies the disjunction between the requirement to appear emotionally “fine” and the internal collapse Edie continually experiences. Even in the absence of external observers, she continues to inhabit the gaze of

racialized respectability, demonstrating how deeply the demands of visibility and palatability have been sedimented within both her body and her psychic life.

Unlike many other catastrofemale figures, however, Edie's encounter with the mirror does not culminate in a grotesque or destabilized recognition of the self. Far from recoiling from her reflection or perceiving it as monstrous, she instead observes with remarkable neutrality: "I look in the mirror and I do not hate how I look" (58). This moment is significant precisely because it refuses one of the most familiar narrative conventions through which female psychological breakdown has traditionally been represented within the catastrofemale corpus. Contrary to protagonists whose mental disintegration becomes immediately legible through distorted or abject self-perception, Edie's reflection remains strikingly coherent. Her crisis, therefore, does not manifest as a visible fracture upon the body's surface but as a widening separation between an *externally legible body* and an *increasingly fragmented interior life*. The mirror, thus, exposes a specifically racialized contradiction: the imperative to remain visually coherent even as coherence itself is progressively withdrawn from her subjective experience. In other words, Edie's appearance continues to satisfy the aesthetic demands of professionalism, femininity and racial respectability, even while these performances become increasingly unsustainable from within.

Read in this light, the recurring imperative throughout the novel to remain "revised" (12, 122) acquires a significance that extends well beyond ordinary self-presentation. To appear revised is to remain continuously edited, corrected, polished, and aesthetically contained according to dominant white standards of legibility. The novel consequently suggests that, for Edie, the labor of maintaining a coherent exterior does not simply conceal psychic fragmentation but *actively produces it*, requiring an ongoing suppression of those forms of vulnerability, exhaustion and disorder that cannot be accommodated within racialized regimes of visibility. It is precisely because her madness cannot openly

inscribe itself upon the body's surface that it begins to migrate beneath it, a displacement that prepares the novel's turn toward the recurring imagery of interior excess and material abjection.

This internal friction, in fact, becomes even more explicit through the novel's recurring imagery of bodily containment, which persistently stages Edie's exterior appearance as existing in tension with an unruly materiality that threatens to exceed it from within. Although, throughout the first half of the novel, her body remains, for the most part, outwardly composed and professionally legible, Edie repeatedly imagines herself as little more than a carefully maintained container barely capable of holding together the proliferating matter concealed beneath its polished surface. She describes herself as consisting of "gleaming elastic parts" (7), imagines her body as a fragile "skin casing" filled with "a dozen gerbils" (5), or fantasizes about unzipping her own "skin suit" and allowing "all the ooze inside" (10) to spill outward. These recurring images refuse any conception of the body as a stable, self-contained organism and instead present it as a porous assemblage in which affective states, psychic distress, biological processes, and material substance continually leak into one another, destabilizing the very distinction between interiority and exteriority. The body, in other words, ceases to function as the coherent vessel of an autonomous subject and instead becomes the site where social, biological, emotional, and material forces are continuously negotiated.

Significantly, however, this grotesque vocabulary almost never materializes upon the visible surface of Edie's body. The molecular and visceral imagery through which she imagines herself remains, in fact, strikingly internal, circulating *beneath the skin* rather than erupting through it. This displacement is crucial. Following the mirror scene, where Edie recognizes that her appearance remains unexpectedly coherent despite her profound psychic fragmentation, the novel repeatedly relocates madness away from visible corporeal distortion and

into the body's concealed materiality. Instead of appearing as an externally legible marker of psychological collapse, madness is imagined as an invisible, *proliferating substance* that courses beneath the surface of the skin, threatening—but never quite succeeding—to rupture the carefully maintained façade through which Edie continues to appear socially intelligible. Her increasingly recurrent fantasies of leaking, splitting open, or failing to contain the matter within her body, therefore, do not signify an actual bodily disintegration so much as the mounting pressure generated by the labor of preserving that outward coherence. Madness is not absent from the body; rather, it has been displaced into its hidden interior, where it accumulates as a restless, microscopic, almost cellular materiality that continually threatens her “ability to maintain human form” (83).

This displacement is particularly significant when situated within the longer racial history through which blackness—and black femininity in particular—has itself been repeatedly constructed as grotesque and abject. As Dariack Scott (2010) argued, any critical association between blackness and abjection necessarily risks reproducing the very racist epistemologies that historically denied black subjects dignity, coherence, and full humanity by locating them outside the category of the properly human. Read against this history, Leilani's decision to relocate abjection beneath, rather than upon, the body's surface assumes considerable political significance. The novel refuses to make Edie's psychological fragmentation immediately visible through bodily grotesquerie because such visibility would risk collapsing her subjective experience back into those historically sedimented visual economies that have long imagined black bodies as naturally excessive, unruly or pathological. Instead, *Luster* insists that the violence of racial capitalism lies precisely in requiring the opposite: the continuous production of an exterior that remains polished, disciplined, and aesthetically coherent *despite* the immense psychic and material labor such coherence demands.

Edie's abjection, therefore, reside in the relentless work of containing everything that dominant regimes of visibility refuse to accommodate. The pressure to appear composed, pleasant, productive, and aesthetically "revised" is revealed as a specifically racialized and gendered mechanism of social regulation, requiring the constant suppression of those forms of exhaustion, vulnerability, disorder, and affective excess that threaten the fiction of coherence. Viewed from this perspective, the novel's title acquires an additional layer of meaning. Derived from the French *lustre*, meaning "shine" or "gleam," *Luster* evokes precisely the polished surface that Edie is compelled to sustain throughout the novel, a seductive exterior that conceals rather than resolves the turbulent materiality beneath it. The gleam promised by the title is, therefore, not simply aesthetic but disciplinary: it names the labor of appearing intact within a social order that demands visibility while refusing recognition. Far from resolving the contradiction between appearance and lived experience, the novel insists upon it, ultimately revealing that the maintenance of coherence is itself a form of embodied labor disproportionately demanded of black women living and working within the intersecting logics of racial capitalism.

The labor of sustaining an outwardly coherent and aesthetically legible surface can however, at moments, reach its limit, allowing the distinction between interior containment and exterior appearance to briefly falter. The novel's exploration of hypervisibility, then, reaches a momentary breaking point when Edie's bodily coherence can no longer be maintained within the disciplinary regime of the corporate workplace. The visible disintegration of her embodied self—already foreshadowed through episodes of paralysis, exhaustion, and affective collapse—culminates in the moment of corporeal rupture when she arrives at work with a conspicuous black eye. This emergence of visible injury does not signify a simple reversal of the logic previously described, nor does it constitute the externalization of an otherwise hidden

interiority. Instead, it marks the point at which Edie's labor of containment momentarily fails, allowing what has been structurally held beneath the surface to become briefly perceptible as bodily inscription. The black eye, the result of a hazardous sexual encounter with Eric, therefore, renders visible what the regime of hypervisibility ordinarily requires to remain concealed: the material costs of maintaining coherence under conditions of continuous interpretive overdetermination and affective discipline.

Yet, significantly, the novel refuses to grant this moment any stabilizing or emancipatory function. Edie's exposed body is immediately reabsorbed into the interpretive frameworks of the workplace, where even signs of injury and breakdown are rendered legible within pre-existing systems of judgment that recode non-conformity as a personal failure, moral deficiency or professional inadequacy. In this sense, Eddie's sudden visibility through excess does not disrupt the logic of hypervisibility but intensifies it, converting the visible trace of an interior fracture into *yet another surface available for evaluation*, interpretation, and disciplinary reading. What appears, at first glance, as the eruption of what had been contained beneath the skin thus becomes, almost immediately, another instance of overdetermined legibility, and even corporeal rupture is immediately assimilated into the same regime of reading that produced the conditions of its emergence.

This dynamic culminates in Edie's confrontation with Aria, a moment within the novel that functions as the culmination of *Luster's* broader interrogation of hypervisibility. Precisely out of this scene starts to emerge the idea that neither slackness—or, more broadly, nonconformity—nor overperformance offers a viable exit from the racialized demands of corporate legibility. Aria's accusation—"You think because you slack and express no impulse control that you're like, black power. Sticking it to the white man or whatever. But you're just what they expect. [...] they can be mediocre. We can't"

(Leilani 2020, 80)—does not simply challenge Edie’s interpretation of her own behavior but exposes the structural bind that renders black female subjectivity perpetually overdetermined in advance of its own articulation. Within this framework, Edie’s perceived slackness is not read by Aria as a refusal but as a confirmation of a stereotype, while Aria’s cultivated restraint is not recognized by Edie as autonomy but as compliance under duress. The novel thereby demonstrates that visibility operates not as a neutral field of perception but as a disciplinary apparatus in which every gesture is already pre-coded within a restricted interpretive economy that renders blackness itself intelligible only through familiar scripts of deficiency, excess or exceptionality. In this sense, Aria does not stand outside Edie’s logic but rather completes it, revealing respectability not as an ideological adherence but as a survival strategy within a system that renders black femininity perpetually accountable to visibility itself. Her admission that she would “shuck and jive” (80) in order to secure professional advancement should not be reduced to simple capitulation; instead, it foregrounds the constrained and often contradictory forms of agency available within a racialized economy that equates blackness with incompetence unless it is continuously countered by exceptional performance. Yet, as the novel makes clear, such counter-performance is never sufficient, since the demand for exceptionality is itself structurally infinite, always deferring recognition while intensifying surveillance. Both Edie and Aria are, thus, positioned within a double bind in which they are compelled either to embody the stereotype or to disprove it through exhausting forms of self-regulation that ultimately reproduce the very logic they seek to evade. What distinguishes them is, therefore, not their position outside this structure, but *the different ways in which they negotiate its impossible demands*: whereas Aria embraces respectability as the only available strategy for survival, Edie increasingly finds herself unable—or unwilling—to

sustain the forms of psychic and affective self-regulation upon which that strategy depends.

The novel, in this sense, refuses to resolve this tension into a stable ethical or political position, instead staging it as the condition of being trapped within regimes of reading that precede and exceed the subject's own capacity for self-definition. It is precisely at this point that Edie's articulation of her desire to "go off script" (20) acquires its full significance, not because it offers a coherent politics of resistance, but because it exposes the psychic costs of remaining indefinitely "within the script." While Aria is unable to recognize this as anything other than slackness or a misrecognition of the system's rules, the novel itself allows a more ambivalent reading in which Edie's refusal of over-productive coherence registers as a fugitive mode of departure from the demands of legibility. As several critics of racialized femininity have argued, the embrace of slackness or inefficiency—while often recuperated as subversive when attached to white, upper-middle-class antiheroines—risks reinscribing well-established stereotypes when embodied by black subjects (Wanzo 2016; Cheers 2018; Hagelin & Silverman 2022). Conversely, the alternative posture of hyper-competence, emotional docility, and professional over-performance merely reproduces the punitive demands of white-coded institutional norms that extract labor while disavowing its psychic costs (Hunt 2005; Cheers 2018; Tyree & Powell 2022). The novel, then, refuses both positions as adequate solutions. Edie's slackness is never romanticized as politically efficacious; on the contrary, it carries immediate material consequences, exposing her to professional dismissal, and the continual risk of confirming the very stereotypes through which black femininity has historically been governed. Yet neither does *Luster* endorse Aria's strategy of perpetual self-management as an emancipatory horizon. If respectability enables survival, it does so only by demanding an endless performance of emotional restraint and self-correction that progressively erodes the subject required to

sustain it. In doing so, the novel places both Edie and Aria within a structure that disallows ambivalence, rendering each available mode of subject formation simultaneously necessary and untenable.

If, as Edie herself observes, “it is an art to be black and dogged and inoffensive” (Leilani 2020, 23), then *Luster* ultimately exposes the impossibility of sustaining such a balance without psychic fragmentation. The demand to remain simultaneously legible, inoffensive, productive, and emotionally regulated is not merely burdensome but structurally dehumanizing, insofar as it requires the continuous splitting of subjectivity between internal experience and externally legible form. Within this logic, madness does not emerge as deviation from normativity but as the affective remainder produced by the impossibility of inhabiting normativity without excess. It is precisely here that Edie’s intermittent slackness acquires its significance. Far from functioning as a successful act of political resistance, it emerges as an existential refusal to continue performing a form of coherence that has become psychically unlivable. In other words, what Edie relinquishes is not productivity alone but the fantasy that recognition might eventually be secured through exemplary performance. Going off script, therefore, remains profoundly costly: it does not free her from racialized legibility, nor does it shield her from precarity or institutional punishment. Instead, it exposes the unequal distribution of refusal itself, revealing that, within the economy of the novel, for a black woman, even disengagement is immediately recoded through pre-existing regimes of racial interpretation. Yet, the novel nevertheless insists that such moments matter precisely because they interrupt, however fleetingly, the imperative to remain indefinitely governable through over-performance. Their value lies less in their political efficacy than in their capacity to disclose the unbearable psychic labor required to inhabit respectability as a permanent mode of existence. Refusal, in this sense, does not overcome the system; it renders visible the impossibility of living indefinitely

according to its demands, thereby preparing the ground for the alternative forms of relationality, artistic practice, and embodied vulnerability through which the novel will subsequently imagine other ways of inhabiting black female subjectivity.

It is precisely at this threshold of impossibility that Edie is expelled from the corporate environment, a dismissal that does not resolve the logic of visibility but only radically reconfigures its conditions. Within the larger architectural economy of the novel, her exit from white-collar labor does not constitute a transition into freedom but rather a structural inversion of her prior position within regimes of surveillance and interpretation. This transition becomes most explicit in Edie's experience as a bicycle delivery rider, as her body is absorbed into the anonymous flows of urban circulation. Unlike the corporate environment, which demanded constant affective and behavioral readability, gig work reduces her presence to movement and task completion, producing a paradoxical form of invisibility in which she is *everywhere* and *nowhere at once*, present only as a vector of labor rather than as a socially recognized subject. This erasure is articulated most starkly in her observation that she moves "the length of Broadway without a face" (110), a phrase that captures not only the collapse of social legibility but the dissolution of subjectivity into infrastructural motion. Here, Edie's embodiment is not intensified through surveillance but dispersed through mobility, as the city itself becomes both the medium and mechanism of her disappearance. Whereas corporate labor required the constant performance of selfhood under conditions of scrutiny, gig labor withdraws the conditions under which selfhood can even be sustained as a recognizable category, an experience Edie herself figures through the image of "the gradual breakdown of [her] body into dust" (93).

The shift from *hypervisibility* to *invisibility*, therefore, does not constitute a liberation from disciplinary regimes but their *rearticulation* across different

temporal and spatial scales of racial capitalism. If the publishing house produces Edie as a subject who is always already over-read, over-interpreted, and over-determined, gig labor produces her as a subject who is structurally under-recognized, existing only through the abstraction of labor itself. Both modalities depend upon the same foundational logic: the regulation of embodiment through systems that alternately intensify and erase legibility in accordance with the demands of capital, revealing visibility and invisibility not as opposites but as coordinated mechanisms of governance.

Importantly, this transformation also reorganizes the texture of Edie's madness. The psychic exhaustion that previously manifested as inertia and affective paralysis within corporate space reappears in gig labor as a form of forced hyper-mobility, in which movement becomes a continuous compulsion without rest or resolution. The novel captures this condition through a fragmented and accelerated narrative rhythm that mirrors the repetitive temporality of gig work, as Edie moves through buses, subways, rental bikes, and congested streets in an exhausting loop that collapses temporal distinction itself. Often, she returns home without the capacity to register duration or affective continuity, recounting how she thrusts "a dollar slice directly into [her] large intestine," collapses into bed already half-asleep, and feels "ready to surrender the part of [herself] that M train mariachi hasn't already killed" (91). What emerges here is not simply exhaustion but a form of embodied excess that paradoxically reproduces the same depletion previously generated by immobility: whether still or in motion, the body is continuously exhausted by the demand to be available for labor.

Ultimately, within these competing regimes of labor, the logic of racial capitalism reveals itself not as a binary between visibility and invisibility, motion and stasis, or presence and absence, but as a *continuous modulation between these states*, each of which functions to exhaust the body's capacity for coherent

selfhood. Within this system, Edie's bodily dissolution becomes increasingly literalized: her descriptions of fatigue and fragmentation register not metaphorical distress but the *gradual erosion of embodied integrity*, in which the boundary between self and environment becomes increasingly unstable. Her movement "without a face" signals not only social erasure but ontological unmooring, as subjectivity ceases to be anchored in recognition and becomes instead distributed across the infrastructures of circulation that organize contemporary labor economies.

At the same time, this invisibility produces a distinct form of vulnerability. Whereas hypervisibility subjected Edie to interpretive violence through overdetermination and moral reading, invisibility exposes her to structural abandonment, in which the absence of recognition does not alleviate pressure but intensifies it through neglect. In this sense, *Luster* refuses any romanticization of disappearance as escape, instead demonstrating that invisibility operates as a dispersed modality of governance, one that functions through indifference rather than scrutiny. Across both regimes, Edie's madness remains anchored in the same structural conditions: it is neither an internal pathology nor a purely individual breakdown, but an embodied and embedded response to systems that alternately over-determine and erase her presence in accordance with the shifting demands of racial capitalism. What persists, therefore, is not resolution but continuity: Edie's madness is produced through the very conditions that structure her legibility as a racialized and gendered subject, and it remains inseparable from the ongoing negotiation between internalized discipline and external constraint. Even moments of apparent withdrawal or refusal are refracted through these structures, returning as exhaustion, fragmentation, and at times even self-reproach, as the novel persistently registers how deeply the logics of racial capitalism are inscribed not only upon the body, but within the forms of perception through which Edie comes to understand herself.

It is precisely from within this suspension—this unresolved oscillation between overdetermination and disappearance—that the novel begins to open onto a longer temporal horizon. If Edie’s madness is produced through these overlapping regimes of embodied regulation, it is also, crucially, never contained within them, insofar as the forms of fragmentation they generate cannot be understood without reference to the historical and intergenerational conditions that precede and exceed her present moment. In other words, what appears as contemporary psychic disintegration is already structured by a deeper genealogy of transmission, one in which violence is not only enacted upon the body but sedimented within it across time. The following section therefore shifts from the contemporary architectures of labor and visibility to the question of inheritance, tracing how Edie’s madness is not only embedded in racial capitalist structures of the present but materially carried forward through familial histories of gendered and racialized dispossession that exceed the limits of the individual subject.

4.3 Mapping the Archive of Mad Components through the Ancestral Line

The notion of madness as a transmissible, materially embedded condition—one that traverses generations rather than emerging within a discrete or self-contained present—structures *Luster’s* articulation of Edie’s mad subjectivity. Within the economy of the novel, the portrayal of multiple stories of mental unraveling does not appear as a series of isolated psychological breakdown or cautionary familial tragedies, but rather as an inescapable form of embodied inheritance through which psychic fragmentation is produced and *reproduced* across multiple generations of women. Far from arising solely from the pressures

of contemporary precarity and neoliberal disaffection, Edie's instability is also continuously shaped by a longer historical continuum of racialized and patriarchal violence, in which dispossession is transmitted not only as narrative memory but as affective and corporeal residue. What follows, then, traces how this logic of inheritance structures Edie's engagement with her maternal and paternal lineages, before demonstrating how these histories of violence are represented as materially inscribed onto her body itself, creating a depiction of madness as embedded in social structures of power, embodied in flesh, and genealogically transmitted across time.

Raised in a fatherless, impoverished household in Queens, New York, alongside ten other siblings, Edie's mother is brutally forced to enter adulthood as soon as she turns sixteen, when she is cast out of her home by her own mother "for general promiscuity and insolence" (67). Off to what the narrative presents as a "bad start," her life unfortunately never takes a different turn, becoming doomed from that point onward to commit herself to a series of bad decisions. Falling into addiction still in her teenage years, her life quickly unfolds along a self-destructing trajectory that, once married, she attempts to rectify with a religious conversion to Seventh Day Adventism. The spiritual reformation, however, fails to deliver the redemption or clarity she so desperately seeks, instead merely serving as a fragile dogmatic scaffolding through which an increasingly incoherent interior life is partially contained but never truly repaired. In Edie's childhood recollections, her mother appears permanently "mellowed by the cosmic and by her prolonged chemical abuse" (150), ultimately reduced to "a husk of herself" (68), left with no available language—spiritual, medical or otherwise—capable of restoring coherence to existence.

This tragic story of mental unraveling—she is, for all intents and purposes, yet another madwoman going mad within the enclosed walls of an apartment—is however hastened and intensified by her disastrous marriage to Edie's father,

an older ex-Navy man who easily seduces her with his charisma and good looks. Yet his poised, virtuous public persona slowly begins to crumble once the couple relocates upstate, where his manipulative and abusive stances come to light as she relapses into her depression. Within the suffocating confines of their home, in fact, he not only isolates and deceives her, engaging in extramarital affairs with women from her congregation, but also actively degrades her, recruiting even the young Edie as his co-conspirator, encouraging her to mock her “mother’s moods and Bible studies” (158). His casual reduction of his wife’s catatonic episodes to mere “moods” (153, 158) participates in his broader abusive treatment of the woman, revealing his deliberate attempt to minimize—even in front of his daughter—her suffering. By stripping his wife’s mental disarray of its validity and, to an extent, its reality, Edie is, then, confronted from a young age with a patriarchal epistemology that renders female pain automatically illegible by reframing it as a personal “excess,” rather than as a structural harm, leading her to unconsciously internalize those norms that will later determine her own understanding of her alienation. Of course, the father enacts a patriarchal violence—this, the novel makes clear—determining what counts as a legitimate illness, who is granted credibility and who is not, and whose interiority is (dis)allowed interpretative authority. As such, her mother’s madness is not only lived in complete isolation but *actively narrated into coherence* by a dominant, masculinized interpretative framework that systematically disavows her psychic reality.

Luster, however, extends this logic of inherited madness beyond the immediate mother-daughter relationship already present in *MYORAR*, sketching instead a broader, yet dispersed genealogy of psychiatric disintegration, embodied in the suppressed history of Edie’s paternal grandmother. Indeed, while the maternal grandmother’s experience of destitution—abandoned by her husband and left to care for eleven children—is recounted in great detail in an

extended flashback early in the novel, the paternal grandmother's story remains conspicuously absent from the family's collective memory, only remembered as the sibling whom the aunts who raised Edie's father in the Bible Belt simply "didn't talk about" (147). Not only excised from the family lore but also relegated to the margins of *Luster's* narrative, her unraveling trajectory—merely summarized as her "slowly going mad" (ibid.)—is actively displaced both temporally and geographically in relation to Edie's existence, occurring entirely offstage, in a faraway mental asylum in an indistinct, rural Louisiana. Minimized through Edie's father's "old man's vocabulary" devoid "of the clinical tact of the DSM-5" (147-148), the woman's condition is reported to the protagonist as none other than "something fickle, something female" (147-148), yet another formulation that strips her psychiatric suffering of clinical specificity and reabsorbs it into the same misogynistic rhetoric through which Edie's mother's condition was framed. The fact that the grandmother's narrative concludes abruptly, in the span of a few sentences within the text, with a lobotomy—as the narrator reports, "so she returned with a severed frontal lobe" (148)—offers Edie yet another example of what kinds of outcomes awaits women affected by mental distress, firmly situating her own personal family's history within a genealogy of institutional violence enacted upon women whose behavior exceeded the narrow, normative expectations of domestic femininity. The paternal grandmother's excision from active family history is not a neutral omission, but rather appears as an act of institutionalized forgetting, a forced silencing that nevertheless persists as a latent, inherited force waiting to resurface in Edie's own fragmented psyche.

Across these fragmented histories of psychological deterioration, Leilani's novel anchors these intergenerational experiences of madness within a broader network of recursive patriarchal violence, each episode interconnected into a broader map of female dispossession, rather than a set of isolated familial

tragedies. Out of this narrative of dispossession, male figures such as Edie's father or her grandfathers appear less as singular, uniquely evil agents than as interchangeable nodes within an overarching system of masculine entitlement. The maternal grandfather is recalled, for instance, as a man fully "equipped to ruin a woman's life" (66), having effortlessly abandoned his wife and children to pursue his own aspirations; Edie's father, on the other hand, withdraws from any form of responsibility across multiple marriages, even vanishing from his own daughter's life when his wife commits suicide. This multi-generational pattern culminates in Edie's explicit, clear-eyed recognition of its uninterrupted sequence over time: "I have learned not to be surprised by a man's sudden withdrawal. It is a tradition that men like Mark and Eric and my father have helped uphold" (153-154). By linking her ex-lover/colleague Mark, her current fling Eric, and her biological father together, Edie actually recognizes that male abandonment and emotional neglect toward women's suffering is not *simply* an individual moral failing or a series of accidental, personal betrayals, but rather a structured temporal logic, a genealogical "tradition" and an inherited social script anchored within patriarchal power. The fact that across multiple generations—her grandmothers', her mother's, her own—men are free to come and go, exploit, deceive and vanish from women's lives without ever taking any accountability reveals—the novel seems to argue—a structural luxury reproduced across time, leaving women alone with the responsibility of taking care of their own of the wreckage these men carelessly leave in their wake. With this statement, then, Edie not only recognizes this recursive logic of reproduction of patriarchal violence but actually verbalizes her own embeddedness within it. Yet Leilani is not simply interested in reconstructing a genealogy of female suffering. The novel's more radical intervention, in fact, lies in showing how these histories do not remain in the past but become *materially incorporated* into Edie's body itself.

Patriarchal violence, therefore, survives not only as historical memory but as *corporeal inheritance*.

Indeed, within this vacuum of care and accountability left by men, Edie's subjectivity and body emerge, within the architecture of the novel, as the inevitable convergence point for these multiple, intersecting histories of gendered and racialized violence. When Edie remarks that the women in her family maybe should not have been mothers, framing it "not so much a judgment as a fact" because they were "dying inside their own bodies, and now *all these dead components are my inheritance*" (195, my emphasis), she explicitly aligns maternity with corporeal disintegration and the maternal line with the transmission of a gender-specific and embodied form of suffering. In the novel, the female body, then, appears not simply as the site upon which patriarchal violence is enacted but also as *the medium* through which its effects are *materially sedimented* and *genealogically reproduced*. Far from remaining external to the subject, structures of domination become—within the economy of the novel—incorporated into the flesh itself of the character, leaving affective, psychic and even *anatomic* traces—the so-called "dead components"—across multiple generations. Much like in *MYORAR*, patriarchal violence thus acquires within *Luster* a profoundly material dimension: it is registered through damaged bodies, altered psychologies and inherited vulnerabilities that accumulate through the family line, transforming Edie's body into a living archive of historical dispossession.

Read in this light, Edie's madness becomes the perceptual and affective register through which these accumulated histories of gendered and racialized oppression are made visible. If structures of power sediment themselves directly into her body, then her madness constitutes the affective and corporeal manifestation of this inscription, exposing the extent to which patriarchal violence persists not only as a social or ideological formation but also as a *lived*,

material experience of exhaustion and pain. The novel, therefore, slightly reframes the protagonist's embodiment, attributing to it historical depth, as Edie's body is seen as carrying within it the lingering, tangible, psycho-physical residues of patriarchal oppression from previous generations.

It is precisely through this embodied logic that Edie comes to understand herself as the continuum of her maternal lineage. Her early recognition of an undeniable bodily continuity with her mother marks a decisive collapse of her paternal lineage into a pure embrace of her maternal embodiment: "I was seven years old, looking how I will always look, which is like *I have a single biological parent, like my father has had no part in my creation, which, in a way, is the truth*" (68, my emphasis). Rather than merely acknowledging physical resemblance between the two women, this statement clearly operates as a total rejection of paternal influence, suggesting instead that what has been transmitted is not simply appearance but an embodied condition—a material, a biological and even psychological one—shaped by a shared history of suffering and vulnerability. This logic of maternal inheritance is, moreover, reinforced throughout the novel through uncanny, dissociative moments of misrecognition where the mother's face appears superimposed directly upon Edie's own reflection in the mirror (56, 68-69). These moments of psychological doubling collapse all temporal distance, rendering biological inheritance a matter of simultaneity: the past does not merely precede the present, but it *actively persists* within it as a living, breathing and embodied residue.

The persistence of this maternal superimposition also helps illuminate another dimension of Edie's artistic impasse. While, as argued earlier, her inability to paint appears to be a symptom of the alienation and psycho-physical impasse she experiences from her embeddedness within racial capitalism and contemporary forms of precarious labor, her inability to complete a self-portrait, in particular, emerges from a more deeply embodied source. If the self-portrait

presupposes the possibility of recognizing and representing herself, Edie, however, repeatedly confronts a reflection that resists such recognition. Looking into the mirror, she sees “a face that doesn’t feel like mine” (58), before later admitting that she sees “only my mother’s face” (68). The reflective surface, thus, ceases to function as a site of stable self-recognition, becoming instead a medium through which inherited histories of dispossession and vulnerability resurface within the present. Her inability to paint herself, then, signifies more than a temporary creative block: it materializes the collapse of a coherent selfhood under the weight of an embodied inheritance that blurs the boundaries between self and mother, past and present. Far from simply lacking an image of herself, Edie confronts a body already inhabited by another history, one whose material and affective residues continue to disrupt both self-perception and artistic representation.

Within the novel, this inherited trauma is further inscribed on Edie’s body through a rigorous, maternal education in physical discipline and self-loathing. Edie, in fact, recalls their domestic life together as a grotesque parody of mother-daughter bonding: “We were bonded in our mutual hatred for our bodies,” Edie bitterly recounts, “though my hatred was adolescent and hers was infinitely more developed, partly a trick of her newly sober brain, which found in food a substitute for the narcotics that had kept her lean. By the time she killed herself, she would still be eleven pounds shy of her goal” (118). For Edie’s mother, once the chaos of psychiatric disintegration claimed her mind, her material body became the absolute last resort—much like for Millie and the protagonist of *MYORAR*—through which she attempted to impose a semblance of order on an otherwise fragmented internal world. Her manic fixations on early-2000s infomercial wellness culture—cabbage soup diets, “kosher Atkins” with steak substitutes made of plant protein, a one-week regime of “just coffee with Danish butter,” followed by another week of foods “that were [only] yellow or green,”

and Zumba routines, “eight-minute abs, or whatever lo-fi glute blasting was available via early aughts on-demand” (ibid.)—yet again reveals the pull that neoliberal self-betterment regimes exert on disaffected women to “cure” their ailments, implicitly equating starvation with personal renewal, and practices of bodily control with moral worth. Even in suicide, this logic remains unyielding: the detail that her mother died “eleven pounds shy of her goal” crystallizes Edie’s awareness of the absolute impossibility of achieving bodily redemption within a system that renders perfection mandatory, yet consistently unattainable or deferred to a future that remains consistently out of a woman’s reach. Yet, despite being aware of the intrinsic faults of these wellness regimens, Edie—having inherited this active legacy of self-hatred—nonetheless feels the pressure to yield to these exhausting efforts to discipline and contain, as discussed in the previous section of this chapter, her own grotesque, unruly body to conform to the imperatives of propriety demanded within neoliberal society in order to obtain success or, at least, acceptance.

Standing in stark contrast to the alternative model of mother-daughter relationality displayed by Rebecca and Akila—who are portrayed as capable of finding a shared language of intimacy and care—Edie’s maternal inheritance is instead structured entirely around revulsion, namely around a deep alienation toward her own abject flesh. Her mother’s rejection of Edie’s “ugly, glottal laugh” (124)—a trait that the protagonist explicitly inherits from her—functions as a foundational lesson in self-surveillance, encoding the imperative to revise and mask one’s visible markers of difference out of the fear that unrevised visibility for black women like them may eventually invite danger or punishment. The emphasis on this inherited laughter consequently transforms what might appear to be a trivial physical characteristic into a material sign of genealogical continuity, recasting their abjection into an ontological condition, something

inscribed and etched into the body as a lived, material legacy of otherness and transmitted across generations, rather than an individual source of shame.

The mother's rejection of the daughter's laugh, therefore, signifies more than a refusal of Edie's body and voice; it also constitutes a rejection of her own embodied history, exposing the extent to which the violence of racialized and patriarchal norms has been internalized. In disciplining her daughter's body, she reproduces the *very* mechanisms of regulation through which her own body was rendered unacceptable, passing on not only a visible marker of resemblance but also an inherited disposition toward self-correction and self-erasure. What is transmitted between mother and daughter, then, is not simply bodily likeness but an *embodied consciousness of vulnerability*: the deeply sedimented understanding that survival depends upon rendering one's difference less visible, less audible, and therefore more palatable to a social order structured by whiteness. The maternal line, thus, becomes the vehicle through which both corporeal traits and the affective disciplines attached to them are genealogically reproduced, illustrating how histories of patriarchal and racial oppression come to inhabit the body as lived experience instead of remaining external social forces.

As such, what distinguishes *Luster* from the other catastrofemal narratives examined here is that Edie's madness is relocated within a much longer historical continuum, where her body itself becomes the material archive through which racialized and gendered violences accumulated across generations ultimately converge and manifest themselves as a shared inheritance. Her fragmentation is therefore not merely embedded within contemporary systems of power but inherited through the material legacies those structures have produced across a broader history of black disenfranchisement and dispossession. Within the novel, madness, consequently, emerges as simultaneously embodied, embedded *and* genealogical, rendering the protagonist's body both the site upon which patriarchal and racial violence is

enacted *and* the medium through which its effects continue to be reproduced across time.

If Edie's body has become the material repository of these accumulated histories, however, can this inheritance be interrupted? Is it possible to negotiate, transform, or even escape a condition of otherness that has become materially inscribed into the flesh itself? It is precisely around these questions that the novel's final movement is organized. For a brief moment, pregnancy appears to offer the possibility of a different future, reactivating the familiar maternal script as the promise of personal renewal and genealogical repair. Yet *Luster* ultimately refuses this redemptive fantasy, dismantling maternity as a teleological solution to inherited suffering before locating the possibility of transformation elsewhere—in forms of artistic practice, relational vulnerability and embodied openness that no longer depend upon biological reproduction as the vehicle of historical redemption.

4.4 The Illusion of Redemption in the Future Child: Unsettling the Scripts of Reproductive Futurity

In *Luster*, the dismantling of the conventional narrative of feminine fulfillment through maternity occurs through its exposure as a structurally overdetermined fantasy, one in which personal renewal and self-coherence are falsely imagined as achievable only through reproductive continuity. Rather than functioning as a site of resolution or affective repair, motherhood in the novel is re-situated within a broader field of competing temporal and ideological regimes, directly confronting neoliberal imperatives of self-reinvention alongside patriarchal investments in domestic reproduction. What is ultimately at stake in Leilani's novel is not a simplistic, reactionary rejection of maternity, but a systemic

destabilization of its normative function as a redemptive endpoint. By unseating this teleological structure, *Luster* refuses to treat reproductive labor as an escape hatch from madness.

Within contemporary neoliberal logics of self-betterment, maternity frequently operates as a privileged site of renewal and moral recalibration, often supplementing or displacing those other regimes of bodily optimization, grounded in discipline and self-fashioning, that have shaped the catastrofemal trajectories analyzed in the first chapter of this dissertation. In *Luster*, this fantasy of bodily and psychic renewal, in fact, surfaces only when Edie discovers her pregnancy, prompting her brief reorientation toward a horizon of redemptive possibility. Driven by a desire to retrospectively repair her life, she reflects: “[...] and what better way to prove yourself than through a child, my personal failure amended by such heroic child-rearing” (195). This very brief formulation effectively condenses the seductive pull of neoliberal logics of self-betterment, wherein personal failures or deficiencies are not negated but simply reorganized into a narrative of productive reinvention. Here, in particular, the child comes to function as an extension of the self, a compensatory figure, through which prior failures of the soon-to-be parents might be rewritten into legible expressions of success through child-rearing (Ahmed 2010). In this sense, this neoliberal framing of motherhood does not abandon the body as a site of self-fashioning but simply reconfigures it: while no longer disciplined through dieting and aesthetic entrepreneurship—like it happened in *TNM*—it is instead mobilized as the site of maternal labor, where value is reconstituted through a woman’s exemplary performance of maternal care and sacrifice (Cooper 2017). Such a configuration resonates with broader cultural scripts surrounding black motherhood, which, as Jennifer C. Nash (2021) has argued, are often structured through a paradoxical economy of visibility in which black maternal labor is simultaneously hyper-visible and overdetermined as “tragic heroism” (4), staged

against the backdrop of enduring structural inequality. Edie's brief investment in maternal renewal is, thus, produced *through*, rather than external to, these converging racialized and gendered scripts of subject-formation, illustrating how neoliberal and patriarchal frameworks collude in the regulation of futurity altogether, rendering motherhood *the* privileged mechanism through which these aspirations are imagined to become attainable.

Edie's investment into a happier, future self through pregnancy becomes further intelligible when read through a posthuman feminist framework, which reconfigures gestation not as a state of biological containment, but as a temporality of suspended becoming. As Rodante Van der Waal (2018) contended, pregnancy constitutes a "being with the always-not-yet of the world" (369), a formulation that aligns with Rosi Braidotti's (2022) conceptualization of the maternal as an opening onto a horizon of futurity, structured by relational emergence instead of teleological completion. In *Luster*, Edie's initial attraction to pregnancy briefly converges with this expanded temporality, offering her a provisional pause within the otherwise recursive and intergenerational logic of inherited defect and dysfunction through which she has always made sense of her own existence. Precisely because she occupies this space of temporal indeterminacy, Edie permits herself to envision a future not wholly circumscribed by inherited damage, finally animated by the possibility of transformation and self-renewal.

Yet, this suspension is inherently volatile, continually saturated by the very genealogical and structural conditions it seeks to transcend. This instability becomes legible in Edie's reflection on pregnancy as an improbable interruption within a trajectory otherwise governed by repetition: "The only reason I want to tell him [Eric]" she muses, "is because of the improbability of it, this miraculous fluke that has come about even through the severe limitations of our bodies, a fluke that makes me ill but also dreamy, *like something can be different, new*"

(Leilani 2020, 198, my emphasis). This passage, framing pregnancy as a “miraculous fluke,” captures the profound ambivalence Edie attributes to her gestation, simultaneously invoking its biological unpredictability and its fragile ability of offering an unforeseen break from an otherwise pre-determined lineage of damage. This moment of potentiality, however, is immediately destabilized by her description of her affective condition as “ill but so dreamy,” an expression which encapsulates the friction between her imagined projection and the material reality of her body. Rather than inaugurating a *tabula rasa*, pregnancy opens a suspended temporal field wherein the future becomes momentarily thinkable without ever being structurally secured. Edie’s optimism, therefore, does not signal a naïve belief in personal transformation *per se*, but rather marks the precarious generation of an alternative temporality in which her personal baggage does not fully exhaust what comes next.

This fragile opening toward hope for personal renewal is extended in another passage of the novel, where Edie daydreams about a future daughter who might be able to exceed the limitations of her own “mad” lineage. In this projection, motherhood becomes a vehicle for staging a temporary break in the family cycle’s transmission of inherited damage. Yet this speculative future remains acutely circumscribed by Edie’s recognition of the gendered and structural constraints that would await her hypothetical offspring: “I have no doubt that a boy would be beautiful. A girl might have some things to overcome” (197). What is staged here is not simply a contrast between hope and constraint, but the way in which futurity itself is produced as a differential field of possibility, unevenly distributed and already marked by the logics of gendered inheritance. This tension between this fragile projection for renewal and the persistence of structural precarity becomes especially palpable as the daydream unfolds:

A sunlit dream where I do better, where there is no father and my daughter and I move upstate and sometimes I yell at her while helping her with her homework, but ultimately we are pals, and she is someone I can talk to, ill-tempered and serious and leaving bowls of cold cereal around the house, off to kindergarten with noisy, ornate hair, because like black mothers everywhere, I will be required to overdo it with the barrettes. And maybe it is not all great and in my single motherhood my bandwidth is shot with work and child rearing and trying to get laid. Maybe I bring too many men into her life and she wishes she knew who her dad was, and I tell her I don't know, the months in Jersey like a brief, sunlit seizure. *Maybe she is too much like me, too much like my mother, teetering silently on some horrific precipice in her teenage years until she comes out the other side as the woman I couldn't be, a woman with good credit and hope and who is terrifying in her conviction to be whatever it is she wants to be* (220, my emphasis).

Oscillating between wistful idealism and painful self-awareness, this passage exposes the volatility of Edie's fantasies, as intergenerational repetition and aspirational projections are continuously folded into one another without resolution. The daughter is positioned in a dual, highly conflicted register: she is simultaneously a redemptive figure—imagined as “the woman I couldn't be”—and a subject already indelibly inscribed within the very lineage she is tasked to transcend. As a result, Edie's maternal body is figured as a deeply paradoxical site: both a potential vessel for renewal and an incubator of inherited dysfunction. What emerges out of the protagonist's daydream is, then, not a linear progression toward historical improvement, but a recursive temporal loop in which each generation replays, in an altered key, the structural conditions of the previous one. *Luster*, thus, exposes a cover structural pattern wherein each generation of women within Edie's family bears the impossible task of rectifying the perceived inadequacies of the one before: the maternal grandmother suppresses her children's artistic ambitions to protect them from repeating their father's fate; the mother imposes conformity and discipline upon Edie to help her navigate a world that had disenfranchised her; and Edie herself dreams of a daughter who might emerge from her own wreckage with the financial stability and resilience she seems to lack. What appears, at first glance, as a teleological narrative of progress gradually reveals itself as a recursive temporal structure in

which hope is continually deferred onto the next generation without ever altering the structural conditions that generate its necessity.

This tension between her fantasies and Edie's reality is further radicalized when she confronts the biological dimensions of this inheritance, viewing the fetus as already entangled in the material legacies of dysfunction that populate her family's history:

I think about our child again, and this time a slew of predispositions undermine that gorgeous Punnett square. A child with profound narcotic inclinations, with generations of inherited trauma, with questionable brain chemistry and a lifetime of some ceaseless prefrontal seesaw, with my flat, rectangular feet and out mutual taste of disco (Leilani 2020, 197-198).

What surfaces here is a deeply affective, corporeal awareness of inheritance that, read through posthuman feminist terms, reaffirms the transgenerational inscription of madness—simultaneously biologically embedded and materially and affectively sedimented—traced in the previous section. Posthuman theorists have, in fact, reconceptualized pregnancy as a dynamic, relational state of becoming wherein the maternal body acts as a generative interface within a “genealogical, generational, gestational network” (Van der Waal 2018, 370), where both mother and fetus are co-constituted through flows of matter, hormones, and affect. Edie's body, read through this lens, operates as a literal and metaphorical incubator (Leilani 2020, 198)—not an autonomous reproductive unit, but an unstable assemblage through which her family's histories of dispossession are materially sedimented and transmitted from one generation to the other. The allusion to “inherited trauma” and “questionable brain chemistry” collapses any easy distinction between genetic transmission and structural violence, rendering the novel's representation of madness as an intergenerational phenomenon not as a metaphor, but as a *visceral, embodied sedimentation* of harm moving through across generations through living bodies.

As a result, the novel systematically dismantles from *within* the ideological scaffolding underpinning reproductive futurism: namely, the heteronormative belief that the figure of the child guarantees historical continuity, personal *and* societal redemption, and progress (see Berlant 1997; Edelman 2004; Muñoz 2009). Edie's pregnancy initially appears to participate in precisely this fantasy, promising her a future capable of amending personal failure and interrupting the repetition of what might seem a "familial curse." Yet, every projection of maternal hope is progressively sabotaged by the protagonist's realization that the structural conditions producing her own precarity must inevitably overdetermine her child's trajectory. The fantasy of renewal is, therefore, exposed as illusory, not because hope itself is impossible, but because the burden of overcoming historical violence is consistently displaced onto the next generation of women. Far from constituting an escape from inherited damage, motherhood—the novel seems to counter—becomes one more mechanism through which precarity is reproduced, managed, and deferred.

Unlike *Severance*, whose conclusion ultimately leaves intact the association between pregnancy and historical continuity, *Luster* pushes this reproductive logic to its breaking point. Whereas Candace's pregnancy remains tethered to the possibility of continuity and survival after societal collapse, Edie's pregnancy exposes the radical impossibility of securing redemption through reproductive succession. The novel, therefore, dismantles the conventional script of maternal fulfillment not by rejecting pregnancy outright, but by exposing how neoliberal fantasies of self-renewal, patriarchal investments in domestic reproduction, and the ideological promises of reproductive futurity *all* depend upon the continual deferral of structural injustice onto the future child. The collapse of Edie's pregnancy through miscarriage, then, does not simply foreclose one possible future, but instead demystifies the fantasy that motherhood could ever resolve

the historical, racialized, and embodied conditions from which Edie's suffering emerges.

This section ultimately intends to demonstrate that even the most seemingly affirmative configurations of maternity within *Luster* remain structurally overdetermined by the very genealogies of damage they appear to suspend, insofar as pregnancy functions not as a rupture from inheritance but as one of its most intensified sites of repetition and deferral. If reproductive futurity collapses under the weight of its own impossible demand to repair what is historically produced, then what remains is not simply disillusionment, but the need to rethink the forms of relation, embodiment, and creation that exceed the maternal as a privileged site of futurity. The following section, therefore, turns away from biological reproduction as the horizon of continuity, in order to consider how the novel reconfigures the possibility of transformation through aesthetic practice, relational vulnerability, and non-teleological forms of embodied openness that refuse both the logic of inherited damage and the fantasy of its repair.

4.5 The Art of Failure: Toward Alternative Modes of Legibility

If Edie's trajectory through corporate labor and gig economies exposes the shifting modalities through which racial capitalism regulates black female embodiment—oscillating between hypervisibility and structural disappearance, interpretive excess and ontological erasure—it is in her artistic practice, her emergent relational attachments, and her reconfiguration of abjection as both aesthetic and epistemological resource that *Luster* stages its most decisive refusal of teleological models of subject formation. This refusal, however, should not be mistaken for a redemptive overcoming of the structures that have rendered Edie

illegible. Rather, what the novel produces is a reorientation of inhabitation itself: a mode of remaining *within* conditions of constraint while refusing the interpretive economies that convert black female life into either pathology or coherence. What is at stake, therefore, is not the emergence of an alternative position outside the regimes previously analyzed—visibility versus invisibility, coherence versus fragmentation, care versus abandonment—but a transformation in the relation to these very terms, one that resists their resolution into dialectical synthesis. In this sense, Edie’s artistic practice does not signal an escape from the structures that produce her psychic disarray, but rather a shift in how those structures are perceived, inhabited, and materially negotiated from within.

The desire to complete a self-portrait, then, emerges not only as a recurrent thread in Edie’s artistic development, but also as an extended meditation on visibility itself—an effort to produce, in her own words, “a record, a proof that I was here” (Leilani 2020, 227). This demand acquires existential urgency insofar as it gestures toward the broader problem of existence under conditions of historical and social erasure: how one comes to be perceived, recorded, or remembered in a world that has persistently rendered women like Edie, her mother, and her grandmother structurally invisible. This sense of dispossession is sharpened in Edie’s recollection of her mother, whose presence, she suggests, consistently eluded artistic capture, as though her mother’s subjectivity itself had been foreclosed from representation. What is at stake in the self-portrait, then, is not simply aesthetic completion but ontological recognition: the attempt to stabilize a self that has been rendered historically illegible, fragmented or ungraspable within regimes of gendered and racialized representation.

Yet this recurring failure of representation also raises the possibility that illegibility itself may constitute an inherited condition rather than an individual limitation. If madness and invisibility are transmitted across generations, then

Edie's project becomes inseparable from the question of how such a lineage might be interrupted without reproducing the very demand for coherence that sustains it. As the novel suggests, the answer does not lie in the restoration of a lost wholeness, but in a *reconfiguration of what visibility itself entails*. Rather than producing coherence through mastery or compositional control, Edie begins to locate selfhood within fragmentation and material excess. Her artistic trajectory, therefore, moves away from the recovery of an integral subject toward an epistemology of partiality, in which subjectivity becomes accessible only through what exceeds containment. Where grotesqueness and nonconformity functioned for earlier generations in her family as sources of shame or precarity, Edie's gradual acceptance of her own molecular, material abject—"the ooze inside" (10)—marks a revaluation of precisely those elements excluded from normative selfhood. In relinquishing the disciplinary demands of composure and legibility, she reclaims the grotesque as a mode of expression capable of holding alienation, psychic disarray, and embodied estrangement simultaneously. What initially appears as a failure of representation is, thus, refigured as a refusal of the terms under which representation is granted: the image no longer stabilizes the subject, but instead becomes a site in which instability itself is rendered perceptible.

This reorientation toward the abject finds its clearest visual articulation in a pivotal early scene following Edie's troubling sexual encounter with Eric, during which she is physically assaulted. Attempting once again to paint herself, she notes: "I have never been able to finish a self-portrait, but in these studies, in the burnt sienna and purple that is meant to be my face, I see the bruises clearly, and it fills me with relief" (69). In this moment, recognition is paradoxically secured through disfiguration: the damaged surface of the face becomes the condition under which the self becomes partially visible. What is significant here is not simply that injury enables representation, but that representation itself is reconfigured as inseparable from bodily rupture. Edie's first partial success in

rendering her image coincides with the disruption of bodily integrity, underscoring the paradoxical productivity of abjection as an aesthetic and epistemological strategy at this point in the narrative. Unlike her mother, who ultimately withdraws from the artistic gaze in fear of grotesque exposure, Edie discovers in distortion *a mode of clarity* that is at once visual and psychic. Her deformation becomes the site of a fragile legibility, allowing her to articulate presence *outside* the normative frameworks of feminine composure and aesthetic coherence she has typically come to understand herself. In recognizing her wounded image, Edie affirms not only suffering but existence itself, transforming what had been deemed unrepresentable into a provisional form of visibility.

From this point onward, and aware that she must “try to find another way toward the self-portrait” (156), Edie gradually reorients her practice toward modes of representation no longer grounded in coherence, composure, or formal unity, but in fragmentation and material excess. Her creative trajectory, particularly following her move into Eric and Rebecca’s home, is marked by a slow displacement of the self-portrait away from the body and toward the residual materiality of everyday life. Instead of striving toward a totalizing image of the self, she begins to approach self-representation obliquely, through an attunement to what conventional aesthetic regimes exclude: discarded objects, domestic waste, bodily residues, and the overlooked debris of daily existence. This shift signals not merely a change in artistic subject matter, but a fundamental reconfiguration of the conditions under which selfhood becomes perceptible at all. Subjectivity is no longer located within interior coherence but distributed across material entanglements, such that the self can only be apprehended indirectly, through its traces within the world.

This process is significantly intensified by Edie’s proximity to Rebecca, whose presence operates as a catalyst for this perceptual and aesthetic reorientation. Within the domestic space they share, Edie’s attention becomes

increasingly drawn to surfaces, textures, and material residues that resist stabilization, while Rebecca herself emerges as a figure through whom corporeality is rendered explicitly porous, vulnerable, and unstable. In this sense, Edie's outward redirection of the gaze is inseparable from a broader decentering of subjectivity, in which perception is no longer anchored in the sovereign self but circulates through relations of attention, proximity, and affective exposure. It is within this emerging configuration that self-discovery becomes indistinguishable from relational attunement, and artistic practice becomes a means of inhabiting—rather than resolving—the instability that defines both self and world.

Tentative and nonlinear, Edie's reorientation begins upon her entry into Eric and Rebecca's home, a space that is at once alien and meticulously curated, marked by polish, restraint, and an almost impersonal coherence. As a racialized outsider within this domestic environment, Edie's perception is drawn not to its apparent totality but to its minute textures and overlooked surfaces: "glass and alloy and silk," materials defined by "their fickle relationship to light and so as difficult to render" (156), alongside perfumes, jewelry, clothing, and hair. Her attention lingers on these unstable surfaces in a way that produces a series of fragmented still-lives—studies of sheen and decay, order and entropy—through which she attempts to locate traces of vitality in an otherwise emotionally opaque space. Significantly, these objects begin to function as provisional substitutes for self-representation, marking the point at which portraiture ceases to be anchored in the body and instead disperses into the material environment:

I try to find another way toward the self-portrait. I close my door and destroy my room and take a picture of the mess. I approach the drawing optimistically, but I am not there. The next time the house is clear, I take an opposite tack and clean. I take out the garbage and then I take a picture of the bags on the curb. I clean the bathroom and take a picture of the tongue of hair I pull from the drain, and at night I render these pictures, hoping to see myself (156).

What emerges here is not simply a shift in artistic medium but a decisive reconfiguration of what counts as a viable site of selfhood. Edie's refusal to locate her image in the face or body signals a departure from conventional portraiture and from the aesthetic ideologies of coherence and self-mastery that implicitly structure the domestic space she inhabits. Instead, the debris of everyday life becomes the ground of a new visual grammar, one that does not purge the abject but incorporates it as constitutive of representation itself. The self she seeks is, therefore, neither unified nor legible in conventional terms, but dispersed across residues and material excess. In this sense, what initially appears as a failure of self-portraiture is more accurately a refusal of the conditions under which self-portraiture is permitted to cohere.

This aesthetic reorientation is further developed through Edie's serial engagement with damaged domestic objects—a lightbulb, a plate, a winter glove—whose fractured residues she renders in paint while designating them, again, as self-portraits. These gestures do not resolve into compositional unity, yet they register a growing willingness to locate subjectivity in what exceeds repair or containment. Importantly, this shift is accompanied by a revaluation of the very materials that earlier generations of women in her lineage were compelled to disavow. As Edie reflects, "there are other things inside me that are dead, but there is so much life around me, tomatoes that beat the bugs and rot, waiting to be held by a hand" (130). Here, decay and vitality are no longer oppositional terms but mutually constitutive processes, through which life persists precisely in its modes of decomposition. Resonating with Jane Bennett's (2010) formulation of "vibrant matter," the novel thus figures materiality as already animated, already relational, undoing any stable separation between subject and object, interiority and environment. Edie's artistic practice, in this sense, becomes not only representational but epistemological: a way of knowing the self through forms of matter that resist stabilization.

It is at this point in Edie's perceptual and artistic reorientation that the novel introduces a crucial inflection, as her attention gradually shifts from inert objects to other subjects, most notably Rebecca. This transition is not immediate but staged through a series of perceptual recalibrations, in which the domestic environment ceases to function merely as a field of objects and becomes instead a site of embodied presence and relational tension. Initially, Rebecca appears within a structure that might easily sustain a familiar narrative script of asymmetry or rivalry—one in which proximity between women is organized through comparison or latent antagonism. Indeed, the intertextual resonance with Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) momentarily activates precisely such a horizon of expectation, in which the figure of "Rebecca" might be read as spectral remainder or a structuring absence. Yet *Luster* subtly withholds this logic of substitution, refusing to stabilize either woman within the roles of rival, double or haunting predecessor. Instead, what emerges is a mode of perception in which neither subject occupies a fixed position within a hierarchy of identification, and where relationality is no longer structured through competition but through a slower, more unstable form of mutual apprehension.

Within this reconfigured field, Rebecca is encountered not as a symbolic figure but as materially excessive presence, registered in explicitly corporeal terms that resist idealization: "most conspicuously an organism," composed of "smell of yeast and salt, deodorant and shampoo," and a body that absorbs "the finite oxygen" around her, "a thing that can weep and degrade" (Leilani 2020, 117-118). Rather than functioning as an object of desire or antagonism, her corporeality becomes continuous with Edie's emerging aesthetic orientation toward permeability and disintegration. What is significant here is that recognition does not occur through interpretive mastery but through *sustained attention* to bodily exposure, such that perception itself becomes an ethically charged form of proximity. Edie's gaze, accordingly, is no longer organized by

patriarchal logics of evaluation or consumption, but by a more uncertain attentiveness that registers presence through affective residue and material trace.

It is precisely this recalibration of attention that gradually displaces any residual fantasy of rivalry. Far from being competing figures within a pre-existing narrative economy, Edie and Rebecca emerge as co-participants in a fragile economy of looking, in which each becomes alternately observer and observed without stabilization into fixed roles. The novel, thus, reworks the Gothic structure implicitly evoked by du Maurier, not by inverting it in a symmetrical sense, but by dissolving the very conditions under which rivalry becomes legible as a structuring principle. What replaces it is a slow accretion of shared perceptual space, in which intimacy is not produced through disclosure or resolution, but through repeated, partial acts of attention. Their developing affective idiom—later described as a language “whittled down to the essential vocabulary, to soft, yearning words” (225)—signals not narrative reconciliation but the emergence of a communicative minimalism shaped by the limits of articulation under conditions of emotional and social precarity.

This dynamic of mutual perception is further intensified in the morgue sequence, where artistic practice becomes explicitly entangled with the study of decomposition. Here, the cadaver functions not as object of morbid fascination but as a site in which the novel’s aesthetics of instability are rendered most explicit: “One moment the body is whole, and the next it is turned out like a rind” (186). The significance of this formulation lies in its refusal of stable form; the body is neither preserved nor simply destroyed but caught in a process of continuous unmaking in which legibility emerges only as transformation. Yet within this instability, Edie identifies “something exact,” a precision located not in coherence but in attentive rendering of flux. Painting, in this sense, becomes a practice of translating instability without neutralizing it, sustaining the tension between dissolution and form rather than resolving it.

Within this shared space of looking and making, Rebecca's presence becomes folded into Edie's perceptual field not as rival subject but as co-participant in an economy of attention oriented toward the fragile materiality of bodies and objects alike. The exchange of glances between them during this sequence is, therefore, not supplementary to the artistic process but constitutive of it, suggesting a form of relational perception in which *meaning emerges through shared exposure* instead of interpretive capture. Edie's recurring invocation of the "ooze inside" is thus no longer confined to self-description but extends outward as a general condition of embodied relation, in which both seeing and being seen are structured by vulnerability, opacity and affective permeability. Painting becomes, in this sense, an act of mediated care: a form of looking that does not stabilize its object but remains with its instability, allowing recognition to emerge without resolution.

Pregnancy briefly intensifies an already operative logic of embodied decentering, although the novel persistently resists any attribution of originary causality to it. Edie's growing awareness of the fetus's influence on her physiological and imaginative life appears, at first, to signal a newly emergent form of creative expansion, yet what the narrative gradually clarifies is that this perceived exception does not generate a new capacity so much as render visible a condition that has already structured her aesthetic practice. The gestational body does not produce relationality *ex nihilo* but only amplifies a mode of being that has consistently been grounded in permeability, fragmentation, and material entanglement. In this sense, Edie's experience of pregnancy as heightened perception, temporal disruption, and bodily estrangement is continuous with her earlier engagements with abjection, waste, and distributed forms of looking. Creativity is not caused by gestation; instead, gestation becomes the figure through which an already existing condition of embodied instability is retrospectively legible. What is therefore reconfigured through pregnancy is not

the origin of artistic agency but *its perceptibility*. Although Edie intermittently attributes a kind of “magical” generativity to gestation, as if it were the source of her renewed artistic clarity, the narrative persistently displaces this interpretation. The capacities she experiences as newly emergent—porousness, heightened sensory receptivity, and the loosening of bodily and psychic containment—are precisely those that her earlier artistic practice has been rehearsing all along. Pregnancy does not inaugurate openness but merely renders visible the fact that openness was never absent. It functions less as transformation than as epistemological exposure: a moment in which the already-decentered structure of subjectivity becomes difficult to misrecognize as coherence.

What becomes clear in the aftermath of pregnancy is that this logic of decentering is neither contingent nor reversible. Edie’s moment of recognition—“for the first time in my life, there I am. Or, at least, something about it is recognizable” (217)—does not signal a return to stability, but the consolidation of *partial legibility* as a *structural condition* of subjectivity. For this reason, recognition here does not resolve fragmentation, but makes it perceptible as a livable, if unstable, mode of being. The significance of this moment lies precisely in its refusal of repair: what emerges is not wholeness, but a threshold of intelligibility that no longer requires coherence in order to register as presence. This is condensed in Edie’s graphite self-portrait: “Later, I try to paint. When I can’t, I sit in front of the mirror and do a quick graphite study of my face, and for the first time in my life, there I am. Or, at least, something about it is recognizable” (217). The force of this passage lies in its hesitation, in the way recognition immediately withdraws from certainty into qualification. The image does not resolve into mastery but only produces a fragile zone of perceptibility in which the self appears without stabilizing into coherence. The significance of this moment lies not in the achievement of self-representation, but in the

emergence of a minimal, unstable legibility that persists precisely because it remains incomplete. The self-portrait, in its unfinishedness, is not a failure of artistic execution but a sustained confrontation with irreducibility, in which Edie's presence is neither fully secured nor fully lost.

At the level of narrative structure, this moment functions as a crucial inflection point: for the first time, Edie appears within her own artistic field not as absence or distortion but as a partially recognizable figure. This appearance, however, does not mark resolution of her earlier artistic impasse but only retroactively reframes it as a condition of perceptual training. What the graphite sketch makes visible is not the overcoming of fragmentation but its gradual conversion into a mode of seeing that can no longer demand coherence as its endpoint. In this sense, artistic practice becomes inseparable from a politics of legibility that refuses both erasure and repair, insisting instead on the precarious persistence of partial visibility under conditions of structural violence. It is, in fact, fundamental that Edie's artistic trajectory does not culminate in a completed self-portrait: this absence, then, underscores *Luster's* sustained refusal of teleological expectations surrounding artistic development, psychic healing and, more broadly, self-mastery itself. Edie's insistence on continuing to work as an artist, despite her fragmentation, becomes a mode of claiming productivity *within failure itself*, such that unfinishedness is refigured not as lack but as *the very condition of artistic and subjective persistence*. Identity, in this configuration, is not the endpoint of a developmental arc but an ongoing negotiation with forms of legibility that remain structurally incomplete.

It is precisely this refusal of closure that prepares the novel's final conceptual displacement. *Luster* closes by shifting attention away from the fantasy of autonomous self-representation toward a logic of relational visibility: perhaps the self-portrait was never the telos of Edie's artistic project, but rather a provisional structure displaced by encounters with others who might, "with

merciless, deliberate hands,” place her “onto the canvas,” subjecting her to a “close and inappropriate reading,” and thereby granting her a form of legibility that exceeds self-authorship (227). Crucially, this reconfiguration does not resolve the question of visibility but relocates it within relational encounter, where recognition is no longer produced through interior coherence but through the unstable ethics of being perceived by another. This final displacement has significant consequences for the novel’s broader rethinking of the catastrofemale. The suspension in failure that has structured Edie’s trajectory is neither redeemed nor overcome, but re-situated within a relational field in which vulnerability, attention and shared exposure become the conditions for alternative forms of recognition. The novel refuses to redeem Edie through artistic triumph or maternal resolution, closing instead with a fragile redistribution of visibility among women—Edie, Rebecca, and Akila—in which being seen no longer depends on mastery of the self but on the willingness to remain exposed to the perceptual labor of others. In this sense, Edie’s final act of painting Rebecca does not complete her artistic arc but displaces it, shifting the site of visibility *from self to relation*. In a world in which black women are routinely denied stable legibility, this concluding gesture does not resolve that condition but reframes its stakes: recognition—the novel seems to counter—emerges not through coherence or incorporation, but through the precarious, affectively charged practices of mutual attention that allow fragmented subjects to persist without being made whole. Under the gaze of another, presence is neither fully secured nor fully denied but held in suspension as *a shared and contingent form of visibility*.

Ultimately, across its sustained engagement with corporate labor, intergenerational inheritance, reproductive futurity, and artistic practice, *Luster* revisits many of the central concerns that have structured the catastrofemale narratives analyzed in this dissertation—namely exhaustion, illegibility, affective

disintegration, and the failure of normative scripts of feminine development—but it does so by fundamentally reconfiguring their stakes through the racialized positioning of its protagonist. In *Edie*, madness is no longer simply an effect of neoliberal precarity or gendered overdetermination but is instead embedded within the logics of racial capitalism and patriarchy in ways that intensify and transform the very conditions under which subjectivity becomes thinkable. Hypervisibility and invisibility no longer operate as abstract or interchangeable regimes of attention but are experienced as specifically racialized modalities of being over-read, under-recognized, and continuously rendered legible within structures that refuse reciprocal recognition. At the same time, madness is not only structurally produced in the present but sedimented across generations, insofar as histories of gendered and racialized violence are shown to be materially inscribed within the body itself, producing a form of inheritance that is at once affective, biological, and institutional.

Within this framework, *Luster* stages a sustained dismantling of redemptive trajectories that have traditionally investigated within catastrofemal narratives. Crucially, this includes not only the familiar neoliberal promise of self-reinvention through labor or aesthetic discipline, but also the reproductive futurism that continues to linger, more ambivalently, within other contemporary configurations such as *Severance*, where pregnancy still holds the promise of continuity or survival. In *Luster*, even maternity is ultimately revealed as structurally overdetermined: rather than offering an escape from inherited damage, it becomes one of its most intensified sites of repetition, insofar as the fantasy of repair is repeatedly displaced onto the figure of the child. The novel, thus, refuses all teleological endpoints—whether professional success, psychological integration or maternal redemption—and instead exposes the ways in which these forms of closure depend upon the deferral of structural violence into the future.

It is against this systematic foreclosure of redemptive scripts that art emerges as the novel's most significant reconfiguration of subjectivity. Edie's artistic practice, her emergent relational attachments, and her reorientation toward abjection do not offer an exit from the conditions previously analyzed but instead constitute *a different mode of inhabiting them*. The significance of this final gesture extends beyond Edie's individual trajectory, for it ultimately reframes what she earlier names the desire to "go off script" (20). The novel's final movement relocates this impulse away from withdrawal or refusal and toward relation: "going off script" no longer signifies escape from racialized and gendered regimes of legibility, but a reconfiguration of *how one might exist within them otherwise*. This alternative does not depend upon achieving coherence, psychological integration or incorporation into dominant systems of value; nor does it hinge upon becoming newly visible in the terms those systems recognize. Instead, the question shifts from how Edie might become legible according to the grammars of racial capitalism to how forms of mutual recognition might emerge among subjects whose lives are already structured by fragmentation, precarity and partial illegibility.

In this sense, visibility itself is transformed from an individual achievement into *a relational practice*. It no longer signals successful incorporation into normative regimes of recognition, but rather the fragile possibility of encountering another subject capable of perceiving incompleteness without demanding its resolution. Nothing resembling neoliberal redemption ultimately takes place, yet this absence of closure does not signal failure or narrative deficiency. Rather, *Luster* consistently refuses the assumption that coherence, healing or self-mastery constitute the necessary endpoints of female development. In doing so, it proposes that unfinishedness may itself function as an ethical and aesthetic condition, one through which alternative forms of relation become tentatively imaginable. Edie's identity, therefore, remains

suspended, not as the result of arrested development, but because development itself is revealed as an inadequate horizon for understanding black female subjectivity under racial capitalism.

In transforming the catastrofemale figure in this way, *Luster* does not abandon her defining features but reorients their implications. Failure becomes method instead of deficiency; incompleteness becomes a refusal of teleological closure; vulnerability becomes the condition of relation rather than its negation; and unbelonging shifts from a mark of exclusion to a situated position from which alternative, fragile forms of collectivity might be cautiously imagined. Unlike earlier catastrofemale narratives in which suspension often resolves into isolation or self-enclosure, *Luster* suggests that even within conditions of structural exclusion there may emerge unstable forms of community that neither overcome catastrophe nor redeem it. These are not utopian formations, but contingent and partial arrangements grounded in shared exposure and attentiveness, which neither reproduce neoliberal logics of self-making nor resolve the violence of interpretive capture historically imposed upon black women.

It is in this context that Zadie Smith (2020) identifies Edie as such a significant literary figure. Far from reproducing inherited cultural archetypes of black femininity—whether as resilience, tragedy, moral exemplar, or symbolic suffering—Leilani instead constructs a subject defined by contradiction and irreducible ordinariness. As Smith observes, “What a brave thing, to describe life from the inside, ignoring the prepackaged archetypes supplied by the culture [...], and instead dare to create Edie, a young black woman frequently in doubt, embarrassed, and unsure, who is passionate and perverse, kind and vengeful, depressed and exhilarated—in other words, human.” The force of *Luster* lies precisely in this refusal of archetype and its insistence upon an un-finalizable form of subjectivity that resists conversion into legibility, exemplariness or

redemption. In doing so, the novel offers not a resolution of the catastrofemal, but its most radical reconfiguration: a figure who does not transcend fragmentation but inhabits it as the very condition through which perception, relation and a fragile form of presence become possible.

Conclusion

The contemporary novels analyzed within this dissertation respond to a vital imperative, namely the desire to map the parameters of the catastrofemale and to trace how this mode of subjectivity fundamentally shifts when examined through the intersecting coordinates of race, class, and material precarity. Rather than presenting a uniform portrait of generational despair, these literary works collectively demonstrate how late-capitalist alienation is unevenly distributed, showing that a protagonist's structural position largely determines what forms of withdrawal, endurance, slackness or self-sabotage are available to her.

To demonstrate how this interpretive figure operates as a diagnostic tool for late-capitalist exhaustion, the dissertation structures a progressive trajectory of literary case studies, moving from the baseline frustrations of white privilege to the complex, systemic traps of racialized and transnational labor. This exploration begins by establishing the baseline conceptual, historical, and methodological scaffolding of the project. By tracing the historical lineage of feminine deviance and madness in literature, the analysis exposes the analytical limits of traditional feminist archetypes—such as the antiheroine, the “unruly woman,” or the classic “madwoman in the attic”—and argues that these older archetypes are structurally unequipped to handle the specific gridlock of twenty-first-century postfeminist disillusionment. As such, this dissertation introduces the catastrofemale as a new interpretive category designed to capture a historically specific configuration of economic precarity, hyper-visibility and psychic immobilization at the turn of the new millennium.

The dissertation then interrogates how this catastrofemale framework operates within the relative safety of white, middle-class privilege through a comparative reading of Halle Butler's *The New Me* and Ottessa Moshfegh's *My*

Year of Rest and Relaxation. This analysis uncovers two seemingly opposite reactions to modern life—obsessive, consumer-driven self-optimization on one hand, and radical, drug-induced chemical withdrawal on the other—and argues that both function as complementary strategies of self-renewal aimed at alleviating the same underlying systemic and existential condition. By trapping these characters in cycles of alienation, both texts expose the fundamental lie of neoliberalism: the idea that deep, structural societal crises can be solved through hyper-individualized, private routines of psychological self-management.

This paradigm is subsequently reconfigured through a reading of Ling Ma's *Severance*, showing that a racialized identity fundamentally alters the terms on which female alienation is both experienced and textually navigated. In this context, the catastrofemale is stripped of the white privilege of "opting out" or choosing elective withdrawal; instead, her alienation is shaped by the suffocating demands of transnational racial capitalism and the model minority myth. By tracing how the protagonist's mechanical over-productivity becomes a compulsory, exhausting method of survival, this analysis demonstrates how compliance itself can function as a form of self-erasure, while simultaneously uncovering quiet, spatial modes of endurance that exist outside of simple success-or-failure binaries.

Finally, this intersectional critique is extended to its furthest bounds by analyzing Raven Leilani's *Luster*, illustrating how black female subjectivity destabilizes dominant white feminist frameworks of recovery. Within this narrative landscape, economic precarity, bodily abjection, and psychological disarray are shown to be completely inseparable from the historical, inherited trauma of systemic racial and gendered violence. By analyzing how the protagonist must negotiate art, intimacy, visibility, and belonging from *within* a position of absolute structural disenfranchisement, this concluding analysis shows how *Luster* flatly refuses neat, redemptive, teleological or therapeutic

narrative closures, insisting instead on permanent fragmentation as both a lived condition *and* a radical, subversive mode of being.

When viewed as a unified critical project, several vital theoretical throughlines emerge from this analysis. First, the catastrofemale cannot be reduced to a static literary stereotype or a simple diagnostic checklist of symptoms. Rather, she functions as a highly dynamic, relational, and historically contingent interpretive figure whose meaning shifts according to the specific structural conditions that produce her. What unites these diverse protagonists is not behavioral similarity, but *their shared confinement within a modern culture* that demands they remain hyper-visible and highly self-aware yet keeps them structurally and economically paralyzed.

Second, this reading reclaims madness from the realm of clinical pathology. Reconceptualized through this systemic lens, psychic distress, emotional dissociation and psycho-physical breakdown cease to operate as individualized psychological flaws or private failures of coping. Instead, in dialogue with feminist traditions ranging from second-wave critiques of literary madness to Foucauldian accounts of disciplinary subject formation—and extended through the lens of Rosi Braidotti's posthuman feminist materialism—madness emerges as a situated, relational, and embodied phenomenon. As such, it serves as a privileged site of exposure where the internal contradictions and structural hypocrisies of late-capitalist modernity become explicitly visible, physically written upon the surfaces of gendered and racialized bodies.

Ultimately, these narratives demonstrate that contemporary fiction does not merely document a state of societal crisis but, instead, fundamentally reconfigures the emotional and intellectual coordinates through which such crisis becomes thinkable. The catastrofemale is a figure of stark exposure: she renders visible the painful absurdities of a cultural moment where the neoliberal

imperative to optimize the self persists despite the structural impossibility of doing so. Her true literary and political weight is found neither in a triumphant recovery nor a tragic surrender, but in her sheer persistence. She matters because she refuses narrative closure, rejects therapeutic healing, and denies neoliberal restoration, remaining a stubborn embodiment of a life that cannot be neatly organized into a profitable corporate script.

From our present historical vantage point, the cultural and critical urgency of these narratives appears increasingly situated within a shifting and unstable horizon. The millennial flavor of female disaffection that dominated books and television throughout the 2010s and early 2020s is currently undergoing an intense critical reassessment, driven by evolving feminist sensibilities across both the United States and Europe. Within this new temporal landscape, the catastrofemale functions simultaneously as the definitive archive of a recent historical era and a figure that is already experiencing partial obsolescence: she is still highly recognizable, yet she is no longer fully aligned with the immediate, unfolding present. This historical gap raises fascinating, urgent questions regarding the future evolution of female failure itself, prompting us to wonder how long contemporary societies will continue to treat a woman's psychological breakdown or absolute non-compliance as an articulate political protest rather than a merely pathologized medical event.

Confronting this changing landscape, the analytical framework established across these chapters opens up several exciting pathways for future academic research. One highly promising direction lies in applying posthuman feminist methodologies to look at the next evolution of the catastrofemale corpus, specifically within newer novels where the boundaries of the human body are explicitly reconfigured through relationships with technology, non-human entities, and speculative science fiction. Novels such as Melissa Broder's *The Pisces* (2018), Luiza Sauma's *Everything You Ever Wanted* (2019), Sierra Greer's

Annie Bot (2024) and Maggie Su's *Blob: A Love Story* (2025) indicate a fascinating generic mutation where female alienation is no longer solely confined to the corporate office, but is instead projected onto ecological, digital, and even interplanetary scales, pushing our current concerns into radically new territories where the very definition of human subjectivity is destabilized.

Furthermore, the utility of the catastrofemal can be expanded beyond the North American novels highlighted in this project. Identical configurations of precarious, deeply anxious, and emotionally fractured women can be found spanning the entire Anglophone literary field, signaling that this narrative style is highly transnational. In recent British and Irish fiction, authors like Sally Rooney (*Conversations with Friends*, 2017), Eliza Clark (*Boy Parts*, 2020), Naoise Dolan (*Exciting Times*, 2020), Natasha Brown (*Assembly*, 2021), Jessie Cave (*Sunset*, 2021), and Megan Nolan (*Acts of Desperation*, 2021) have all constructed female protagonists defined by intense precarity, toxic romantic dynamics, psychophysical unraveling, and the grueling demands of modern corporate labor. Expanding this project's framework into a comparative, global study would provide an even more sophisticated mapping of how geographical boundaries and local institutional networks alter a shared, global language of contemporary female suffering.

Finally, it is perhaps not an accidental detail that a recurring plot point within some novels belonging to the catastrofemal corpus involves characters who are explicitly trapped within academic environments, frequently depicting young women who are frozen in the agonizing process of trying to write their doctoral dissertations, paralyzed between intellectual ambition and absolute emotional exhaustion. Encountering these fictional mirrors while writing my own doctoral project has created a surreal and unexpected blurring of the boundaries between my daily critical labor and my lived experience. As I followed protagonists immobilized by unfinished dissertations, the distance

separating my object of study from my own daily reality became increasingly difficult to sustain. While I have felt a profound personal and intellectual affinity with many of the aimless protagonists analyzed throughout this project—an intense identification that undoubtedly fueled the birth of this research—the completion of this manuscript marks a sharp moment of personal discontinuity as much as it does academic closure. This ending does not represent a neat resolution of the systemic problems I have uncovered, nor does it mean I am abandoning the critical questions this project has raised; rather, it marks a necessary, if uncertain, first step *beyond* the narrative and conceptual orbit of the catastrofemal—the figure whose contradictions have shaped not only the literary works examined here, but also, in quieter ways, the process of writing this dissertation itself.

A List of North American Catastrofemale Narratives

Attenberg, Jami. *All Grown Up* (2017)
Austin, Emily R. *Everyone in This Room Will Someday Be Dead* (2021)
Austin, Emily R. *Interesting Facts About Space* (2024)
Austin, Emily R. *We Could Be Rats* (2025)
Batuman, Elif. *The Idiot* (2017)
Batuman, Elif. *Either/Or* (2022)
Awad, Mona. *Rouge* (2023)
Broder, Melissa. *The Pisces* (2018)
Broder, Melissa. *Milk Fed* (2021)
Broder, Melissa. *Death Valley* (2023)
Butler, Halle. *Jillian* (2015)
Butler, Halle. *The New Me* (2019)
Butler, Halle. *Banal Nightmare* (2024)
Chou, Elaine Hsieh. *Disorientation* (2022)
Etter, Sarah Rose. *Ripe* (2023)
Frazier, Jean Kyoung. *Pizza Girl* (2020)
Greer, Sierra. *Annie Bot* (2024)
Gross, Jessica. *Hysteria* (2020)
Kleeman, Alexandra. *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* (2015)
Lacey, Catherine. *The Answers* (2017)
Leilani, Raven. *Luster* (2020)
Ma, Ling. *Severance* (2018)
Mathews, Sarah Thankam. *All This Could Be Different* (2022)
McClore, Kelly. *Nobody, Somebody, Anybody* (2021)
Morgan, Beth. *A Touch of Jen* (2021)
Moshfegh, Ottessa. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018)
Sauma, Luiza. *Everything You Ever Wanted* (2019)
Su, Maggie. *Blob: A Love Story* (2025)
Tanner, Alexandra. *Worry* (2024)
Wang, Weike. *Chemistry* (2017)
Williams, Lara. *Supper Club* (2019)
Yoder, Rachel. *Nightbitch* (2021)

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