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Drug Free America: The Ethics and Politics of Drugs in Contemporary American Literature

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DRUG FREE AMERICA: THE ETHICS AND POLITICS OF DRUGS IN CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN LITERATURE

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DRUG FREE AMERICA: THE ETHICS AND POLITICS OF DRUGS IN CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN LITERATURE

A Dissertation Presented to the Graduate Faculty of
Dedman College

Southern Methodist University

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

with a

Major in English

by

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Drug Free America:
The Ethics and Politics of Drugs in Contemporary
American Literature

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The utopian vision behind the so-called War on Drugs was that, as with other wars, we might sacrifice some amount of individual freedom in order to gain a larger freedom. In this case, the larger freedom was what Nancy Reagan called a “drug free America.” Thus, the War on Drugs era (from roughly 1970 to the present) aligns historically yet exists in tension with what scholars have called the neoliberal era, wherein individual freedom is paramount, and moral, political, and economic responsibility is left to the individual. This dissertation asks what the depictions of drug use in literature from this period might indicate about the relationship between neoliberalism and the War on Drugs. Reading subtle or extended portrayals of drug use in novels by Joan Didion, Bret Easton Ellis, Daniel Cano, David Foster Wallace, and Alfredo Vía, and ambitious literary memoirs by Ann Marlowe and Leslie Jamison, this dissertation finds that these texts depict drug use as a normative moral or political issue, either in a way that demonstrates residual moral thinking, or makes new normative claims about how to live in a fractured, atomistic, and consumption-driven world. This dissertation argues that the depictions of drugs in these literary texts represents a significant complication of the notion that literature in the neoliberal era leaves normative morality and politics to the individual.

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This dissertation is dedicated to Molly Pickard. Without you, it would not exist.

INTRODUCTION

Neoliberalism and the War on Drugs

From the 1980s to the present, the US government decided to devote substantial resources to a project of arresting, jailing, and imprisoning millions of people for drug-related offenses.¹ The utopian vision behind this so-called War on Drugs was that, as with other wars, we might sacrifice the freedom of some individuals in order to gain a larger freedom; namely a “drug free America,” to use Nancy Reagan’s phrase.² America never got—nor will it ever get—this freedom from drug use or drug addiction, yet, even with growing recognition of its incoherence and of how it inevitably will fail to achieve its stated goals, the War on Drugs continues. The War on Drugs era (initiated in 1971, beginning in earnest in the 1980s, and

¹ As of 1980 about 40,900 people were in prison for drug use, whereas in 2017 456,000 people were in prison for drug law violations. “Trends in U.S. Corrections,” The Sentencing Project, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/trends-in-u-s-corrections/>. In 2018 alone 1,654,282 people were arrested for drug law violations, 46.9% of whom were Black or Latino (though making up just 31.5 percent of the population in the US). “Drug War Statistics,” Drug Policy Alliance, <http://www.drugpolicy.org/issues/drug-war-statistics>. Michelle Alexander’s famous claim in *The New Jim Crow* about the War on Drugs being a primary driver of mass incarceration recently has been disputed by John Pfaff, who argues that the rise in mass incarceration was driven by the change in the role of prosecutors, who started to bring more felony charges against arrestees starting in the 1990s. See John Pfaff, *Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration—and How to Achieve Real Reform* (Basic Books, 2017). Regardless of whether or not the War on Drugs was the primary driver behind mass incarceration, the massive increase in people put in prison for drug law violations from the 1980s to the present is inarguable.

² See Ronald Reagan and Nancy Reagan, “Remarks at a Meeting of the White House Conference for a Drug Free America,” <https://reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/speeches/1988/022988a.htm>.

continuing to the present) aligns historically with what literary scholars have started to characterize as the neoliberal era of literary production. Scholars such as Rachel Greenwald Smith, Daniel Worden, and Walter Benn Michaels have pointed out different ways in which contemporary literature intersects with neoliberalism. Underlying each account is the notion that neoliberalism leaves moral, political, and economic responsibility to the individual.³ Michaels zeroes in on how neoliberalism replaces normative values with those driven by the market, when he writes, “a complete identification of America with neoliberalism” means “that the world we want is a world where...we are allowed to do what we can afford to do.”⁴ In other words, besides the marketplace, no entity larger than the individual—such as the state, the community, or even the family—should interfere in our decisions about how to live our lives. Often unexplored in the criticism about the neoliberal era is the fact that many notable literary works from this period feature significant representations of drug use. What (if anything) might the depictions of drug use in these supposedly neoliberal texts indicate about the relationship between neoliberalism and the War on Drugs? To put Michaels’ formulation slightly differently: Why in the neoliberal era are we not “allowed to do” certain drugs, even when we can afford them?

³ Smith argues that “neoliberalism amplifies this tendency for capitalism to individualize, casting individuals as exclusively responsible for themselves.” She focuses specifically on how individuals are made responsible for the development and management of emotions, which aligns with a turn in literature to texts that foreground emotional connection with the reader. See Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2015), 3. Worden argues that one literary response to neoliberalism has been the popularity of first-person narratives and the rise of the memoir as a major contemporary genre, precisely because of the way it uses the individual, subjective experience to understand the world. He argues that the “memoir in our contemporary moment is uniquely outfitted to articulate the ways in which neoliberal reforms have isolated and limited, while championing and privileging, the individual.” Daniel Worden, “The Memoir in the Age of Neoliberal Individualism,” in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2017), 161.

⁴ Walter Benn Michaels, “Plots against America: Neoliberalism and Antiracism,” *American Literary History* 18, no. 2 (2006): 298.

We find subtle or extended portrayals of drug use in novels by Joan Didion, Bret Easton Ellis, Daniel Cano, David Foster Wallace, and Alfredo Vía, and ambitious literary memoirs by Ann Marlowe and Leslie Jamison. Though these literary works do not primarily focus on the War on Drugs, and are neither pro- nor anti-drug in any straightforward, propagandistic way, I find that they often depict drug use as a normative moral or political issue, either in a way that demonstrates residual moral thinking, or makes new normative claims about how to live in a fractured, atomistic, and consumption-driven world. I will argue that the depictions of drugs in these literary texts represents a significant complication of the notion that literature in the neoliberal era leaves normative morality and politics to the individual and the individual's success in the marketplace, and demonstrates the complex moral attitudes toward drugs that often come into conflict with other dominant social beliefs.

Before looking specifically at literature, I want to drill down on the ways in which neoliberalism and the War on Drugs historically seem odd bedfellows. The two most influential accounts of neoliberalism come from the economic geographer David Harvey and the political theorist Wendy Brown, who use the term to define the reaction against the post-World War II welfare state and Keynesian consensus, and the turn toward a program of deregulation, privatization, and reliance on the market.⁵ Originally developed as a theory by political theorists and economists such as F.A. Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Ludvig von Mises, who founded the Mont Perelin Society in 1947, neoliberalism began to take hold in the US with the set of economic reforms known as the “Nixon shock” in the 1971—which allowed capital to move

⁵ For other political accounts of neoliberalism, see Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (Verso, 2013); David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); and Thomas Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism* (Stanford UP, 2018).

freely across international borders—but became increasingly dominant ideologically during the administrations of Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, all of whom either helped privatize public institutions, deregulate private institutions, undermine organized labor, or center the market in their policy decisions.⁶ Harvey argues that these policies of “privatization and deregulation combined with competition” grew out of an ideological investment in a particular notion of freedom, one that seeks to guarantee “personal and individual freedom in the marketplace.”⁷ Importantly, this freedom both makes the individual “responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being,” and also allows us to judge the success and failure of any given individual in market terms.⁸ In slight contrast, Wendy Brown’s conception of neoliberalism as a governing rationality does not claim “that neoliberalism literally *marketizes* all spheres...the point is that neoliberal rationality disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities—even where money is not at issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo economicus*.”⁹ In other words, we do not necessarily calculate every action according to whether it adds or subtracts from GDP, but calculation itself becomes ubiquitous, whether in the form of “likes” on social media or the score on teaching evaluations.

⁶ I focus here on the US context. According to David Harvey, the actions of the US have been essential to the spread of neoliberalism globally. He writes, the “grim reach of US imperial power” has led to “the rapid proliferation of neoliberal state forms throughout the world from the mid-1970s onwards.” However, the first experiment with creating a neoliberal state occurred in Chile after the Pinochet coup of 1973, pushed by economists that Augusto Pinochet brought into the government, all of whom were influenced by the ideas of University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman. Harvey argues that the lessons learned from this experiment in Chile had a significant influence on the policies instituted by the Reagan administration. See Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005), 7-9.

⁷ See Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 65-66.

⁸ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 66.

⁹ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 31; emphasis in original.

The appearance of the War on Drugs during this same period seems in tension with both Harvey's conception of neoliberalism as individual freedom and responsibility in the market, and Brown's notion of *homo economicus*. Richard Nixon proposed "an emergency program to combat narcotics addiction," to Congress on June 17, 1971, and famously called drugs "public enemy number one."¹⁰ In a manner reminiscent of what happened with neoliberal public policy, the War on Drugs that Nixon set in motion was expanded and intensified under subsequent presidents. The most essential of these came from the Reagan administration, who announced the War on Drugs in 1982, a few years before the emergence of crack cocaine in American cities and at a time when drug use was in decline.¹¹ During the Reagan administration, congress passed the bipartisan Anti-Drug Abuse Acts of 1986 and 1988.¹² George Bush and Bill Clinton largely

¹⁰ Richard Nixon, "Remarks About an Intensified Program for Drug Abuse Prevention and Control," <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=3047>. The groundwork for what became the War on Drugs in America was laid throughout the late-nineteenth and twentieth century. An early example of the shift in public policy toward drug use is the San Francisco municipal ban on opium in 1875 and the Smoking Opium Exclusion Act, passed in 1909. Scholars have connected these policies to the fact that the labor market tightened in California in the latter half of the nineteenth century, which coincided with an uptick of "fictional newspaper accusations of Chinese men drugging white women into sexual slavery." They argue that these laws were "designed, at least in part, to control the Chinese and thus assuage the economic *cum* xenophobic anxieties of whites." See Craig Reinerman and Harry G. Levine, "Crack in Context: America's Latest Demon Drug," in *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice* (California: U of California Press, 1997), 6. Harry J. Anslinger, who was the head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics from 1930-1962, became famous for his "reefer madness" campaigns, wherein he claimed that marijuana could "arouse in blacks and Hispanics a state of menacing fury or homicidal attack" and claimed that marijuana "addicts" had "perpetrated some of the most bizarre and fantastic offenses and sex crimes known to police annals." Quoted in Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair, *Whiteout: The CIA, Drugs and the Press* (New York: Verso, 1998), 72. For a thorough history of how the US "transitioned from a regulatory illicit drug regime to a prohibitive and punitive one" between World War II and 1973, see Kathleen J. Frydl, *The Drug Wars in America: 1940-1973* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2013).

¹¹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Revised Edition (New York: The New Press, 2012), 5-6.

¹² Among many other things, these laws included the notorious 100-to-1 ratio for the sentencing of crack (used primarily by African Americans) versus powder cocaine (used primarily by whites), though the effects of the drugs are remarkably similar, and also authorized evictions for

continued these policies into the 1990s.¹³ Due to these policy changes, the number of people—especially people of color—incarcerated for drug offenses exploded. The US continues to spend over \$47 billion annually on enforcement of War on Drugs policies.¹⁴ Thus, the War on Drugs seems an odd set of policy choices for the neoliberal era: it has been a costly state-run institution with the explicit goal of restricting consumer choice and, as a byproduct, worked to eliminate massive profits and increases to GDP.¹⁵

Placing responsibility above all on the individual—as Harvey claim is central to the neoliberal project—seems incompatible with strictly regulated controls on the drugs the individual consumes. This is not to say that we should expect an overall decrease in the repressive power of the state under neoliberalism: as Harvey points out, the “supposed distrust of all state power” found in the statements of the Mont Pelerin Society still assumes “a strong and if necessary coercive state that will defend the rights of private property, individual liberties, and entrepreneurial freedoms.”¹⁶ Since the freedom to buy and sell private property in the market underlies the neoliberal project, the state must protect property ownership. We thus would expect to see (and have seen) increased funding to police departments during the neoliberal era, and cuts

tenants of public housing, and the elimination of some federal benefits, such as student loans, for drug offenses. For overviews of these laws see Cockburn and St. Clair, *Whiteout*, 75, and Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 53.

¹³ Most notably The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act signed into law by President Bill Clinton federally mandated the three-strike policy, requiring people to serve life sentences for three felonies, including non-violent drug offenses. See Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 56.

¹⁴ For an estimate for spending on the War on Drugs, see “Drug War Statistics.”

¹⁵ Gillian Tett estimates that if illegal drugs sales were counted toward GDP it would increase by about one percent, but this estimate is of existing drug sales and she does not consider how these figures might increase if drugs were legalized and made easily accessible. Tett, “Should America’s GDP Data Include Drug Dealing?,” *FT Magazine*, January 8, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/3201e3e4-31aa-11ea-a329-0bcf87a328f2>.

¹⁶ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 21.

to funding for education, health, and welfare assistance.¹⁷ If the society maintains itself and functions through the market, the rules of the market must be enforced. While we can make sense of neoliberalism requiring the repressive power of the state to protect the market, it remains odd that so much of this repressive power would be used to police individual drug consumption. If, as Wendy Brown argues, neoliberalism “configures human beings...as market actors,” and “always, only, and everywhere as *homo economicus*,” and thus neoliberalism assumes the rationality of the human actor who will above all attempt to maximize utility within the marketplace, why has this assumption not extended to one’s decisions about which drugs to consume?¹⁸ Based on the accounts of Harvey and Brown, it seems that we should expect a *laissez-faire* treatment of drug use, in which businesses can profit greatly off the sale of drugs, and we can judge the individual according to productivity, regardless of what drugs she chooses to consume. If—as is the case for many people—the individual uses stimulants such as cocaine, crack cocaine, and meth in order to fuel productivity, a fully neoliberalized society might be expected to celebrate the choice.¹⁹ Yet, instead of this *laissez-faire* approach, the US enacted new costly and expansive government agencies (such as the Drug Enforcement Agency) that limited the individual’s consumer choices.

¹⁷ A report put out by The Center for Popular Democracy provides an analysis of the budgets of 12 major American cities, and concludes that “over the last 30 years, at both the national and local levels, governments have dramatically increased their spending on criminalization, policing, and mass incarceration while drastically cutting investments in basic infrastructure and slowing investment in social safety net programs.” See Kate Hamaji et al., “Freedom to Thrive: Reimagining Safety & Security In Our Communities” (The Center for Popular Democracy, 2017), 1.

¹⁸ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 31.

¹⁹ Many people report heavy use of methamphetamine in order to increase productivity and enhance their ability to function. See Daniel H. Lende et al., “Functional Methamphetamine Use: The Insider’s Perspective,” *Addiction Research & Theory* 15, no. 5 (2007): 465–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/16066350701284552>.

Why were drugs treated differently than other consumer goods? Jacques Derrida wrestles with the question in a famous interview. He argues that the primary motivation of drug prohibition is the “fantasy” that “drugs make us lose any sense of true reality.”²⁰ He writes, “We do not object to the drug user's pleasure per se, but we cannot abide the fact that his is a pleasure taken in an experience without truth.”²¹ Anticipating the objection that we allow the consumption of other non-real experiences—fictional ones, for instance—he clarifies that what he means by “truth” goes back to the production of economic value. We prohibit drug use yet allow other ways of escaping from reality, such as the writing of fiction, so long as “the writer...allows himself to be reincorporated in the institution. He restores the normal order of intelligible production; he produces and his production generates value...The drug addict, in our common conception, the drug addict as such produces nothing, nothing true or real.”²² Derrida strangely compares the drug *user* to the fiction *writer*, when the more accurate analogy would be between the fiction writer/drug dealer and the fiction reader/drug user. From the perspective of the marketplace, no distinction should exist: in both cases an escape from reality is produced and consumed, thus generating economic value.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Chapter One: The Rhetoric of Drugs,” in *High Culture: Reflections on Addiction and Modernity*, ed. Anna Alexander and Mark S. Roberts, trans. Michael Israel (State University of New York Press, 2002), 25. It is important to note that Derrida does not necessarily reject this prohibition. He does not claim that, as many advocates of drug reform do, that “each of us be left the freedom to do as we will with our desire, our soul, and our body, as well as with that stuff known as ‘drugs,’ and “do away with this law which the history of conventions and of ethical norms has so deeply inscribed in the concept of ‘drugs.’” Though he recognizes the arbitrariness of these conventions and norms—which renders marijuana a “drug” but not alcohol or tobacco—he views this argument as a futile attempt to “return” to a conception of “nature” that never actually existed. Derrida, “The Rhetoric of Drugs,” 21.

²¹ Derrida, “The Rhetoric of Drugs,” 26.

²² *Ibid.*

More historically precise accounts of cultural attitudes toward drugs help point to why drugs, more than other consumer goods, have become the subject of cultural and moral panic. Craig Reinerman and Harry Levine put forward the conception of “drug scares,” which exist as “phenomena in their own right, quite apart from drug use and drug problems.” They note that drug scares can occur “independent of actual increases in drug use or drug problems,” and explain that “drug scares typically link a scapegoated substance to a troubling subordinate group.”²³ In their introduction to *High Anxieties: Cultural Studies in Addiction*, Janet Farrell Brodie and Marc Redfield similarly explain how heroin, cocaine, and marijuana became linked to stigmatized social groups (either based on ethnicity, race, or class), often during institutional crises.²⁴ John Ehrlichman, the former domestic policy chief to Richard Nixon, provides the most straightforward example of policymakers cynically using the fear of drugs to push a different agenda:

The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people... We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities... We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.²⁵

²³ Reinerman and Levine, “Crack in Context,” 1-2.

²⁴ Janet Farrell Brodie and Marc Redfield, eds., *High Anxieties: Cultural Studies in Addiction* (California: U of California Press, 2002), 3. They go on to write that “although growing numbers of Americans habitually used opium, morphine, laudanum, cannabis, heroin, and beginning in the 1880s, cocaine, there was little public anxiety and no formal campaign to restrict drug consumption until the early twentieth century,” which changed when “medical professionals, police and criminologists, government bureaucrats, policymakers, and social reformers” began to mount campaigns against “racial minorities, the urban poor, and the foreign born” and thus created or used “stereotypes of the opium-smoking Chinese immigrant, the ‘cocaine-crazed’ and sexually threatening African-American male, [and] the marijuana-smoking and violent Mexican youth in of the Southwest.” Ibid.

²⁵ This quote appears in Dan Baum, “Legalize It All: How to Win the War on Drugs,” *Harper’s Magazine*, April 2016, 24.

Though some have disputed Ehrlichman's account, he states clearly the cynical use of drug policy to enact other agendas. In his cultural study of methamphetamine, Travis Linneman argues along the same lines that drugs "operate as fetish objects," that they exist as "symbolically articulated knowledge ignored by the subject," and permit "the public to disavow and endure the many... 'dirty compromises of American life.'"²⁶ According to Linneman (and many other historians and scholars of the drug war), the media has used a moral reaction to drugs in order to mask structural issues. As he writes in his analysis of the prestige television show *Breaking Bad*, meth allows the viewer to focus on the simple fact that "drugs are bad," rather than on our inadequate and unequal health care infrastructure, which leads Walter White to sell meth in the first place.²⁷

We see scholars try to navigate this moral reaction in their justifications for choosing to write about drugs, and have written with the express purpose of moderating this moral reaction in the public. In *Travel and Drugs in Twentieth Century Literature*, Lindsey Michael Banco writes about the "strangely common (and, in my opinion, scurrilous) assumption that a literary analysis of drugs must necessarily be irresponsibly celebratory."²⁸ Banco expresses the hope that we can clear up "some of the misconceptions and derision that fogs contemporary understandings of drugs" and try to overcome "the reigning moralistic... attitudes toward these substances and behaviors" through nuanced scholarly analysis that avoids either celebration or mindless condemnation.²⁹ Similarly, Marcus Boon begins *Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs*

²⁶ Travis Linneman, *Meth Wars: Police, Media, Power* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 8.

²⁷ Linneman, *Meth Wars*, 29.

²⁸ Lindsey Michael Banco, *Travel and Drugs in Twentieth Century Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 4.

²⁹ Banco, *Travel and Drugs*, 5.

by noting that “the discourse of the obscene lingers around drug books” where simply reading about drug experiences will lead “to inevitable moral corruption, and “the most promising solution to the ‘drug problem’ is neither negating or affirming drugs, but learning to discriminate between different drugs through unbiased studies of how human beings interact with them.”³⁰ Both authors believe that this potential moral corruption should not prohibit us from reading, teaching, and studying these books. Both books address this moralism because “just say no” had attempted to shut down any open-minded investigation of drugs—and how they are represented in literature—from the outset.³¹

However, my interest is in the underlying tension between the moral reaction to drugs and the individualistic ideology that has supposedly taken hold in the neoliberal era. In the neoliberal era, we would expect the US to leave the individual to suffer the consequences for her bad decisions, and thus not provide substantial resources to help treat addiction or alleviate poverty. But the US has taken this a step further and created institutions centered on punishing this bad decision made by the individual. In a quote often taken as representative of neoliberal ideology, Margaret Thatcher said, “They are casting their problems at society. And, you know,

³⁰ Marcus Boon, *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs* (Harvard UP, 2002), 2.

³¹ Banco is primarily interested in the “confluence” of the “thematics” of drugs and travel, which he argues “underwent dramatic and concurrent shifts” after World War II—with the increase in both tourism and drug use by middle-class Americans—and which retain a discursive intimacy, and often reveal similar questions and insights about epistemology and consciousness. Banco, *Travel and Drugs*, 2. Boon writes from what he calls the methodology of the “ethnographer,” “studying how a society came to believe certain things,” thus he characterizes his work as “a history of books that were written and published, but equally of the lives of those who wrote them, the substances they took, how those substances became available, what those substances were,” and thus create an exhaustive amount of careful, historical detail. Boon, *The Road of Excess*, 5. Both of these accounts have informed my own, though my emphasis is different than the epistemological approach of Banco or the tracing of drug networks with which Boon is concerned.

there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families.”³² But for the Reagan administration—the other embodiment of neoliberalism—drug use was a social issue, not an individual one. Nancy Reagan said, “Although we're making progress, still many ignorant ideas persist. And one of the worst is the casual user's justification that drug use is a victimless crime, that drugs don't hurt anyone except the person who's using them. Yet there are consequences to drug use beyond an individual's personal and selfish high.”³³ She goes on to say that “if you're a casual drug user you're an accomplice to murder,” because of the violence involved in trafficking drugs.³⁴ In other words, when it comes to drugs, society does in fact exist, and we must take into account the way our actions have significant social, not just individual, consequences. (Nancy Reagan does not apply this same logic to the action of passing the drug laws that made drug trafficking a violent business, nor does she consider whether the administration enabling the Contras to smuggle cocaine into the US made the administration accomplices to murder.³⁵) To put it succinctly, we cannot square “there's no such thing as society” with the government's universalistic admonition to “just say no.”

I do not point out this tension between neoliberalism and the War on Drugs in order to provide an account of the complex historical and political reasons for the pairing of these seemingly contradictory phenomena. I want instead to emphasize how a normative thinking—applied implicitly or explicitly to the entire community or society, rather than on the individual—continued throughout, and in tension with, the neoliberal era, and how we can find this normative thinking at work in complex ways in the literature of the era. This dissertation

³² Margaret Thatcher, “Interview for Woman's Own (‘no Such Thing as Society’),” Margaret Thatcher Foundation, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>.

³³ Ronald Reagan and Nancy Reagan, “Remarks.”

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ See Cockburn and St. Clair, *Whiteout*, 2.

thus locates places where the response to drugs and other dominant notions—such as the one that society does not exist, only individuals—come into tension, and does so in order to help us both understand how drugs function in literary works and to see what sort of moral claims literary works continued to make throughout the neoliberal era.

Thus, rather than look at the canonical drug texts from the twentieth century, such as those by Aldous Huxley or William S. Burroughs, I turn my attention to texts, styles, or genres that either overlap in significant ways with literary scholarship about neoliberalism, or help us see the connection between drugs and normative ethical and political accounts. The recent collection *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* proves an instructive account of how scholars have turned to neoliberalism to re-think accounts of contemporary American literature. In their introduction, editors Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith note how “efforts to periodize” what comes after postmodernism, “have been...plural, internally contradictory, and fraught with disagreement,” and argue that neoliberalism serves as a useful concept for periodizing contemporary literary production.³⁶ They break neoliberalism into four historical phases (roughly corresponding to the decades from the 1970s to the 2000s) where “gradually” an “extension of market rationality to otherwise noneconomic domains of life shifts from a way of thinking—quantitative, efficient, pragmatic, and profitable—to a way of being.”³⁷ I find this historical arc less useful than the particular texts and genres they reference and the ways in which they describe them. In addition to some other texts from the 1980s, they note that

³⁶ Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, “Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature: An Introduction,” in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, ed. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2017), 3.

³⁷ Huehls and Smith, *Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature*, 9. These phases are the economic phase in the 1970s; the political phase in the 1980s; the sociocultural phase in the 1990s; and the ontological phase from sometime in the 2000s to the present.

Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero* (1985)—which I examine in Chapter Two—demonstrates how “the representational content of literature [began] to address neoliberalism as both economic innovation and political policy,” and “describe[s] the transformation of economic policy into lived political ideology.”³⁸ Though it is somewhat unclear, what Huehls and Smith seem to mean is that Ellis portrays his characters as both obsessed with consumer goods and amoral, which represents the extension of neoliberalism into daily life. They go on to argue that the novelists and memoirists from the 1990s and early 2000s, such as David Foster Wallace, “saw their time as a moment of scarcity, leading them to treat formal literary innovation as a matter of competition, market assessment, and entrepreneurial risk-taking,” and contend that Wallace’s famous call for “single-entendre values” is an example of “neoliberal capital’s expanding investment in consumer affect and sentiment.”³⁹ (I examine Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* in Chapter Three and memoirs from the 1990s and 2010s in Chapter Four). We see the influence of Wendy Brown on Smith and Huehls in this reading of Wallace. They treat both Wallace’s decisions about literary form and the moral theory he proposes in his nonfiction as the product of market-based calculation.

Because their account puts forth a version of neoliberalism that gradually resolves its internal contradictions over time, Smith and Huehls do not attend to how the residual moral sentiments, or normative moral theories, put forward by authors such as Ellis and Wallace exist in tension with an account of neoliberalism’s hegemony. While using opposed literary styles (minimalism and maximalism, respectively), both Ellis and Wallace attempt to work out the relationship between morality and consumption, especially the consumption of drugs. As I argue

³⁸ Huehls and Smith, *Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature*,” 7.

³⁹ Huehls and Smith, *Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature*,” 8.

in Chapters Two and Three, Ellis and Wallace find moral meaning in drug use that goes well beyond how it might affect the drug user's productivity. Ellis views drug use as incompatible with traditional family values upon which the functioning of society depends. Wallace describes the recovery from drug use as a way of creating social connection from within a consumerist dystopia. I do not claim that neoliberalism is irrelevant to these discussions, but find that, in their depictions of drug use, these texts highlight a loss of morality or imagine new normative accounts of how we should live in a way not reducible to a neoliberal individualism or calculation. According to these texts, the individual's actions and decisions have real social consequences. And the decision they see of ultimate significance is the one of what we should consume, particularly whether or not to consume drugs. I will argue that the significance attributed to this question, and the various ways in which these texts answer this question, will help us understand why drugs have been the subject of ongoing punitive state repression. While I do believe the normative treatments of drug use exist in tension with some accounts of neoliberalism, I do not seek to valorize a resistance to the homogenizing force of neoliberal capitalism on the part of these writers, nor am I arguing in favor of an individualistic right-wing libertarianism that would legalize drugs in the interest of individualism and profit maximization. (My personal political leanings are antagonistic to both the moralism of the War on Drugs and the individualism of neoliberalism.) I instead want to argue that recognizing the continued moralism in accounts of drug use—even by the authors who would seem most opposed to it—provides nuance and complexity to scholarly accounts that emphasize the moral skepticism or individualistic relativism in contemporary literature.

I have separated my chapters so that each one focuses on a text or set of texts, as well as a piece of relevant context from the history of the specific moral or political attitudes toward drug

use, in order to show either how a residual moral thinking was still at work in even supposedly amoral neoliberal writers, or were put forth in order to think through how we might create new normative values in a world of individualism, fracture, and atomization. Chapter One focuses on two novels written by Chicano veterans that look back at the Vietnam War, Daniel Cano's *Shifting Loyalties* (1995) and Alfredo Vea's *Gods Go Begging* (1999). I have chosen these novels because they are explicitly radical and anti-imperialist, and use descriptions of, and plots about, drug use to express both of these political positions. In other words, this chapter looks at the way left wing or radical texts from the neoliberal era put forth normative understandings of drug use. *Shifting Loyalties* and *Gods Go Begging* explicitly diagnose US imperialism as the cause of the suffering in Vietnam and link the suffering in Vietnam to the suffering of particular impoverished, minority, and working-class people in the US. The texts conspicuously highlight marijuana as a force that bonds their multiethnic, working-class coalitions and allows these coalitions, in the midst of the war, to articulate a newly discovered antiwar ethic. Both texts go on to show that other drugs—heroin and crack cocaine, respectively—entrench imperialism and capitalism, thus are incompatible with political progress. The representation of marijuana and the other drugs thus seems quite different. I point this out in part to show how moralistic condemnations of drugs for political purposes were not limited to the culturally conservative, “just say no” right wing. However, my larger goal is to show that regardless of whether the texts take an approving or condemnatory posture toward a particular drug, a common literary treatment of drugs across the political spectrum—as I will demonstrate in subsequent chapters—has been to narrativize drugs so that they become socially meaningful, morally significant, and politically powerful. Whether in the case of marijuana bringing us all together, LSD starting a revolution, or heroin tearing society apart, drugs seem to transcend social circumstances and, in

themselves, advance or stifle political change. I have chosen *Shifting Loyalties* and *Gods Go Begging* precisely because the texts contain both the approving and condemnatory depictions of different drugs that, I will argue, result in the same understanding of drugs themselves having a great social, moral, and political power.

In Chapter Two, Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* and Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero* juxtapose extreme actions—including abuse, suicide, rape, and snuff films—while excluding the articulation of an ethical response to these actions on behalf of the characters, and in doing so highlight a lost sense of morality. I will argue that the drugs consumed by the narrators in the texts help keep away these moral considerations, and instead allow the characters, who at times signal an unease or discomfort with the world around them, to react passively. I pair my reading of *Play It As It Lays* with a brief history of sedative use by women, an issue that grew in national importance throughout the 1960s. Didion enters this conversation about female tranquilization in order to show that tranquilizers exacerbate the loss of control, rather than restoring it, and indicates the incompatibility between the drug and what, in spite of her moral skepticism, remains a moral issue: the care and responsibility for one's family. In *Less Than Zero* it is precisely because the Los Angeles parents (such as the ones Didion portrays in *Play It As It Lays*) lost control of their children that the teenagers in the novel numb themselves with excessive drug use, which lead them to sell their bodies for drug money, watch snuff films, and rape children. Both *Play It As It Lays* and *Less Than Zero* critique something like the consumerist vapidness at the heart of postwar American culture that was given full expression in Ronald Reagan's free market ideology, yet they do so via moralistic, anti-drug narratives—the very same sort of narratives used by Nixon and Reagan in order to propagate the War on Drugs.

In the minimalist novels of Joan Didion and Bret Easton Ellis, a functioning family—and by extension a functioning society—is depicted as incompatible with both legal and illegal drug use.

Chapter Three looks at David Foster Wallace’s novel *Infinite Jest*. Wallace sets the novel in near-future dystopia, where corporations have free reign to addict people to every imaginable consumer good, made most clear by the fact that calendar years are now corporate-sponsored advertising (the novel takes place in “Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment,” “Year of the Whopper” etc.). Wallace depicts every aspect of life as both cause and consequence of unbridled consumption. In other words, Wallace’s vision of how we respond to drugs constitutes how he imagines the entirety of contemporary life. What is not available is any sort of action or thinking that can take place in addition to or outside of compulsion. I will argue that a scene dealing with methadone treatment—that has gone overlooked in critical accounts of the novel—helps illuminate the moral stakes of drug use. I look at the development of methadone treatment in the 1960s, and the attendant backlash, especially among the leaders of “therapeutic communities” that viewed methadone use as immoral, and instead advocated for strict abstinence. In *Infinite Jest*, we find a version of the criticism that methadone does not substantially treat the deep problems with addiction, along with a sympathetic portrayal of a tough, hierarchical residential treatment facility, called the Ennet House. The tough treatment of the residents of the Ennet House, and their zero-tolerance policy for relapse, is presented as difficult but admirable, and—as many critics have argued—the Ennet House becomes Wallace’s vision of how one can live a life of “recovery” from within a world of rampant consumerism. As I will argue, Wallace’s depiction of the conflict between methadone treatment and the Ennet House constitutes both his normative account of drug use, but also the breakdown in his attempt to describe addiction as an affective “dis-ease” of the body. Wallace demonstrates the way he views drug use as an issue

with moral stakes when he indicates a preference for abstinence promoted by the Ennet House over the methadone treatment center, yet this relies on a certain moral judgment and belief that the understanding of addiction as a bodily “dis-ease” tries to downplay. Drugs thus persist as a subject of moral consequence.

In Chapter Four, I examine two ambitious literary memoirs, Leslie Jamison’s *The Recovering* and Ann Marlowe’s *How to Stop Time: Heroin from A to Z*. I look at Jamison’s *The Recovering* in order to interrogate the tendency in contemporary American literature—especially within the genre of the memoir, which exploded in popularity during the neoliberal era—to think about drug use first and foremost as an issue of addiction. Jamison’s hybrid work of memoir, reporting, and cultural criticism pairs a large number of different stories that always foreground addiction with a large-scale history and cultural analysis of intoxication, and, in doing so, depicts issues such as the War on Drugs as primarily about addiction, and a problem insofar as they do not allow people struggling with addiction the chance to take on the identity of “addict.” While *The Recovering* addresses the critiques that the memoir is a particularly neoliberal genre by making gestures toward the “structural” and not just the individual, it also continues the project of thinking about drug use in normative terms, and provides story-after-story in which intoxication overpowers the agency of the user and lasts for life.

Ann Marlowe, on the other hand, deviates from the story in *How to Stop Time: Heroin from A to Z*, a memoir that, though well received at the time of publication, has received little scholarly attention. Marlowe’s book provides an alternative account of how memoir can substantively reevaluate our understandings of drug use and addiction. Marlowe uses experiments with form—the book is told alphabetically rather than chronologically—in order to illuminate the psychological predisposition toward nostalgia, which she believes has led to her

addiction. Marlowe follows the logic of this self-investigation into ambiguous and controversial territory. For instance, her belief that nostalgia—always looking backwards—underwrites her addiction leads her to argue that the AA/NA program exacerbates rather than helps addiction, since AA/NA forces the participant to retell her story over and over. Marlowe shows how the stifling of dissent from the normative dysphoric/euphoric narrative encourages such a reductive understanding of the different ways people can relate to intoxicants, and illustrates the narrative possibilities opened up by a less moralistic depiction of drugs and addiction.

CHAPTER ONE

Public Enemy or Agent of Political Change? Drugs in Vietnam War Literature

For the 1960s counterculture, psychedelic drugs held the promise to, as Timothy Leary put it, “propel awareness out beyond normal modes of consciousness,” thus creating the conditions for a revolution both in our modes of thought and in our politics.⁴⁰ We can see the promise that drugs—especially marijuana and psychedelics—might change the society through transforming the individual and the culture in the writings of many well-known figures, including Allen Ginsberg, Norman Mailer, and Michel Foucault. Norman Mailer observed that the counterculture “believed in LSD, in witches, in tribal knowledge, in orgy, and revolution. It had no respect whatsoever for the unassailable logic of the next step: belief was reserved for the revelatory mystery of the happening where you did not know what was going to happen next; that was what was good about it.”⁴¹ Michel Foucault said in an interview in 1971, “It is possible...that the rough outline of future society is supplied by the recent experiences with drugs, sex, communes, other forms of consciousness, and other forms of individuality.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Timothy Leary, “Introduction,” in *LSD: The Consciousness-Expanding Drug* (Putnam, 1964), 1. Historian Jeremy Kuzmarov argues that Timothy Leary’s view of politics was shaped in part by post-Marxist counterculture icon Herbert Marcuse’s argument in *Eros and Civilization* (1955) “that revolutionary change in American society needed to be accomplished within the realm of individual self-transformation and culture rather than through political ends.” Jeremy Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs* (Massachusetts: U of Massachusetts P, 2009), 64.

⁴¹ Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*, Reprint edition (Plume, 1995), 86.

⁴² Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald Bouchard (Cornell UP, 1980), 231.

Though we should not reduce all of left politics in the 1960s to this strain of the counterculture, this view of drugs creating social change through changes to individual consciousness certainly had a substantive influence. Rather than the bureaucratic work involved in building and maintaining institutions—not to mention the threat bureaucracies were seen as posing to individual expression—one could, as literary critics Sean McCann and Michael Szalay put it, rely on “the spontaneous, the symbolic, and ultimately, the magical” to transform the culture and consciousness of American society.⁴³ Given the transformative range of experiences one could have while “tripping,” the hope was that drugs would prove integral to a transformed American culture, one liberated primarily through changes to individual consciousness.⁴⁴ Though not always focused on drugs in particular, many critics have noted how the counterculture’s individualistic focus either did not pose much of a challenge to, or eventually was incorporated into, the consumerism that would dominate the neoliberal era.⁴⁵

⁴³ Sean McCann and Michael Szalay, “Do You Believe in Magic? Literary Thinking after the New Left,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* Volume 18, no. Number 2 (2005): 436, <https://doi.org/10.1353/yale.2006.0010>. McCann and Szalay influentially have described this as the “magical thinking” of the post-counterculture literary and academic left. Their argument is that the “romantic appeal to ‘the disruptive, disorienting’ force of ‘vertiginous knowledge,’” and “the inflation of self-realization to revolutionary importance,” as having had a marginalizing and stultifying effect on the American left over the last fifty years, because of the way it downplayed the need to transform society materially through amassing and wielding power in labor unions or government. McCann and Szalay, “Do You Believe in Magic?,” 460.

⁴⁴ Even in foregrounding the need to be liberated from individual consciousness, the individual is still the primary focus of this method of change. Lindsey Michael Banco zeroes in on this dynamic of “psychedelic liberation” working simultaneously to “reinscribe the insular self” in his reading of Aldous Huxley, which he argues proved exceedingly influential on the counterculture. Banco writes, “Huxley advocates a union of self and the infinite but cannot relinquish the individuality at the heart of the discourse of self-improvement and self-realization so characteristic of popular psychedelic drug use.” Banco, *Travel and Drugs*, 36.

⁴⁵ McCann and Szalay call this the “libertarian turn,” which they argue did not meet substantive challenge from the counterculture. McCann and Szalay, “Do You Believe in Magic?,” 441. Thomas Frank wrote an influential account of this transition from the revolutionary sixties to what he called “hip consumerism.” Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998).

Yet the promise that drugs might provide both an individual and social liberation from old constraints and escape from old forms of thinking and being was seemingly belied by the experience with drugs during and after the Vietnam War, which included reports of widespread heroin addiction among veterans, the use of psychedelics during the Manson murders, and revelations about the CIA's role in the opium trade in Vietnam.⁴⁶ Instead of the acid trip's expansion of consciousness, drugs now seemed to be used as an escape not from old patterns of thought, but from thought altogether. In perhaps the most famous account of this change in drug use, Hunter S. Thompson's narrator, Duke, in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971), notes how, in 1971, "the popularity of psychedelics has fallen off so drastically that most volume dealers no longer even handle quality acid or mescaline."⁴⁷ Rather than psychedelics or speed, people wanted downers: "Seconal and heroin... What sells, today, is whatever Fucks You Up—whatever short-circuits your brain and grounds it out for the longest possible time."⁴⁸ Many writers have wanted to note the resonances between this post-psychedelic era of drug use and the expansion of US imperialism, consumerism, and capitalism. During this time, instead of a means of liberatory escape from the ordinary bounds of consciousness that might transform our politics, drugs become the ultimate commodity, with, as Eve Sedgwick puts it, the "unique ability to pry the potentially unlimited trajectory of demand, in its users, conclusively and ever-increasingly apart from the relative

⁴⁶ I address the issues of heroin addiction among veterans and the CIA's enabling of the opium trade in Vietnam below. For an account of how the Manson murders popularized "new and fearsome dimensions" of LSD that were not widespread before, see Tom O'Neill, *Chaos: Charles Manson, the CIA, and the Secret History of the Sixties* (Little, Brown and Company, 2019), 320-321.

⁴⁷ Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas and Other American Stories*, Modern Library Edition (New York: Modern Library, 1996), 201.

⁴⁸ Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, 202.

homeostasis of need.”⁴⁹ Rather than drugs providing a means to a revolution in the way we live and relate to each other—as we see in Ginsberg, Leary, Mailer, and Foucault—drug use keeps society from advancing.

This chapter looks back to the Vietnam era in order to explore how both ways of conceptualizing drug use—viewing it as either politically liberatory or socially disastrous—understand drugs as an agent of moral and political change. This chapter will focus on drug use in two novels written by Chicano veterans that look back at the Vietnam War, Daniel Cano’s *Shifting Loyalties* (1995) and Alfredo Vea’s *Gods Go Begging* (1999), precisely because they are explicitly radical and anti-imperialist, yet use descriptions of, and plots about, drug use to express both of these political positions. In other words, this chapter looks at the way left wing or radical texts from the neoliberal era put forth both normative understandings of drug use. *Shifting Loyalties* and *Gods Go Begging* explicitly diagnose US imperialism as the cause of the suffering in Vietnam and link the suffering in Vietnam to the suffering of particular impoverished, minority, and working-class people in the US. In Chapter Two, I will turn to novels that express traditional or conservative moral sentiments (centered on the importance of the nuclear family) through depictions of drug use, but, in this chapter, looking at these radical, anti-imperialist novels will help demonstrate that it was not just a conservative reaction to the counterculture’s drug use that led to a moralistic response to drugs.

Literary critics have noted the oppositional politics in *Shifting Loyalties* and *Gods Go Begging* (and in the imaginative responses to the Vietnam War by minority writers more generally), yet have failed to address the way these novels often articulate their antiwar politics,

⁴⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993), 135.

both positively and negatively, in drug scenes.⁵⁰ The texts conspicuously highlight marijuana as a force that bonds their multiethnic, working-class coalitions and allows these coalitions, in the midst of the war, to articulate a newly discovered antiwar ethic. Both texts go on to show that other drugs—heroin and crack cocaine, respectively—entrench imperialism and capitalism, thus are incompatible with political progress. The representation of marijuana and the other drugs thus seems quite different. The depiction of marijuana use seems to counter the stigma associated with the drug during the Vietnam War (what historian Jeremy Kuzmarov terms the “myth of the addicted army”), and perhaps the history of US drug warriors claiming that marijuana use led to violence from the Latinx community.⁵¹ The novels’ portrayals of heroin and crack cocaine, in contrast, share common ground, at least rhetorically, with how Nixon and Reagan described the effect of drug use on communities. I point this out in part to show how moralistic condemnations of drugs for political purposes were not limited to the culturally conservative, “just say no” right

⁵⁰ For the oppositional politics in texts by Chicano soldier-authors, see John Alba Cutler, “Disappeared Men: Chicana/o Authenticity and the American War in Viet Nam,” *American Literature* 81, no. 3 (2009): 583–611, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-2009-027>, Patrick Hamilton, *Of Space and Mind: Cognitive Mappings of Contemporary Chicano/a Fiction* (Texas: U of Texas P, 2011), and Jayson Sae-Saue, *Southwest Asia: The Transpacific Geographies of Chicana/o Literature* (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2016). For responses to the Vietnam War in African American literature, and why this response took such a long time to appear, see Heike Raphael-Hernandez, “‘It Takes Some Time to Learn the Right Words’: The Vietnam War in African American Novel,” in *Afroasian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics* (New York: New York UP, 2006), 103–23. For Asian American literary responses to the Vietnam War, see Long T Bui, “The Debts of Memory: Historical Amnesia and Refugee Knowledge in *The Reeducation of Cherry Truon*,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 18, no. 1 (2015): 73–97.

⁵¹ In his “reefer madness” campaigns in the mid-twentieth century, Harry J. Anslinger—head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics—often used the threat of violent Mexicans as the reason for outlawing marijuana, popularizing the term “marihuana” (at the time more widely known as hemp) in order to connect the drug with the Mexican community. Anslinger claimed that marijuana could “arouse in blacks and Hispanics a state of menacing fury or homicidal attack” and claimed that marijuana “addicts” had “perpetrated some of the most bizarre and fantastic offenses and sex crimes known to police annals.” For this history and these quotes, see Cockburn and St. Clair, *Whiteout*, 72.

wing. However, my larger goal is to show that regardless of whether the texts take an approving or condemnatory posture toward a particular drug, a common literary treatment of drugs across the political spectrum—as I will demonstrate in subsequent chapters—has been to narrativize drugs so that they become socially meaningful, morally significant, and politically powerful. Whether in the case of marijuana bringing us all together, LSD starting a revolution, or heroin tearing society apart, drugs transcend social circumstances and, in themselves, advance or stifle political change. I have chosen *Shifting Loyalties* and *Gods Go Begging* precisely because the texts contain both the approving and condemnatory depictions of different drugs that, I will argue, result in the same understanding of drugs themselves having a great social, moral, and political power.

This understanding of drugs is by no means limited to literary texts, nor is this the only understanding of drugs we find in literature. (I discuss examples of literary texts that do not find drugs morally or politically significant in chapters three and four.) Yet literature is a particularly fruitful place to look. Literature—especially in longer forms such as the novel and the memoir—has long attempted to both represent the experience of altered consciousness with language, and has situated this experience in particular historical contexts. My contention is that throughout the War on Drugs era language used in depictions of altered consciousness, plots about drug users, and/or the aesthetic form taken by literary texts that deal substantively with drugs has often aligned with, and attempted to further, timely moral and political debates in a way that confers moral and political weight on the drug itself. In analyzing drug use in these literary texts, I hope to shed new light on these debates.

I. Makeshift Funerals and Heroin Dens in *Shifting Loyalties*

The pot-smoking or heroin-addicted soldier became widespread in the US cultural imaginary during the Vietnam War. Newspapers of record such as the *New York Times* ran numerous reports of the soldiers' widespread drug use.⁵² In one television segment, *CBS News* showed footage of a soldier inhaling smoke out of a shotgun. Voiceover narration explained, "What's happening here is also happening to some extent at virtually every other American installation in Vietnam. Recent surveys estimate that well over fifty percent of the soldiers in Vietnam use marijuana."⁵³ The narrator explains that the soldier holding the shotgun is "a squad leader, responsible for the lives of a dozen men."⁵⁴ The narrator's statement implicitly links irresponsible drug use to military failures and the deaths of American soldiers. The viewer sees these mustached, shirtless men consume marijuana smoke using a frightening, extreme method (out of a shotgun). The narrator reminds the viewer that these same men hold responsibility for the lives of their family members and neighbors. In typical Vietnam War-era slippery-slope logic, the drug use by these men not only endangers their fellow soldiers, but also endangers the US position in Vietnam, thus the US position on the world stage in the face of international communism. Responses from members of congress exemplified, and further stoked, the moral outrage and panic that accompanied these reports and images. For example, Senator Thomas J. Dodd, a Democrat from Connecticut, said in a hearing to investigate juvenile delinquency, "School children are popping pills like peanuts and as my hearings have shown, tens of thousands of troops have gone into battle high on marijuana, opium or other drugs, with

⁵² See "U.S. Servicemen Reported Mailing Drugs in Vietnam," *The New York Times*, September 7, 1967, and Drummond Ayres, "Marijuana Is Part of The Scene Among G.I.'s In Vietnam," *The New York Times*, March 29, 1970.

⁵³ Quoted in Ron Mann, *Grass* (Unapix Home Entertainment, 1999).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

horrifying results. There is a drug culture in this nation that existing laws have failed to reduce.”⁵⁵ In his slippage from “school children” to “tens of thousands” of troops fighting while high, Dodd portrayed drugs as simultaneously an existential domestic threat and a cause of the US military’s failure in Vietnam.

Following his logic, there was no inherent problem with the war being fought in Vietnam; instead the problem was the existence of a second, underestimated enemy: drugs. In order to safeguard the futures of children in the US, to be victorious in Vietnam, and to defeat communism, the second enemy would need to be vanquished. It should come as no surprise that Richard Nixon’s so-called War on Drugs proved a political triumph, even as the unpopular war in Vietnam persisted.⁵⁶ In his message to Congress on June 17, 1971, Richard Nixon proposed “an emergency program to combat narcotics addiction,” noting that “The threat of narcotics among our people is one which properly frightens many Americans. It comes quietly into homes and destroys children; it moves into neighborhoods and breaks the fiber of community which makes neighbors.”⁵⁷ Central to Nixon’s “threat of narcotics” was the Vietnam War soldier who would become addicted to drugs while in Southeast Asia, return home, and spread his contagious

⁵⁵ Quoted in Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 8.

⁵⁶ Kuzmarov notes that, even though Vietnam was going poorly, Nixon’s statements on drugs “received a flurry of positive letters from constituents praising his commitment to solving the drug ‘crisis,’ which many considered to be among the ‘gravest social problems’ of their time.” Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 2.

⁵⁷ Richard Nixon, “Excerpts from President’s Message on Drug Abuse Control,” *The New York Times*, June 18, 1971, http://www.nytimes.com/1971/06/18/archives/excerpts-from-presidents-message-on-drug-abuse-control.html?_r=0.

addiction. In Nixon's words, this soldier would "slip into the twilight world of crime, bad drugs and all too often premature death."⁵⁸

Daniel Cano's *Shifting Loyalties* proves exemplary for how, when it comes to marijuana, it pushes back on the descriptions of drug use by Dodd and Nixon, yet simultaneously reproduces the logic of their argument. *Shifting Loyalties* is a little-known novel—published by Arte Público, a small press that focuses primarily on recovery work—about a group of Chicano soldiers' experiences with the Vietnam War and the related traumas they suffer. The novel is written in the fractured style of many Vietnam War novels (such as O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*). Critics have typically characterized this style of Vietnam War novel as postmodern, where, according to Lucas Carpenter, the shifting focalization and temporalities of the text "demonstrate the multi-perspectival, relativistic nature of America's Vietnam experience and the futility of any attempt to identify, much less communicate (especially via language), any fundamental meaning or truth attaching to or derived from the war."⁵⁹ We can see something like the postmodern contestation of metanarratives (as Jean-François Lyotard famously defined it) in the way *Shifting Loyalties* deconstructs the binary of ally and enemy, and also in the anti-hegemonic rejection of the early Chicana/o movements' nationalistic and masculinist framework—often associated with the novels of Oscar Zeta Acosta—in favor of a transnational alliance against US imperialism.⁶⁰ Yet these are specific binaries and narratives that the text

⁵⁸ Quoted in Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 2.

⁵⁹ Lucas Carpenter, "'It Don't Mean Nothin'": Vietnam War Fiction and Postmodernism," *College Literature* 30, no. 2 (2003): 2.

⁶⁰ B.V. Olguín notes that for Cano, "Mexican-American identity is not so much about a claim to difference as minority Americans as it is a claim to sameness with a broader cadre of subaltern subjects throughout the world at large." Olguín lists "working-class and racial minority feminists, gay activists, black nationalists, North Vietnamese communists, and Sandinistas" as part of this "broader cadre of subaltern subjects." B.V. Olguín, "Sangre Mexicana/Corazón

challenges. It does not subvert the idea of binaries or trouble the idea of narrative writ large. (In other words, there are still enemies and allies; it just shifts its loyalty from the US government to the North Vietnamese army.)

We can thus see a marked difference from what we get in Tim O'Brien's Pulitzer-finalist Vietnam War novel, *The Things They Carried* (1990). For instance, O'Brien's insight that any story which attributes blame for, or extracts any moral from, the war is necessarily false is revealed in a particularly striking passage:

When a man died, there had to be blame. Jimmy Cross understood this. You could blame the war. You could blame the idiots who made the war. You could blame Kiowa for going to it. You could blame the rain. You could blame the river. You could blame the field, the mud, the climate. You could blame the enemy. You could blame the mortar rounds. You could blame people who were too lazy to read a newspaper, who were bored by the daily body counts, who switched channels at the mention of politics. You could blame whole nations. You could blame God. You could blame the munitions makers or Karl Marx or a trick of fate or an old man in Omaha who forgot to vote.⁶¹

O'Brien attempts to show that it is impossible to provide any straightforward account of blame for the War, given the limited narrative perspective each of us inhabits. Representation of the war itself becomes difficult. The book thus takes the form of shifting, limited, at times contradictory perspectives. In contrast to this relativistic inability to find a stable agent of blame, Cano's novel believes that a normative moral and political stance can be taken, and he often expresses this stance through his depiction of drug use.

Robert Stone's National Book Award winning *Dog Soldiers* (1973) understands the blame for the war differently than O'Brien does, but to similar effect. For Stone, the "problem of other minds"—the difficulty in knowing the mind and motives of other people (and by extension,

Americano: Identity, Ambiguity, and Critique in Mexican-American War Narrative," *American Literary History* 14, no. 1 (2002): 106.

⁶¹ Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Mariner Books, 2009), 169-170.

other nations)—leads to pervasive violence, perpetrated either out of ignorance or out of paranoia. Because this condition is universal, it again makes stable attribution of blame difficult and perhaps futile. Unlike most the other texts I will examine, *Dog Soldiers* applies this moral skepticism to the drugs it depicts, which is perhaps the most significant way it serves as a contrast with *Shifting Loyalties* and *Gods Go Begging*. *Dog Soldiers* tells the story of a journalist smuggling heroin back from Vietnam, the heroin itself neither causes nor represents the violence and suffering that pervades the book. In fact, Stone satirizes the type of writer who attributes moral or political power to heroin itself. At one point in the novel, Marge and Hicks invite a Hollywood-connected counterculture figure named Eddie Peace to their motel room, hoping to make a heroin deal. Eddie brings with him Gerald, a writer attempting to compose “something honest and real about the heroin scene.”⁶² Gerald explains that he finds the significance of heroin in the fact that people are “linked to each other through this incredible almost superhuman need. A chain of victims.”⁶³ Because Gerald does not feel like he has the requisite experiential knowledge, or an authentic connection to “the scene,” he wants to buy heroin from Hicks. Stone provides a mocking description of Gerald preparing himself for injection: “he sat erect and grim, with the air of a man about to do something valorous in a good cause. When he looked at Hicks, his eyes held humility and trust.”⁶⁴ Hicks then punches the needle directly into Gerald’s vein, knowing that this will cause an overdose. In a cruel sense, Gerald receives what he wants: he becomes a member of the “chain of victims”; he receives the experience he has asked for. Only, it’s not the power of heroin in society that has killed him. He has instead become a victim because he is ignorant of Hicks’s odd malice, not from any “incredible almost superhuman need”

⁶² Robert Stone, *Dog Soldiers* (Mariner Books, 1973), 190.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Stone, *Dog Soldiers*, 199.

the drug causes.⁶⁵ Stone reveals, and darkly satirizes, the tendency among writers to attribute social power to the drug itself. Throughout the novel, ignorance and specifically the inability to know the motives of other people leads to suffering. When people act decisively upon faulty knowledge or assumptions, they often perpetuate suffering, exemplified by the violence perpetrated by the US in Vietnam, but ultimately—in Stone’s telling—this is a universal element of the human condition.

Unlike *The Things They Carried*, *Shifting Loyalties* does not contest the notion that some truth can be gleaned from, or blame attributed for, the Vietnam War. And in contrast to the all-encompassing cynicism of *Dog Soldiers*, *Shifting Loyalties* provides a positive political vision, a positive vision we see most clearly in a scene where marijuana use conditions the possibility of the soldiers’ transgression of ethnic boundaries and articulation of their antiwar ethic. One of the major plotlines in *Shifting Loyalties* revolves around questions of transnational identification between the Chicano soldiers (fighting for the US) and the North Vietnamese soldiers fighting for the National Liberation Front (NLF). Even as *Shifting Loyalties* alternates between different characters and temporalities, each storyline deals with the traumatic experiences of soldiers in the 320th Artillery, 101st Airborne Division of the US Army. The disappearance of soldier Jesse Peña while in Vietnam becomes a common discussion point throughout the book. At one point the soldiers hold a “session, more of a funeral,” for Jesse, “in the training area which was at the perimeter of the brigade camp, near the foot of a jungle-covered mountain range.”⁶⁶ Using “C-ration cans and heat tablets,” the soldiers create “a church-like atmosphere.”⁶⁷ In addition to the

⁶⁵ In the character of Marge, Stone provides a depiction of heroin addiction. She uses heroin, which makes her feel good, and when she goes without using it for too long, she becomes sick, yet her need for heroin does not cause the misery in which the novel is steeped.

⁶⁶ Cano, Daniel. *Shifting Loyalties*. Texas: Arte Publico Press, 1995, 94.

⁶⁷ Cano, *Shifting Loyalties*, 95.

group of Chicano soldiers, which includes Hector and David Almas, Wayne, a white friend of David's, attends this makeshift funeral. All the soldiers are from working-class backgrounds.

An important ritual at this church-like event is smoking marijuana: When David nodded, Wayne reached into his pocket and pulled out a plastic baggie, took off the rubber band, opened up the plastic, and handed Big Rod a stack of joints, each rolled extra thick. Big Rod passed them around and said to light up. Except for Wayne, Langley and David, none of the other guys smoked much, but this night they all breathed in the stinging herb.⁶⁸

The text describes the effect of the drug: "The Jungle moved in closer, the roots, leaves and trunks swelling. The trees came down on their heads like thick spider webs and the plants weighed against their backs. The joints moved around the circle until the air and smoke mingled into a kind of anesthetized gas."⁶⁹ This choice of metaphor is important. As in a surgery, the "anesthetized gas" dulls an otherwise unbearable pain, which allows something necessary to take place. The pain in this case is the experiences the Chicano soldiers share. The necessary work is the understanding of their own predicament, the cross-racial alliance that forms between the Chicano soldiers and Wayne, and a psychological identification between the group of soldiers and the NLF. The Chicano soldiers speak about their pasts, where they were insulted by teachers, attended "schoolhouses with holes in the roofs," and have received the "worst duties" while on tour in Vietnam.⁷⁰ As the Chicano soldiers go through a litany of grievances and work themselves "into a fury," the novel formally stages the interracial work that takes place with a simple one sentence paragraph, which, because of its brevity, is emphasized: "Wayne didn't say much, just listened and laughed."⁷¹ Gaining access to the stories and emotions he normally would be shielded from, Wayne does not try to defend the institutions that have oppressed these

⁶⁸ Cano, *Shifting Loyalties*, 97.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Cano, *Shifting Loyalties*, 98-99.

⁷¹ Cano, *Shifting Loyalties*, 99.

Chicano men, and he does not attempt to dominate the conversation. He instead listens and learns from their stories, participating primarily through his laughter. The metaphor of anesthetization suggests that without marijuana, this scene could not take place. The pain would be too great. No multiethnic coalition would be formed.

Because they have been anesthetized, the soldiers feel free to voice their troubling thoughts about the disappearance of Jesse. The soldiers share rumors about what happened to Jesse; a particularly popular story is that Jesse has switched sides and joined the NLF. Hector imagines Jesse's possible motives for joining the other side:

this Peña guy understands that everything here means nothing. It's all fantasy, a joke, a big fuckin' lie, man. I ain't never met the guy, but I been thinking about him a lot. I heard the stories. I heard that Peña lived in San Antonio, in some rat hole that he could't afford to buy because the bank would't lend him the money. I heard that in the summer when it hits a hundred, him and his neighbors fried like goddamn chickens because they could't afford air conditioning. So now they send him here to fight for his country, for his land! Wow, what a joke, man.⁷²

B.V. Olguín, August Carbonella, and Jayson Sae-Saue point to this description as central to the novel's politics.⁷³ What is especially important—as these scholars note—is that the soldiers are beginning to form and articulate their nascent anti-imperialist politics as they discuss Jesse's disappearance. Jesse's circumstances, as Hector describes them, bely rationality: Jesse's material oppression has been perpetrated by racist institutions and the larger capitalist system, and the nation that has created and enabled these institutions has been redefined as the "land" that Jesse is responsible for protecting. Reflecting on this, the soldiers realize that their material conditions align their subaltern status both with each other and with their supposed enemy (the North

⁷² Daniel Cano, *Shifting Loyalties* (Texas: Arte Publico Press, 1995).

⁷³ See B.V. Olguín, "Sangre Mexicana/Corazón Americano," 102; August Carbonella, "Structures of Fear, Spaces of Hope," *Anthropologica* 51, no. 2 (2009): 357; and Sae-Saue, *Southwest Asia*, 69.

Vietnamese), creating the “shifting loyalties” of the book’s title. Hector can only make sense of this situation by calling it a “joke,” or a “big, fucking lie.”

This identification proves quite a contrast to a scene in *The Things They Carried*, and demonstrates the radical politics of *Shifting Loyalties*. In *The Things They Carried*, the self-referential character “Tim” receives incompetent medical treatment, which nearly kills him, from Bobby Jorgenson. Upset by this, Tim and another member of his troop pretend to be NLF soldiers in order to frighten Jorgenson. O’Brien writes, “Squinting down at Jorgenson’s position, I felt a swell of immense power. It was a feeling the VC must have. Like a puppeteer.”⁷⁴ Tim’s identification with the North Vietnamese comes when he does something that causes him great shame, and he imagines them not as occupying a similar material position, but as powerfully different. We can thus see the radical nature *Shifting Loyalties* staging this identification with the NLF. Important for our purposes, and missed by the above scholars, is the way marijuana use enables this identification. Hector would no doubt have gone on “thinking about [Jesse] a lot,” but he shares these thoughts with the other soldiers—including the white, working-class Wayne—when appropriately anesthetized by marijuana. What this scene indicates is that, in spite of their different backgrounds and identities, common understanding and a common anti-imperialist cause can be reached when high. Pot can bring us together.

If this seems like an over-reading of the marijuana references, it is important to consider the relationship between smoking marijuana while enlisted and the counterculture, as well as common counterculture ideas about marijuana. On one level, this relationship is symbolic, and highlights the soldiers’ connection to the larger antiwar movement. As John Hudak shows, the attitudes adopted by both Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon toward marijuana were based on

⁷⁴ O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 198.

how they linked the drug to antiwar protests and the counterculture more broadly.⁷⁵ Kuzmarov notes how soldiers picked up on this association while on duty, which was a partial motivation for using it. Kuzmarov quotes one Vietnam War veteran who said that smoking marijuana “was the symbol of the anti-war movement in the service.”⁷⁶ Beyond this symbolic relationship, the belief in marijuana’s effectual power to get otherwise different people to come together and put an end to violence was common for the counterculture. For instance, beat poet and counterculture hero Allen Ginsberg had the idea in the early 1960s that he might take acid and have a conference call with John F. Kennedy, Mao Zedong, and Nikita Krushchev, in which he would advise that they smoke marijuana. Ginsberg believed that if they did so, they would put an end to violence and perhaps bring about world peace.⁷⁷

If, for Cano, marijuana possesses both the symbolic and effectual power to create bonds between Chicano soldiers and white soldiers, as well as US soldiers and (at least in the imagination of the US soldiers) NLF soldiers, which enable anti-imperialist and anti-racist politics, heroin use is the product of American imperialism. Early in the novel, Manny Cardoza suffers a traumatic experience from which he is unable to recover. A member of Manny’s troop, Charley Yañez, accidentally kills another member of their troop, Albert “Beto” Alvarez. After Manny wakes Charley Yañez at midnight to replace him on watch, Charley, overtired and paranoid, accidentally fires his gun when he hears a sound. The sound has been caused by Albert, and the bullet from Charley’s M-16 enters “Albert’s forehead and slam[s] him into a tree.”⁷⁸ Manny runs out of his tent, sees what has happened, and calls for a medic.

⁷⁵ John Hudak, *Marijuana: A Short History* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 46-50.

⁷⁶ Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 31.

⁷⁷ See Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 81.

⁷⁸ Cano, *Shifting Loyalties*, 44.

This traumatic experience eventually leads to Manny becoming addicted to heroin. When Cano recounts Manny's first experience using heroin, he writes that "there came a time when Manny was willing to try anything, anything to keep the dogs away, to keep Beto's face out of his head."⁷⁹ In his attempt to stifle these memories, Manny has "drunk whiskey, smoked weed, dropped Darvon" but nothing has helped.⁸⁰ Thus he decides to try heroin while in "the back room" of a place in Phan Rhang.⁸¹ While observing other soldiers using heroin, Manny notes the "beautiful Vietnamese women moving about the room":

One woman, not a girl, but a lady, in her thirties, voluptuous, mature, was fixing a guy who looked like he was already nodding off. She stuck the needle into the young, blond soldier's arm. His bangs fell to his forehead. He looked like an Indiana farm boy. She withdrew the syringe, opened her blouse, placed his hand on her breast, and kissed him deeply on the mouth. The soldier didn't respond. He was somewhere else, somewhere far away. Manny couldn't decline. He sat down and waited his turn. He made the woman open her blouse first, kiss him deeply, and when he could barely breathe, his heart pounding, she slid the needle in.⁸²

Cano emphasizes the soldiers' passivity and strips them of agency. The Vietnamese woman is "not a girl, but a lady," a "mature" woman juxtaposed to the "young," "boy" soldiers who seem unable to refuse heroin. Manny uses heroin as a response to a traumatic incident, but the description of his heroin use itself aligns with Freud's famous definition of trauma. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud writes, "the subject appears to have a *passive* experience, over which he has no influence, but in which he meets with a repetition of the same fatality."⁸³ Manny's first heroin experience does not solve or even displace the trauma of witnessing Beto's

⁷⁹ Cano, *Shifting Loyalties*, 272.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. W.W. Strachey (Norton, 1961), 16. Emphasis is mine.

death; instead, it re-traumatizes him, causing Manny to continually suffer a dual-trauma, as we will see.

It is worth noting that though most of the counterculture encouraged the use of psychedelics and marijuana, heroin use was viewed differently, and, in part, this view was shaped by findings about CIA involvement with the heroin trade in South Vietnam. In 1972 Alfred W. McCoy wanted to highlight the war's widespread corruption. In his groundbreaking work of investigative journalism, which had a large influence on the counterculture, McCoy found that the CIA "provided their drug lord allies," in South Vietnam, "with transport, arms, cash and political protection."⁸⁴ By this point, *The New York Times* already had exposed the fact that the vice president of the Republic of South Vietnam, Nguyen Cao Ky, had used a CIA operation in order to smuggle opium.⁸⁵ And in 1970 the leftwing muckraking magazine *Ramparts* had shown that the CIA-run Air America airline had transported opium for American-allied officials in South Vietnam.⁸⁶ Yet McCoy's efforts to expose US complicity in the heroin trade in South Vietnam were unparalleled, interviewing intelligence officers in France, CIA operatives in Langley, and Laotian soldiers and CIA operatives in Saigon, all at great personal and professional risk.⁸⁷ In the most explosive interview conducted for the book, McCoy got General Ouane Rattikone, who commanded the CIA-backed Royal Lao Air Force, to admit to the existence of a heroin refinery that, under the guise of bottling Pepsi-Cola, produced much of the heroin used by American soldiers in South Vietnam.⁸⁸ Influenced by McCoy's findings and other

⁸⁴ See Alfred W. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade*, Revised Edition (Lawrence Hill Books, 2003), 385.

⁸⁵ "CIA Once Ousted Ky, Report Shows: Senate Study Charges He Flew Opium on Mission," *The New York Times*, April 19, 1968.

⁸⁶ Peter D. Scott, "Air America: Flying the U.S. into Laos," *Ramparts*, February 1970.

⁸⁷ See Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 82-83.

⁸⁸ Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 83.

notable accounts of CIA complicity in the drug trade, the counterculture responded furiously. Nothing symbolized the corrupt partnership between the US and South Vietnam better than the fact that South Vietnam was—with CIA knowledge—profiting from the heroin addiction of US soldiers. McCoy channeled the fury this knowledge elicited, writing “returning GI addicts have come home as carriers of the disease, and are afflicting hundreds of communities with the heroin virus, spawning a crime wave that has turned America’s inner cities into concrete jungles.”⁸⁹

Manny’s ultimate fate follows along these lines. When Manny returns to the US, he marries and starts a family, but he remains hopelessly addicted. He values heroin to the exclusion of everything else in his life: “Family no longer meant anything to him. Sharon [his wife] was a body he lived with. He stopped going to school. He began to miss work.”⁹⁰ Even after Sharon has a baby, and he swears to her that he will “work hard, go back to college and get his degree,” he finds himself, “each night after work,” driving “through Hollywood, buy[ing] the stuff, and party[ing].”⁹¹ Manny is arrested near the end of the chapter, and, after his family refuses to post his bail, he throws a punch and hurls an insult at a cop. The cop responds by hitting him under the jaw, causing Manny to fall backwards and hit his head on a metal bunk bed, which ultimately kills him. Cano describes Manny’s final thoughts as he falls backwards. Manny returns, once more, to his two traumatic memories: “he saw the Vietnamese woman, her white *ao dai* above the waist, her breasts exposed. He saw Beto and Charley. They stood beside a tree.”⁹²

After his return to the US, Manny has attempted to incorporate himself into middle class, American life, but he has been tainted by heroin. He now has no choice but to “slip into the

⁸⁹ McCoy, *Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, 1.

⁹⁰ Cano, *Shifting Loyalties*, 275.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Cano, *Shifting Loyalties*, 278.

twilight world of crime, bad drugs and all too often premature death” (as Nixon put it), because he is a “carrier” of the “heroin virus” (as McCoy put it). Manny’s story serves as an interesting contrast to the gender dynamics Sae-Saue notes in his reading of *Shifting Loyalties*. He argues that *Shifting Loyalties* reproduces “the material violence of US imperialism on female Asian bodies.”⁹³ Sae-Saue specifically looks at a chapter that takes place in Thailand, where David Almas coerces a woman to become his prostitute, and thus “generates a psychic projection of himself as full-fledged American colonialist, one that mimics and fantasizes about an imperial obsession to subjugate the Asian other.”⁹⁴ What happens with Manny is the inverse: *Manny* has been penetrated and subjugated by “the Asian other,” evident in the language of needles sliding into and entering him. But consistent with the text’s attempt to forge a symbolic alliance with the NLF, the woman who subjugates Manny is from South Vietnam. US imperialism is thus behind both sides of Manny’s dual trauma: it has sent boys like Beto to die and boys like Manny to witness their deaths, and the US has allowed South Vietnam to penetrate US soldiers with needles. Once back home, Manny cannot settle into a traditional, monogamous marriage; Manny’s masculine function in society is threatened by this experience and the drug addiction that results from it: he can no longer work; he cannot provide for his family.

The wide range of trauma that resulted from the Vietnam War was given voice in the many fictional accounts of the war. And the hypocrisy of US intelligence providing cover for the heroin trade just as Nixon would announce the War on Drugs (and in the midst of decades of heroin prosecutions from the Federal Bureau of Narcotics) is striking. However, the social, political, and moral power attributed to both marijuana and heroin in texts like *Shifting Loyalties*

⁹³ Sae-Saue, *Southwest Asia*, 66.

⁹⁴ Sae-Saue, *Southwest Asia*, 70.

is notable and has been too long unexplored. In the novel, heroin is a result of the imperialism that marijuana use can unmask. Heroin not only prolongs the traumas suffered in Vietnam, it brings them back to the US and spreads them into new communities, who now cannot help but catch the disease. Marijuana can enlighten one to the evils of imperialism, and bring together the groups of people necessary to fight that evil. Heroin *is* one of the evils. Yet these exaggerations of the moral and political power of drugs have their own consequences. While marijuana can work as a bonding element within small social groups, viewing it—as we see in *Shifting Loyalties* and in common counterculture rhetoric—as an agent of peace reveals a reliance on, as McCann and Szalay write about, “spontaneous,” “symbolic,” and “magical” transformations in consciousness for political progress. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that most soldiers who used heroin in Vietnam did not continue to use it when they returned home. In reality, stories like Manny’s were rare, in spite of claims by McCoy, *Ramparts* writers, and Nixon. Sociologist Eric Schneider, for instance, writes, “The heroin-using soldiers who worried Richard Nixon and the American public so much stopped using heroin upon returning from Vietnam.”⁹⁵ Schneider cites studies which found that only one percent of soldiers reported being addicted to heroin eight to twelve months after returning from duty, which does not sound like a virulent disease that has the power to destroy entire communities. “One percent of soldiers became addicted to heroin,” also is not much of a metaphor for the evils of imperialism. What *has* occurred in a post-Vietnam, post-Nixon US is the expenditure of large amounts of public resources in an attempt to eradicate these supposedly powerful, dangerous drugs. But if anything has destroyed US communities, it is the drug war itself, though it spread neither like an agency-less virus, nor

⁹⁵ Eric Schneider, *Heroin and the American City* (Pennsylvania: U of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 179-180.

because of the menacing agency of the drug-object. Its spreading was due to the efforts of those who—convinced of the power of drugs—held and exercised institutional power.

II. “Desire stripped of humanity” in *Gods Go Begging*

In Alfredo Vea’s *God’s Go Begging* it is “desire stripped of humanity” that triggers suffering. Yet this aggravation of desire and stripping away of humanity is not a universal condition; it is situated in a politico-historical context and attributed to specific causes. The novel centers around the double murder of an African American woman (Persephone) and a Vietnamese woman (Mai) in the violent area of San Francisco called Potrero Hill. Calvin “Biscuit Boy” Thibault, a sensitive teenager who has grown up on Potrero Hill, is accused of committing this crime. The protagonist of the novel is Calvin’s defense attorney, Jesse Pasadoble, a Chicano Vietnam War veteran. As the novel unfolds, we learn of the numerous connections between the double homicide on Potrero Hill and events that took place decades earlier in Vietnam. To recount just a couple of these connections: We learn that Jesse served alongside Persephone’s fiancé, and that he once had a conversation with Mai’s fiancé, who was fighting for the NLF and was held as a prisoner of war by the US Army. We also learn that a mestizo Army chaplain was present both in Vietnam and also for the double murder on Potrero Hill. Jesse begins to see the meaning behind these connections by the end of the novel. As he says in his courtroom defense of Calvin, “The war that left two women and four boys dead on the eastern slope of Potrero Hill did not begin this year, or in this decade. It did not begin in this city. It began years ago—eleven thousand days ago, to be exact—on another hillside far from this courtroom, far away from here.”⁹⁶ The violence in both spaces reveals the “desire...stripped

⁹⁶ Alfredo Vea, *Gods Go Begging* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 274.

of humanity,” yet the severing of desire from humanity has been at the behest of, and aligns, US imperialism abroad and capitalism domestically.⁹⁷

In the chapters that return to Jesse’s experiences in Vietnam, the novel focuses on a diverse group of soldiers stationed on a hill near the border of Laos, and a game they play called “supposing.” In this game, they imagine alternative histories for themselves, and, in doing so, articulate their nascent antiwar politics. The game takes on political resonance because of the contrast it strikes to their disastrous circumstances. The violence from the war has been utterly devastating, going so far as to have profound ecological and geological effects:

Two groups of men had met on one face of this hill, and their savage intentions had left every tree limb and twig disfigured. Unwatered since the last monsoon rains, the small hill of dry and cracked earth had been sickened to nausea by this forced feeding of burned sulfur and human fluids. Here and there intrepid flowers persisted between fissures and foxholes, their soft petals and thin stems choked shut by the savage spray, the crimson effluence of exit wounds. Against their will, the living poppies masqueraded as roses.⁹⁸

The hill is a site of complete destruction—the violence so pervasive that it nauseates the earth and chokes the flowers; nothing beautiful is allowed to grow. In his description of what the soldiers lived through the previous night, V́ea writes that “scores of red seeds” have “erupted from human bodies, bursting violently through the drabness of cloth and skin—seed of stomach, seed of lung, hopeless grains set onto the wind.”⁹⁹ In his careful, poetic prose, V́ea makes clear the futility of the violence on the hill. As critics have noted, the violent setting makes the soldiers’ game of supposing remarkable. Brian J. Williams argues that the games function as “powerful acts” which “serve as the novel’s few moments of liberation, celebrating the infusion

⁹⁷ V́ea, *Gods Go Begging*, 291.

⁹⁸ V́ea, *Gods Go Begging*, 88.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

of cultures traditionally denoted minorities or powerless.”¹⁰⁰ This game gains its power from the horror of their material reality. According to Véa, as the soldiers’ world becomes more ghastly, the act of creating a speculative world grows in importance.

However, critics have missed how marijuana use enables the supposing, in a way similar to the conversation that occurs at the makeshift funeral in *Shifting Loyalties*. Before the main instance of “supposing” in the novel, Jim-Earl—a Native American character—offers Jesse a joint. Jesse inhales “deeply” and then asks about the “asshole pucker factor” of the other soldiers during the violence of the previous night; they subsequently bond over the high levels of fear they experienced. In addition to Jesse and Jim-Earl, the participants in this conversation are even more diverse than the group in *Shifting Loyalties*: there is a Black man from the South, white men from Nevada and the Midwest, and Mendez, “an enlistee from Tijuana who joined the U.S. Army to get his American citizenship.”¹⁰¹ Véa has informed us previously that these conversations revolve around alternative history questions about issues regarding ethnicity, nationalism, and oppression, such as, “what America would be like if there had never been any African slaves.”¹⁰² In this scene, before the group poses their question, the soldiers huddle “together, lighting up still another gigantic joint.”¹⁰³ Véa’s redundant diction (“still another”) emphasizes the extent of their marijuana use.

Thoroughly high, the group looks up as a satellite passes, and Mendez poses a question to Jesse: “Do you suppose that there will ever be Mexicanos in space?”¹⁰⁴ The group initially

¹⁰⁰ Brian J. Williams, “‘In This Same Shamble of Strewn Bone’: *Gods Go Begging* and the Community of Loss.,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 54, no. 3 (2013): 319.

¹⁰¹ Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 106.

¹⁰² Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 99.

¹⁰³ Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 109.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

laughs at “the insane images [the question] created in their minds,” of “low-rider rockets and pachucos on Pluto.”¹⁰⁵ The text recounts Jesse’s imagining of this possibility—and the historical contingencies that would allow for this possibility—in great detail. But before that, the soldiers again, “in anticipation of Jesse’s story,” pass around “new extra-large joints.” In this moment, Véa notes that they seem as if “no longer soldiers” but “enthusiastic students around a noisy table in a coffee shop in Berkeley.”¹⁰⁶ William Arce writes that Véa highlights “the political awakening Chicano soldiers in the U.S. military gained as a result of combat,” but misses the way marijuana—as in *Shifting Loyalties*—both occasions and symbolizes this political awakening.¹⁰⁷ The pleasure the soldiers take in comparing themselves to students in Berkeley—even if this identification can only last a moment—speaks to the importance of marijuana for this political awakening.

In answer to Mendez’s question, Jesse imagines “Hernán Cortez and his men [being] blown far off course and land[ing] at Plymouth Rock instead of Veracruz,” meaning that the Spanish would have intermarried with the Native Americans, rather than being revolted by them as the Puritans were. The Spanish and the Native Americans would have created a mestizo culture, instead of the US “melting pot,” which, as one character puts it, consisted of “All them European folks melt[ing] into white.”¹⁰⁸ Jesse explains the profound effect this would have had:

This simple idea of cultural difference as blasphemy is the very foundation of American racism. It wasn’t much of a leap from the Puritans to the Aryan Nation. It wasn’t much of a leap from their laws against consorting with the Indians to the Jim Crow laws in the

¹⁰⁵ Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 110.

¹⁰⁶ Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 113.

¹⁰⁷ See William Arce, “Landscapes of Trauma: The Transnational Dislocation of Vietnam’s War Trauma in Alfredo Veá’s *Gods Go Begging*,” in *Reframing the Transnational Turn in American Studies*, ed. Winfried Fluck, Donald E. Pease, and John Carlos Rose (New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2011), 116.

¹⁰⁸ Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 113-114.

South and the antimiscegenation laws in the West. You see, back in the world, racism is a sacred thing.¹⁰⁹

Resembling the literary tradition in which minority writers have established oppositional politics through imaginative and speculative fiction—by writers such as Américo Paredes, Margaret Atwood, Ishmael Reed, Gloria Naylor, Junot Díaz, Colson Whitehead, and Mat Johnson—Jesse and the other soldiers put forth speculative narratives that function as a means of political critique. These narratives seem to empower the soldiers as agents of history and help them begin to envision a different political future. Jim-Earl articulates how different the world would be: if the altered past they have created were true, then the soldiers “wouldn’t be standing here in Indian country.”¹¹⁰ In this fantasy world, the soldiers would not have been forced, because of their subaltern status, to fight in the war. Furthermore, by describing Vietnam as “Indian country,” Jim-Earl collapses the distinction between US imperialism in Vietnam and US capitalism in North America; as with the Chicano soldiers in *Shifting Loyalties*, Jim-Earl identifies with the Vietnamese “enemy.” At this point, Véa again makes explicit the connection between smoking marijuana and exercising one’s political imagination: “Jesse took a deep drag off another joint that had been shoved into his face by an unknown grunt. Now his entire brain was bathed in warmth. This daydream felt good.”¹¹¹ In the midst of fighting an imperialistic war, the soldiers come together across racial and ethnic boundaries to create a transnational political ethic, in no small part because of their drug use.

The scene of “supposing” on the hill in Laos ends suddenly as NLF troops attack. After the attack ends, the hill is left “completely blackened all the way to its crest” with “unfamiliar

¹⁰⁹ Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 114.

¹¹⁰ Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 119.

¹¹¹ Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 118.

blisters and newly cut gashes in the crust of the earth.”¹¹² After this attack, the soldiers learn the real reason they are stationed on the hill: they are a decoy, not a communications relay (their stated mission). As the chaplain explains to another soldier: “We were never supposed to carry a signal. Those crypto machines were turned off.”¹¹³ The violence and loss of life has been a tactical move in a masturbatory game, serving no larger purpose. The hill thus serves as a synecdoche of the Vietnam War itself. Yet, in spite of that, the text allows the productive game of supposing to take place between the soldiers. Marijuana is not the cause of the massacre the troops suffer—it doesn’t impair their fighting abilities as US politicians and media asserted about drugs during the Vietnam War.¹¹⁴ Rather, it aids in their brief, productive respite from the near total devastation of the hill near the Laotian border, and it allows the spreading of antiwar, anti-imperialist sentiment. Importantly, it also trains Jesse to make the sort of connections between historical events that will lead to him, years later, saving Calvin from incarceration.

In these later scenes that take place in contemporary San Francisco, V́ea describes the urban space of Potrero Hill (where the double homicide has taken place) as a site of devastation similar to the hill in Laos. V́ea creates a parallel between the two spaces in his description of the destruction to the natural environment: “Even in broad daylight the hill was difficult to see. The mounds of discards and heaps of trash on the hillside had begun to fuse with the industrial rubble down below to form a wised, formless mass of fast-food wrappers, rusted metal, plastics and paper soaked in rainwater, and engine oil.”¹¹⁵ Just as the violence of imperialism bleeds into and transforms the geography and ecology of the hill in Laos, the mass-produced ephemera of the

¹¹² V́ea, *Gods Go Begging*, 130.

¹¹³ V́ea, *Gods Go Begging*, 136.

¹¹⁴ See Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 20-21.

¹¹⁵ V́ea, *Gods Go Begging*, 159-160.

twentieth century has converted Potrero Hill into a monster of late capitalism. The hill is described as “affronted by neglect,” and residents of this space are given up, for all intents and purposes, as hopeless.¹¹⁶ As one character puts it, “Every child born on this hill had entered this world without the slightest chance to succeed. That chance had been ritually excised at birth, as routinely as excess umbilical cord, as routinely as the removal of the foreskin.”¹¹⁷ Arce, Theresa Delgadillo, and Hamilton have argued that the parallels between the two spaces, the way the violence in one space seems to exist beyond the bounds of its national borders or geographic locations, is the crux of the novel’s transnational politics.¹¹⁸

Yet, on Potrero Hill, drugs serve a different purpose than the one they serve in Vietnam. In particular, Véa describes crack cocaine as an impediment to Potero Hill being productive in any way, political or otherwise. In Vietnam, marijuana allows the soldiers to imagine alternatives to their otherwise bankrupt situation, and thus retain their humanity. On Potrero Hill, the characters have no chance of similar acts of imagination. In large part because of the “desire” that is “smoked in crack pipes and injected into the crooks of arms,” humanity, as one character puts it echoing the novel’s thematic refrain, is “hard to come by on this hill.”¹¹⁹ When Jesse and his partner Eddy first go to Potrero Hill in order to investigate the murders, Jesse, in a moment of semi-magical realism, becomes infected with what Eddy calls “urban Tourette’s.” As he ascends the hill, he begins cursing uncontrollably. Eddy explains,

urban Tourette’s is, in part, the result of radon gases from all this concrete mixing with hamburger wrappers and the tons of cocaine residue that have fallen onto the roadway. This compound ferments underfoot and is then bombarded by that dead blue light that

¹¹⁶ Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 160.

¹¹⁷ Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 163.

¹¹⁸ See Arce, “Landscapes of Trauma, 103; Theresa Delgadillo, “The Criticality of Latino/a Fiction in the Twenty-First Century,” *American Literary History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 604; and Hamilton, *Of Space and Mind*, 169.

¹¹⁹ Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 300.

pours out of television screens. The result is an insidious chemical gas that slowly leaches the human spirit out of these kids. It attacks and destroys the hippocampus so that these kids have no future and no cultural memory. Without a hippocampus they are forced to live in the eternal now...these kids are incapable of abstraction. Everything in their lives is physical and in the immediate present. They need to own things now; they need to react to insults now. They need to retaliate now. Hell, half the boys that were raised in this place are already in state prison. When the union movement was murdered in America, the bodies were thrown here and a thousand places like this.¹²⁰

This passage demonstrates the difference between “cocaine residue” and the marijuana smoked on the hill in Laos. When Jesse’s “entire brain” is “bathed in warmth” by marijuana, he gains an ability to transcend the present: he can look back into and speculatively alter the past, then use these alternations to imagine different presents and possible futures. In contrast, the kids on Potrero Hill are “incapable of abstraction” and possess “no cultural memory,” instead constricted to “the immediate present.” The chemicals they ingest have deteriorated their brains; they do not have the neurological capability to play a game of supposing. In fact, by the end of Eddy’s description, the boys no longer possess brains at all: they are “bodies” thrown onto Potrero Hill.¹²¹

It is not the boys’ fault that they now lack a “human spirit” or a “hippocampus,” and are destined for prison. *Gods Go Begging* was published three years after William Julius Wilson’s influential rejection of “culture of poverty” arguments in his book *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (1996).¹²² Wilson argued that deindustrialization in particular caused the perpetuation of poverty in urban areas. Perhaps with Wilson in mind, Eddy references

¹²⁰ Vea, *Gods Go Begging*, 170.

¹²¹ Though it’s beyond the scope of this chapter to address these issues fully, the novel’s reliance on Cartesian dualism for its understanding of humanity has gone strangely ignored by the many critics who describe the novel as a particularly complex and radical example of transnationalism and multiculturalism.

¹²² Wilson, William Julius. *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. Knopf, 1996.

the obliteration of the union movement in order to make clear that reactionary and neoliberal political forces have come together to deindustrialize urban areas like Potrero Hill, resulting in the cheap consumer goods that now seep into Potrero Hill's environment. Yet, in contrast to Wilson's argument but more consistent with the scenes of supposing in Laos, when V́ea shows what a teenager from Potrero Hill must do to escape becoming a mere body, it is very much the cultural effects of poverty he must learn to transcend.

In a pivotal scene near the end of the novel, Calvin—thanks to Jesse's defense—has been acquitted of the double homicide. After the trial he attempts to return to Potrero Hill. When he approaches the hill, he sees “dimly what had once been his own impoverished life.”¹²³ He now recognizes the “desire...stripped of humanity” in

every corner, cupboard, and crevice of Potrero Hill. Desire was there, leaking from the drainpipes and heading for the ocean untreated. Desire was leaping electrically down the wires that dangled from all the rusting antennas that clotted the rooftops. Desire was being pumped into gas tanks and rammed violently into the chambers of cheap weapons. Desire was being smoked in crack pipes and injected into the crooks of arms. Humanity was hard to come by on this hill, but desire was everywhere.¹²⁴

Calvin's eyes are opened to the reality of the hill. The reason he now sees clearly is that, while he awaited trial, Jesse made him compose book reports. In contrast to the pure desire demonstrated on Potrero Hill, Calvin's humanity reveals itself the more he reads and writes. After reading Calvin's book report on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Jesse remarks, “The boy is becoming a real person.”¹²⁵ Like the sunglasses in the John Carpenter film *They Live*, the literature Calvin reads allows him to see reality. “Desire” is central to the ideology that works to subjugate those ignorant of its existence. Imperialism and capitalism both run on desire and work

¹²³ V́ea, *Gods Go Begging*, 300.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ V́ea, *Gods Go Begging*, 257.

to sever it from humanity. Calvin can now see the desire “leaking” from Potrero Hill, thanks to his cultural education.

Even with Calvin’s newfound humanity, desire still proves tempting. As he approaches the hill he considers “kickin’ back with the fellas, firing up a pipe full of crack cocaine, and tellin’ all the boys about his murder trial—about how he had walked scot-free.”¹²⁶ Distracted by his desire for crack, Calvin does not hear “the bullet that [sends] him to the coroner’s office.”¹²⁷ In the description of Calvin’s shooting, V́ea pays special attention to Calvin’s books and writing. The books are “strewn in a wide circle about Calvin’s body” as he falls to the ground. The “paragraphs that he had written at his lawyer’s direction” are now “bloodstained... fluttering and tumbling off to join all the other windborne litter that was destined to embrace the gutter and curb.”¹²⁸ The emphasis on these elements of Calvin’s cultural education indicates that Potrero Hill will not abide Calvin’s restored humanity. Potrero Hill makes no distinction between Calvin’s humanistic inquiry and ephemeral litter. Calvin miraculously survives the shooting. Eddy calls to inform Jesse that Calvin is still alive, and he ecstatically informs Jesse that Calvin’s “never going back to the hill. Never!”¹²⁹ Because Calvin will never return to Potrero Hill, he has escaped an otherwise disastrous fate. The gunshot has served as a warning to Calvin: he cannot have his humanity and his crack pipe too.

In her remarks at the White House Conference for a Drug Free America in 1988, First Lady Nancy Reagan also argued that drugs had a disastrous impact on “our communities.”¹³⁰

¹²⁶ V́ea, *Gods Go Begging*, 301.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ V́ea, *Gods Go Begging*, 302.

¹²⁹ V́ea, *Gods Go Begging*, 317.

¹³⁰ Nancy Reagan and Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at a Meeting of the White House Conference for a Drug Free America,” (February 29, 1988).

Though she provides grim details of the violence caused by drugs, her speech is not directed towards perpetrators of violent crimes. It is directed toward the “casual user,” who, like Calvin, might in a moment of weakness think that “kickin’ back with the fellas” and “firing up a pipe full of crack cocaine,” sounds desirable. The purpose of Reagan’s speech is twofold: to convince casual users to stop, and, failing this, to make clear the punitive consequences they will face.¹³¹ Reagan says, “Ladies and gentlemen, I want to make it impossible for casual users to escape responsibility for any innocent death due to drugs. I want to make them fully face the brutality of drug use.”¹³² Yet Reagan had it backwards: very little violence was due to casual use of crack or other drugs; the violence was due to the profit that could be made from selling drugs, a direct result of illegalization. A comprehensive study of homicides in New York City in 1988 found that, though crack use was widespread among arrestees that year, only one percent of murders were committed by someone who had recently used the drug.¹³³ As Carl Hart writes, the violence was as “ ‘crack-related’ as the shoot-outs between gangsters during Prohibition were ‘alcohol-related.’ ”¹³⁴ Though Vea would surely challenge Reagan’s brutalizing lack of empathy toward the people on Potrero Hill, and would most likely disagree with who holds responsibility for the proliferation of poverty and drugs in urban environments, his narrative also works to make

¹³¹ In his remarks before Nancy’s speech, Ronald Reagan gave an enthused overview of the supply-side measures being taken to eradicate drugs, including “enlist[ing] the military in the battle,” “substantially increas[ing] the number of Federal prosecutors and agents,” and “confiscate[ing] over half a billion dollars’ worth of drug-related assets,” which, because of civil asset forfeiture laws, the government did not have to return. Ronald Reagan’s overview of the consequences followed by Nancy Reagan’s speech make clear that the casual user is part of the enemy forces in the drug war, and should be afraid of other side’s muscular, militarized forces. See *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ For a good summary of this study see Carl Hart, *High Price: A Neuroscientist’s Journey of Self-Discovery That Challenges Everything You Know About Drugs and Society* (Harper Perennial, 2013), 110.

¹³⁴ Hart, *High Price*, 111.

Calvin feel the weight of responsibility for casual crack use. Calvin's desire to smoke crack one last time near the end of the novel requires a brush with death: he must "fully face the brutality" of casual drug use. Above all, Reagan and V \acute{e} a seem to share a belief in the power of drugs themselves to forestall any progress in communities.

In both its liberatory view of marijuana and condemnatory attitude toward crack cocaine, the novel demonstrates a belief in drugs being able to affect not just individual lives but the outcomes of communities. Marijuana fosters the creation of a literal and imagined community in Laos. It both brings the soldiers together and allows them to create an imagined bond of identification with the counterculture (the students in Berkeley) and with the NLF. Though this is a brief respite from the ongoing war, the novel frames it as meaningful, as we can see in the response from critics. Their conversation enables the historical and cultural imagination to flourish in a way that US imperialism and capitalism tries to beat down through the selling of stupid, brute consumption—a consumption that, if challenged ideologically by foreign powers, will be met with war. In other words, marijuana use balances out desire by restoring humanity. As we have just seen, crack cocaine use does the opposite. Calvin can only leave Potrero Hill after being punished for his desire for crack, and learning the correct lesson. Though the novel points to the material underpinnings of the tragedies in Vietnam and in US urban areas, and is unequivocal in blaming the US for the violence in both places, the solution it provides is strictly cultural. After Calvin learns to read literature, he will possess the ability to correctly interpret and critique his surroundings. And with this ability, he can go on to make the correct moral and political choice, which in this case means refusing his desire for crack. In other words, rather than regaining control of institutions of power (rather than re-building the union movement) to which the novel itself attributes responsibility for the poverty on Potrero Hill, the novel's vision

for how to fight imperialism and capitalism is to, depending on the drug in question, just say yes or just say no.¹³⁵

In the last decade or so it has become common to question why the various policies grouped under the heading of the “War on Drugs” have persisted, in spite of the fact that the War on Drugs has made no progress in furthering its aim of eradicating the supply of illegal drugs in the US, and has instead led to increased harm to drug users and large numbers of incarceration, especially for people of color.¹³⁶ This chapter and subsequent chapters suggests one possible answer, by showing the willingness of writers on both sides of the political spectrum to ascribe excess moral and political power to drugs. Made powerful, the eradication of drugs (the goal of creating a “drug free America,” as Nancy Reagan put it) begins to become common sense, which would need to be—and so far has not been—met with a substantive challenge.

¹³⁵ I am not claiming that the novel should provide a vision of how to fight imperialism and capitalism. But since the novel does provide a vision, I am clarifying what that vision is and is not.

¹³⁶ Peter Reuter provides a clear, detailed account of the stasis in drug policy and the related harms from 1980-2010 in his article, “Why Has US Drug Policy Changed So Little over 30 Years?,” *Crime and Justice* 42, no. 1 (2013): 75–140. The material effects of so little change have no doubt contributed to the increased frequency with which people question the War on Drugs, but another important factor has been the popularity of Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow*, which ties the War on Drugs to mass incarceration, and argues that we can think of the War on Drugs as a continuation of Jim Crow laws.

CHAPTER TWO

Sleepwalkers and Zombies

Joan Didion's fiction and nonfiction from the 1960s and 1970s often features narratives of maternal abandonment or irresponsibility. In "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," a mother gives her five-year-old daughter acid and peyote on a regular basis.¹³⁷ After the pregnant Lucille Miller burns her husband alive in "Some Dreamers of a Golden Dream," she must send her newborn away as soon as she gives birth, so that she can return to prison.¹³⁸ Maria Wyeth, the protagonist of *Play It As It Lays*—whose own daughter has been taken from her and institutionalized—dwells on stories she's read in the newspaper: "four-year-olds in the abandoned refrigerator, the tea party with Purex, the infant in the driveway, rattlesnake in the playpen."¹³⁹ In *The White Album*, Didion provides the story of Betty Lansdown Fouquet, who forced her five-year-old daughter to get out of the car in the middle of Interstate 5 and then drove away. Over this same time period, Didion—in her own telling—became skeptical of our ability to align experience with normative ethical claims. In "On Morality," she writes that "we have no way of knowing...what is 'right' and what is 'wrong,' what is 'good' and what is 'evil.'"¹⁴⁰ In *The White Album*, the story of Betty Lansdown Fouquet leads to Didion's ethical skepticism, because

¹³⁷ Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Paperback Edition (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2008), 128.

¹³⁸ Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 26.

¹³⁹ Joan Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, Paperback edition (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2005), 99-100.

¹⁴⁰ Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 162.

it is an “image” that does not fit into any narrative that we might use to teach ourselves how to live.¹⁴¹ Yet I will argue that these irresponsible mothers do not demonstrate an image that cannot fit into a moral system, but images that fit all too well into a sense of residual moral belief that Didion demonstrates with the mother/child relationship, which Bret Easton Ellis then picks up on in his own fiction from the 1980s. Rather than demonstrating the impossibility of claims to morality, bad parents shock our residual moral sentiments, even in a postmodern or neoliberal world. And, for both Didion and Ellis, bad parenting is often the result of, or the reason for, drug use.

Didion and Ellis demonstrate this residual morality in the particular way they use literary minimalism. As noted by critics such as Mark McGurl, Andrew Hoberek, and Robert C. Clark, literary minimalism—the most famous practitioners of which have included Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, and the “Brat Pack” writers of the 1980s—works primarily via exclusion, excluding, for instance, character backstory or the “sprawl” of history.¹⁴² David Wyatt argues that Hemingway’s “‘theory’ of the ‘omitted’” works by excluding outright expressions of emotion in order “to make people ‘feel more.’”¹⁴³ The effect of Hemingway’s minimalism is not to “embrace emotional reticence,” but to “measure the cost of it.”¹⁴⁴ Hemingway served as something of a stylistic model for both Didion and Ellis, yet I will argue that they “measure the

¹⁴¹ Didion, *The White Album*, 11.

¹⁴² This quote is from Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 2009), 377. See also Andrew Hoberek, “The Novel after David Foster Wallace,” in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. Stephen J. Burn and Marshall Boswell (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 211–28, and Robert C. Clark, *American Literary Minimalism* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2014).

¹⁴³ David Wyatt, *Hemingway, Style, and the Art of Emotion* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2015), 3.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

cost” of moral absence in particular.¹⁴⁵ One of the central features of both texts is the exclusion of moral consideration or demonstrations of conscience. To extend Wyatt’s argument about Hemingway, the effect of this is not amoral, but is particularly moral: by juxtaposing actions that presumably will read as immoral—including infidelity, abuse, suicide, rape, and snuff films—while excluding the articulation of an ethical response to these actions on behalf of the characters, the novels highlight a lost sense of morality.

I will argue that the drugs consumed by the narrators in the texts help keep away these moral considerations, and instead allow the characters, who at times signal an unease or discomfort with the world around them, to react passively. There is a slippery-slope quality to the way these texts function as “cautionary tales” (as Jennifer Brady calls *Play It As It Lays*): if Maria Wyeth in *Play It As It Lays* does not toughen up and exercise control, rather than let the medical-industrial complex continue to pacify her, she will never be reunited with her daughter. In the 1980s, Bret Easton Ellis seems to pick up where Didion left off. He ends his novel *Less Than Zero* (1985) with the protagonist listening to a song full of “harsh and bitter” imagery of “parents who were so hungry and unfulfilled that they ate their own children.”¹⁴⁶ In other words, it is precisely because the Los Angeles parents (such as Maria Wyeth) lost control of their children that Clay and the other teenagers in *Less Than Zero* insist on numbing themselves with excessive drug use, turning them into zombies who sell their bodies for drug money, watch snuff films, and drug and rape children. We thus see the consequences of the drug-induced loss of

¹⁴⁵ On the influence of Hemingway on Didion’s style in *Play It As It Lays*, see Cynthia Griffin Wolff, “Play It As It Lays: Didion and the Diver Heroine,” *Contemporary Literature* XXIV, no. 4 (1983): 483. Ellis explains in an interview that Hemingway and Didion’s *Play It As It Lays* were the primary influences on *Less Than Zero*. See Jaime Clarke and Bret Easton Ellis, “Interview with Bret Easton Ellis,” *Mississippi Review* 27, no. 3 (1999): 70.

¹⁴⁶ Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, First Vintage Contemporaries Edition (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1998), 207.

control from the mothers of Maria's generation in the drug-induced violence their children perpetrate.

Critics have argued that we can locate early cultural representations of an economic and political shift to neoliberalism in the work of Didion and Ellis; I will argue instead that their work is best understood as embodying the tensions that critics often elide in their descriptions of neoliberalism, and that—both in their novels and in other texts throughout this era—these tensions become clearest when we examine drug use. Daniel Worden and Alex Trimble Young connect Didion's resistance to "claims to moral authority" to the way she often uses nonfiction written from a highly subjective first-person perspective, and argue that Didion uses this style to "represent the emergence of what we can now describe as neoliberal America."¹⁴⁷ In their more comprehensive account of the relationship between contemporary literature and neoliberalism, Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith describe the 1980s as an early stage of neoliberalism, where neoliberalism begins to expand "its logic to the political, social and cultural domains of everyday life," and include *Less Than Zero* as one of the novels that "describe[s] the transformation of economic policy into lived political ideology."¹⁴⁸ They note the many political transformations initiated by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in favor of "lower taxes, deregulation, [and] free and private markets," yet they view the 1980s as an inchoate form of neoliberalism because of the other more explicitly reactionary or moralistic features of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations, such as "anticommunism, Christian morality, and a

¹⁴⁷ Daniel Worden and Alex Trimble Young, "On Joan Didion: An Introduction," *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 31, no. 3 (2016): 582 and 584, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2016.1199627>.

¹⁴⁸ Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, "Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature: An Introduction," in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, ed. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2017), 6.

generalized fear of minorities and immigrants,” and move past these elements quickly in order to highlight a neoliberalism with fewer internal contradictions.¹⁴⁹ (They argue that this less contradictory form of neoliberalism becomes a society-wide ontology by the early 2000s.) However, I argue that examining these moralistic elements is crucial to understanding this era. Both *Play It As It Lays* and *Less Than Zero* critique something like the consumerist vapidness at the heart of postwar American culture that was given full expression in Ronald Reagan’s free market ideology, yet they do so via moralistic, anti-drug narratives—the very same sort of narratives used by Nixon and Reagan in order to propagate the War on Drugs. Though the moral response to drug use varies at different times and depends on the text in question, I will use Didion and Ellis as a starting point to show that normative claims about the individual’s drug use have existed in tension with claims about neoliberal individualism, and constitutes a major element of the War on Drugs that continues to this day.

I. “Maria felt herself a sleepwalker”: *Play It As It Lays* and Female Sedation

The strongest critical accounts of Didion have often praised her for a moral skepticism that rejects nostalgia. In a particularly compelling reading, Jennifer Brady explores how the grief and loss in Didion’s early novels and nonfiction are motivated by her sense of herself as a descendent of pioneer families who believed in the promise of the frontier as an “escape from the bondage of the past,” as Frederick Jackson Turner famously put it, but who now “have ‘run out of continent’ and purpose.”¹⁵⁰ Brady helpfully explicates how Didion’s treatment is not straightforwardly nostalgic—especially in her first novel *Run River* and in an early short story

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Jennifer H. Brady, “Points West, Then and Now: The Fiction of Joan Didion,” *Contemporary Literature* 20, no. 4 (1979): 453.

“When Did Music Come This Way?”—but instead recognizes the “flaw endemic” to the “origins” of the “frontier dream” when she has her characters discover a past “comprised of ‘failures of love and faith and honor,’ and thus grasp the “deeper loss...of a world that never existed.”¹⁵¹ This “deeper loss” functions similarly to the way she “doubt[s] the premises of all the stories” she has told herself in *The White Album*, which, as Worden and Young point out, entails her moral skepticism.¹⁵² For Brady the significance of this loss lies in its anti-nostalgia: Didion has lost faith in, and thus demonstrates skepticism towards, not just the modern world but the stories and myths that functioned to create the normative morality of the old world.

Brady finds this avoidance of nostalgia missing in *Play It As It Lays*, and, in this reading, *Play It As It Lays* becomes a moralistic misstep in Didion’s early career, but I will argue that the actual moral argument we find most explicitly articulated in the way Didion handles Maria’s sedation in *Play It As It Lays* extends her moral thinking from this era. For Brady, it is formal decisions that lead to the novel’s seeming moralism. Unlike how the characters in her other early works struggle explicitly with the effect of their ancestral past on the present, Didion sets *Play It As It Lays* almost “exclusively ‘in the now.’”¹⁵³ Mark McGurl lists this sense of

¹⁵¹ Brady, “Points West, Then and Now,” 458.

¹⁵² See Didion, *The White Album*, 11, and Worden and Young, “On Joan Didion: An Introduction,” 584. In *The White Album*, Didion explains the point more fully: “I was meant to know the plot, but all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no ‘meaning’ beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting-room experience...I wanted still to believe in the narrative and in the narrative’s intelligibility, but to know that one could change the sense with every cut was to begin to perceive the experience as rather more electrical than ethical.” Didion, *The White Album*, 13. Didion imagines herself as a film viewer, but rather than a theater experience, she is in the editing room. In the editing room, filmmakers create “sense” and “meaning” and can change these meanings by simply re-arranging the sequence of images. If life is like an editing room, instead of like a theater experience, then Didion can no longer have the confidence that what she encounters fits with any larger narrative or overarching ethical system.

¹⁵³ Brady, “Points West, Then and Now,” 463.

“contemporaneity,” or a focus on a relatively “narrow span of story time” as a common feature of minimalism.¹⁵⁴ Brady argues that this decision to delimit the narrative focus to a bleak present makes the novel function as “a dramatic cautionary tale, a condemnation of our tendency to shed the ‘old ways.’”¹⁵⁵ Brady is right to characterize the novel as a “dramatic cautionary tale,” yet I will argue that Brady misses the specific moral argument the novel makes, which is not about a general shedding of the “old ways,” but about the loss of a very specific type of morality characterized by emotional control and toughness. This specific moral argument is important to recognize because it does not exist in tension with but extends out of Didion’s writing about morality from this time. Didion might have experienced a loss of faith in narrative, yet a residual moral argument remains. How this particular moral argument functions in the novel is important for understanding both the novel itself and because it showcases how residual moral claims can overlap with the depiction of drugs on behavior and consciousness in contemporary fiction that seems to reject normative claims.

The content of this residual moral argument becomes clear in Didion’s nonfiction from the years between the publication of *Run River* and *Play It As It Lays*. Her famous essay “On Morality,” delimits what activities and areas of concern Didion believed could be included in the category of morality. Didion argues that it is a mistake to include most activities or concerns in the category of the moral. For instance, the political questions roiling the nation when she composed this essay in the fall of 1965 seem to her issues of “want,” “need,” or “pragmatic

¹⁵⁴ McGurl, *The Program Era*, 377.

¹⁵⁵ Brady also notes the novel’s focus on a “truncated present” and its “white spaces.” Because of the short chapters, many pages have only a few lines of writing, and the rest is taken up by blank space. Brady thus gestures toward the way *Play It As It Lays* uses minimalism in order to make a moral argument (though she does not use the term minimalism). Brady, “Points West, Then and Now,” 465.

necessity,” and describes those who do claim these issues have moral weight as “fashionable madmen” sounding “the thin whine of hysteria.”¹⁵⁶ As mentioned earlier, she goes so far as to insist that “we have no way of knowing...what is ‘right’ and what is ‘wrong,’ what is ‘good’ and what is ‘evil,’” seeming to make a strong case for moral skepticism, or even moral relativism. However, in contrast to a thoroughgoing skeptic or relativist, she does point to a moral or normative claim one can still make. Her passage about the famous wagon-train families who met disaster underscores her moral argument:

Some might say that the Jayhawkers were killed by the desert summer, and the Donner Party by the mountain winter, by circumstances beyond control: we were taught instead that they had somewhere abdicated their responsibilities, somehow breached their primary loyalties, or they would not have found themselves helpless in the mountain winter or the desert summer...we heard such stories as cautionary tales, and they still suggest the only kind of “morality” that seems to me to have any but the most potentially mendacious meaning.¹⁵⁷

When Didion writes “we were taught” near the beginning of this passage, it seems as if she is getting ready to undermine the story passed down from her family. However, instead of contrasting what she was taught with a newly acquired skepticism, she ends the passage by reaffirming this traditional belief. In spite of an otherwise skeptical or relativistic stance toward morality, she endorses the belief that when the Jayhawkers and the Donner Party met tragedy it constituted a moral failure. The story shows the primary (and perhaps only) way one *can* fail morally: they failed to care for their families. She does not excuse the Jayhawker and Donner Party based on “circumstances” being “beyond control.” It is not the “desert summer” or the “mountain winter” that killed them, because they should have understood these threats and planned accordingly. According to Didion, it was their own carelessness that led to them losing

¹⁵⁶ Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 162-163.

¹⁵⁷ Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 159.

control of their situation. When it comes to caring for family, one's moral responsibility is not diminished by difficult circumstances; it is one's responsibility to maintain control so that those circumstances do not threaten one's family. We find this moral argument in the way Didion depicts drug use, because Didion portrays the particular set of effects one experiences when taking tranquilizers in *Play It As It Lays* as making it more difficult (if not impossible) to maintain control and thus uphold one's moral responsibility.

Critics have noted that Maria certainly *seems* tranquilized, and often they have used metaphors of anesthetization to describe Maria. Pat Hise writes that, because of Maria's self-anesthetizing, her "life is muted."¹⁵⁸ David J. Geherin notes Maria's "anaesthetized feelings."¹⁵⁹ Sandra K. Hinchman explains that Maria "reaches the breaking point" while in the desert, where "she is anaesthetized, wanting and feeling nothing."¹⁶⁰ However, we should understand Didion's "anesthetized" protagonist in the specific context and cultural conversation about tranquilizers that had grown heated by the late-1960s. Pharmaceuticals had become a massive sector of American industry after World War II.¹⁶¹ "These are the tranquilized *Fifties*," Robert Lowell

¹⁵⁸ Pat Hise, "The Pursuit of Nothingness or Play It As It Lays," *CCTE Studies* 60 (1996): 82-83.

¹⁵⁹ David J. Geherin, "Nothingness and Beyond: Joan Didion's Play It As It Lays," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 16, no. 1 (1974): 77.

¹⁶⁰ Sandra K. Hinchman, "Making Sense and Making Stories: Problems of Cognition and Narration in Joan Didion's Play It As It Lays," *The Centennial Review* 29, no. 4 (1985): 468.

¹⁶¹ The reasons for the rise in pharmaceuticals were complex, but a significant aspect was the need for large quantities of drugs like penicillin in World War II, which led to changes in how drug companies manufactured and marketed their product. Having previously sold bulk amounts of chemicals to pharmacists, these companies now sold finished drugs directly to the consumer, placing increased importance on branding, and these brands remained after the war ended. Measday, Walter, "The Pharmaceutical Industry," in *The Structure of American Industry*, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 159. In 1939, sales of prescription medication amounted to \$150 million. In 1947, they were \$500 million. In 1963, they were over \$2 billion, and the pharmaceutical industry was one of America's most profitable industries. David Herzberg, *Happy Pills in America: From Miltown to Prozac* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), Herzberg 23.

writes metaphorically in “Memories of West Street and Lepke,” yet in his poem “Man and Wife”—which Didion used as an epigraph for *Run River*—the speaker makes clear that this tranquilization is not just a metaphor, as the titular couple begins the poem “Tamed by *Miltown*.”¹⁶² The risk of prescription drug abuse became a matter of increasing general knowledge throughout the 1960s.¹⁶³ A report put out at the behest of John F. Kennedy in 1962 found that around 250,000 Americans were addicted to barbiturates.¹⁶⁴ In 1966, Jacqueline Susann’s *Valley of the Dolls* was the bestselling novel of the year: the “dolls” in the title is famously slang for barbiturates, on which one of the characters becomes dependent.¹⁶⁵ By 1968, the *New York Times* noted that barbiturates “could lead to addiction” and were “abused...often in the upper and middle classes.”¹⁶⁶ The article describes doctors overprescribing to patients who “once hooked” would string together “five or 10 or more physicians.”¹⁶⁷ It was thus a matter of

¹⁶² From Robert Lowell, *New Selected Poems*, ed. Katie Peterson (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 78 and 80.

¹⁶³ Though congressional hearings first discussed the dangers of barbiturate use in 1955. See Herzberg, *Happy Pills*, 93.

¹⁶⁴ See Francisco López-Muñoz, Ronaldo Ucha-Udabe, and Cecilio Alamo, “The History of Barbiturates a Century after Their Clinical Introduction,” *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment* 1, no. 4 (2005): 339.

¹⁶⁵ “20th-Century American Bestsellers,” accessed June 14, 2020, <http://bestsellers.lib.virginia.edu/decade/1960>.

¹⁶⁶ Martin Arnold, “The Drug Scene: A Growing Number of America’s Elite Are Quietly Turning On; SOME SEEK INSIGHT, OTHERS SEXUALITY,” *The New York Times*, January 10, 1968.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. As Caroline Jean Acker points out, this belief that it was possible for middle and upper class people to abuse a drug prescribed by the medical industry in a similar fashion to how illegal drugs were abused represented shifting notions of addiction itself. Specifically, Acker argues that it demonstrates the replacement of the “junkie paradigm,” which she dates as ascendant from roughly the passage of the Harrison Narcotic Act of 1914 to the 1960s. The junkie paradigm viewed habitual drug users as primarily “deviants with inherently flawed personalities in the grip of a physiological and psychological dependence from which few would ever escape.” See Acker, *Creating the American Junkie: Addiction Research in the Classic Era of Narcotic Control* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2002), 12. In the 1960s, it became clear that it wasn’t just deviants who were developing dependencies. Richard Nixon makes this change exceedingly clear in his statement about the burgeoning prescription pill crisis. He said, “We used to say [that drug

general knowledge, and was already the subject of popular cultural representations, that people could get “hooked” on anti-anxiety sedatives such as barbiturates by the time Didion was composing *Play It As It Lays*.

At this time, women were being prescribed twice the amount of tranquilizers as men, a rate that, even though women were more likely to use the medical system in general, did not hold true for other medications.¹⁶⁸ The reason women were prescribed tranquilizers often possessed a similar logic to what we see in Didion’s moral thinking: because women lacked emotional control, they were failing to take care of their families. The tranquilizers were prescribed in order to restore that emotional control. For instance, an advertisement for the tranquilizer Meprospan from a 1960 issue of *The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* shows a housewife who is suffering from “emotional problems,” the result of “recurring states of anxiety which have no organic etiology.” The advertisement shows the changes once the woman begins taking a pill at breakfast and then another in the evening: she will enjoy “sustained tranquilization all day,” allowing her (as it shows in subsequent panels) to do what she needs to in order to take care of her family: grocery shop, enjoy dinner with her husband and children,

abuse] is a ghetto problem or it is a black problem...But today it has moved from the ghetto to the suburbs, from the poor to the upper middle class.” Instead of just black or poor people, he notes that “one-third of all Americans between the ages of 18 and 74 used a psychotropic drug of some type last year”—a category in which he includes “tranquilizers, amphetamines, and barbiturates.” In this address, Nixon demonstrates an expansive view of the factors that led the creation of this culture, including public health elements such as the over-producing and over-prescribing of legal drugs, a failure of doctors to educate their patients, and a lack of tough moral character leading patients to seek out these drugs. Richard Nixon, “Remarks to the American Medical Association’s House of Delegates Meeting in Atlantic City, New Jersey,” <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-american-medical-associations-house-delegates-meeting-atlantic-city-new-jersey>.

¹⁶⁸ See Herzberg, *Happy Pills*, 73.

listen attentively at PTA meetings, and sleep soundly.¹⁶⁹ However, many high-profile women began to dispute the idea that what women needed was tranquilization. As early as 1963, Betty Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique*, criticized the prescription of barbiturates for reducing emotional distress without resolving core issues. Friedan argued that rather than taking “tranquilizers like cough drops,” or, as one of her interviewee’s puts it, “taking a tranquillizer because it makes you not care so much” about life’s general pointlessness, women needed fulfillment, to seek something beyond the bounds of the nuclear family.¹⁷⁰ By the 1970s, feminist groups had created a “drug panic” in response to the over-prescription of tranquilizer use, which led to a marked reduction in prescriptions for drugs such as Valium.¹⁷¹

Didion portrayal of Maria is complex in the way it enters this conversation about female tranquilization. I want to highlight three main features of this conversation that my readings from the novel will show Didion thinking through in moral terms: first, in contrast to the pharmaceutical industry, Didion shows that female anxiety does have a cause. Second, she

¹⁶⁹ “Meprospan Advertisement,” *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 173, no. 11 (July 16, 1960): 220.

¹⁷⁰ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 20-22. Later in the decade, famous women such as Betty Ford and Barbara Gordon spoke candidly about their own addiction, which helped spur a general feminist backlash to the over-prescription of tranquilizers. See Herzberg, *Happy Pills*, 143.

¹⁷¹ On the way “Valium’s downfall reflected feminists’ broader success in redefining tranquilizer use itself,” see Herzberg, *Happy Pills*, 146. Herzberg also clarifies the distinction between this drug panic and the many other drug panics throughout history: “feminists of the 1970s had helped frame a strikingly different kind of drug panic. Most antidrug campaigns demonized addicts, pointing to defective character as the cause of drug use and sensationalizing the addicts’ threat to ‘normal’ society. The Valium scare embodied the sympathetic, humane, and politically sophisticated approach long favored by progressive drug reformers but rarely seen in practice. Rather than using addiction to air negative stereotypes of drug users, feminists used it to dramatize the hardships faced by essentially decent Valium-using women in a sexist society. Rather than punishment for addicts, they called for greater political awareness and assertiveness.” Herzberg, *Happy Pills*, 144-145. Herzberg’s clarification is well taken, though we should recognize that this more humane response to prescription-pill addiction no doubt relates to the fact that the addicts in this case were largely coded as middle and upper class, and white.

disputes Friedan's idea that one should deal with this anxiety by finding fulfillment outside the nuclear family. And third, she shows that tranquilizers exacerbate the loss of control, rather than restoring it, indicating the incompatibility between the drug and what, in spite of her moral skepticism, remains a moral issue: the care and responsibility for one's family. By making this context about tranquilizer use central to my reading of the novel, I hope to show that the loss of faith in stable ethical systems often comes into conflict with the ways drugs are depicted in supposedly neoliberal literary texts.

The novel begins and ends in the narrative present, from Maria's first-person perspective in an unspecified institution. Though the doctors ask her a lot of questions, Maria has come to the conclusion that there are "no satisfactory" answers, and that "to look for 'reasons' is beside the point."¹⁷² Even as Maria produces certain questions, she often does not end the question with a question mark: "Why should Shalimar attract kraits. Why should a coral snake need two glands of neurotoxic poison to survive while a king snake, *so similarly marked*, needs none." She goes on to suggest that another "version of why does a coral snake have two glands of neurotoxic poison," is the question of why her daughter Kate has "soft down on her spine and an aberrant chemical in her brain," which has led Kate to be placed in an institution where "they put electrodes on her head and needles in her spine."¹⁷³ In other words, these are questions about the difficulty of life, and why we must experience, and watch our loved ones experience, pain. Because "there is no satisfactory 'answer' to them," Maria explains that she no longer asks herself these questions. By withholding the question marks, Didion makes these non-questions difficult to read aloud (since we expect to use a rising inflection when we see the interrogative

¹⁷² Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 3.

¹⁷³ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 4.

word at the beginning of the sentence), but gives the reader a sense of both how Maria refuses to question why things happen and her blank affect. Instead of asking why things happen, all she can do is recognize that “certain facts” exist.¹⁷⁴ In other words, Maria has fallen prey to the same “common condition” Didion narrates herself struggling with in *The White Album*: she doubts “the premises of all the stories,” she has been told, and thus has lost a sense of how her experiences fit together, instead seeing them as discrete images that do not have an obvious relation to each other.¹⁷⁵ Barry Chabot suggests that Maria has come to the conclusion that “the human scale is marginal, of little consequence, a world without reason, which distributes events at random, a material world in which nothing finally matters.”¹⁷⁶ However, it is important to recognize that even as no “reasons” seem to exist for why things happen, Maria still has a lingering source of purpose, and thus of something that does matter. Given that Didion places it within a parenthetical, this remaining purpose seems to interrupt her other claims about the loss of meaning: “(Why bother, you might ask. I bother for Kate. What I play for here is Kate. Carter put Kate in there and I am going to get her out.)”¹⁷⁷ Herself now institutionalized, the one thing that continues to matter is getting Kate out of the institution in which her ex-husband, Carter, placed her.

The novel goes back about a year, shifts into the third person (though still focalized through Maria’s point of view), and explains some of the “facts” that lead Maria to this point. One fact that becomes clear is that, in contrast to claims from the medical industry, Maria’s anxiety is not simply random, irrational, or without “organic etiology,” but is a reasonable

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Didion, *The White Album*, 11.

¹⁷⁶ Barry C. Chabot, “Joan Didion’s Play It As It Lays and the Vacuity of the ‘Here and Now,’” *Critique* 21, no. 3 (1980): 55.

¹⁷⁷ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 4.

response to her relationships. We see an example of Maria's anxiety in an early passage. Maria has driven her car into the desert, in the direction of Carter's film set. She stops at a gas station, picks up the payphone, and begins to imagine what would happen if she called Carter. At first she pictures him saying "Get on up here," after learning she is nearby, but this thought seems too idealized and quickly dissolves. She then envisions a seemingly more realistic conversation, with them "playing out a dialogue so familiar that it drained the imagination." As she imagines the argument they would have, she knows "she would feel first guilty, resigned to misery, then furious, trapped, white with anger."¹⁷⁸ In this more accurate version of how their conversation would play out, the call comes to an end with Carter telling her to go kill herself.¹⁷⁹ To combat the anxiety with which this imagined call fills her, she swallows "two Fiorinal tablets," closes "her eyes against the sun," and "wait[s] for the Fiorinal to clear her head of Carter and what Carter would say."¹⁸⁰ A commonly prescribed barbiturate in the late 1960s, Fiorinal causes periods of sedation that last for several hours.¹⁸¹ As her imagined phone call with Carter demonstrates, Maria ingests Fiorinal because of a tension and anxiety that has a very real source. She cannot imagine a conversation with her husband without feelings of guilt, misery, fury, and

¹⁷⁸ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 31.

¹⁷⁹ In fact, later in the novel he says, "Stay here and kill yourself. Something interesting like that." Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 180.

¹⁸⁰ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 32.

¹⁸¹ Typically prescribed for tension headaches, one of Fiorinal's primary ingredients is the barbiturate Butalbital. Beginning in the 1940s, the profusion of barbiturates led to the various compounds being classified into four categories: ultrashort, short, intermediate, and long acting. The brands Maria takes in the novel (Fiorinal and Seconal) are part of the second and third categories (short and intermediate), which, according to Richard DeGrandpre, were the "most popular domestically and on the street," producing "sedation within fifteen to forty minutes and last[ing] for several hours," as opposed to an ultrashort period of sedation, or the twelve-hour long sedation brought on by long-acting compounds. Richard DeGrandpre, *The Cult of Pharmacology: How America Became the World's Most Troubled Drug Culture* (Duke UP, 2006), 154.

anger, and without anticipating that Carter will casually tell her to kill herself. Beyond his cruelty, they are both engaged in extra-marital affairs, and their social circle seems to have lost all sense of meaning or purpose, as we will see later on with BZ. Didion portrays the breakdown of these relationships as significant. Maria responds in the way many people—especially women—did when faced with domestic tension and a loss of a sense of control: she takes a drug that will “clear her head” of her anxiety.

Before examining the novel in a more systematic fashion, I would like to look at a later scene where barbiturates are again mentioned explicitly, so that I can suggest a relationship between the effects of the drugs and Didion’s prose. On the day Maria and Carter go to court to get a divorce, Maria oversleeps, “thick with Seconal.”¹⁸² Didion writes that “Maria felt herself a sleepwalker,” as she enters the courthouse, consistent with Seconal’s narcotizing effect; once in the courtroom, Maria again exists at an emotional remove from the events that occur:

At two o’clock they met Carter and the lawyers outside the courtroom in Santa Monica, and at two-thirty Maria swore and Helene confirmed that the defendant, Carter Lang, had repeatedly struck and in other ways humiliated the plaintiff, Mrs. Maria Lang. The charge was mental cruelty, uncontested. This Mrs. Maria Lang to whom the lawyers referred seemed to Maria someone other than herself, an aggrieved wife she might see interviewed on television. As they waited for the details to be cleared up, the papers to be signed, Maria sat very still with her hands in her lap. Helene stirred restlessly beside her, her eyes across the aisle, on Carter and his lawyer. “*Carter,*” Helene whispered finally, leaning across Maria to attract his attention. “*Puzzle of the week. Guess which two dykes were seen feeding each other cheese soufflé in the Bistro today.*”¹⁸³

Maria provides “the facts” of what happens, but we get the sense that she is leaving out, or perhaps not noticing, important information. Maria and Helene provide evidence of primarily physical abuse, yet Carter is charged with “mental” cruelty. What has happened between the testimony and the charge? Has Carter disputed the physical abuse, or provided testimony of

¹⁸² Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 106.

¹⁸³ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 108; italics in original.

Maria's behavior—such as her extra-marital affairs—in order to negotiate down his charge? This gap seems less a result of Maria being unable to think about her own behavior than a lack of focus or interest. She has a difficult time identifying with her name or the details from the past. She testifies to physical abuse, yet feels utterly dissociated from feeling “aggrieved.” Given Helene's desire to tell Carter gossip at the end of the passage, we see the general lack of concern for mistreatment or abuse, even on the part of the person testifying on Maria's behalf. Yet, unlike Helene who seems eager to share the gossip with Carter, Maria seems to feel no excitement: she views the entire course of events from an emotionally flattened vantage point. In this scene and in many others, she indeed seems like a sleepwalker.

Prescribed for anxiety or insomnia, Seconal was perhaps the brand of barbiturate most associated with prescription-pill abuse in the 1960s. It is mentioned by the narrator of Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as one of the drugs that “Fucks You Up” and that people use because it “short-circuits your brain and grounds it out for the longest possible time.”¹⁸⁴ In *Valley of the Dolls*, Susann describes in detail the onset of Seconal the first time Jennifer tries it. Jennifer's friend then instructs her about what sort of doctor (one “whose ethics are a little shady”) she needs to see and what she needs to say in order to get her own prescription. Jennifer soon becomes addicted to the “red dolls.”¹⁸⁵ Given the massive commercial success of *Valley of the Dolls*, Didion's reader would likely have been familiar with the reputation of Seconal as a drug abused by the sort of character Maria is (a white, upper-middle-class female attempting to make it in the movie industry). Didion is much more subtle describing the effects of Seconal than how Susann depicts them in *Valley of the Dolls*. However, we do

¹⁸⁴ Thompson, *Fear and Loathing*, 202.

¹⁸⁵ Jacqueline Susann, *Valley of the Dolls*, 50th Anniversary edition (Grove Press, 2016), 193.

learn later in the novel that Maria has had an ongoing barbiturate prescription. Her prescription for, and use of, the widely abused sleeping pills that had become a cultural phenomenon in the years Didion was writing the novel should thus not go overlooked when examining Maria's actions and affect.

To take a step back, what is it that leads Maria to take the barbiturates, and then, later, become institutionalized? And what does she feel is missing from her life? Friedan suggested that what women in Maria's situation needed was professional independence. The relationship between Maria's career and the notion of independence from the nuclear family is complicated. Maria has had initial success as a model, navigating this career largely without family support. But her film career thus far always has involved Carter: he has directed both of the films in which she has starred. The first film is titled *Maria*. In it, the camera captures Maria in mundane situations: at a fashion sitting, falling asleep at a party, arguing with Bloomingdale's customer service, and so on. The twist is the film's final shot: Maria is "thrown into negative" so that she looks dead.¹⁸⁶ Carter had final cut on this film, and thus a large amount of artistic control. Maria expresses her hatred for it. She feels distinct unease when approached by film students who admire it, and she feels nauseous when Carter's producer, BZ, projects it inside his house. What bothers Maria is the aimlessness of her character who has "no knack for anything."¹⁸⁷ In fact, the final shot seems to indicate that her character is not just aimless but almost zombie-like, internally absent of human characteristics. In Carter's second film, *Angel Beach*, a motorcycle gang rapes Maria's character. Carter intends for the film to end, like *Maria*, by wresting any control from her character, with "a shot of the motorcycle gang, as if they represented some

¹⁸⁶ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 20.

¹⁸⁷ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 21.

reality not fully apprehended by the girl Maria played.”¹⁸⁸ But Carter has his own creative control seized from him, and this final shot is replaced by the studio with a final “long dolly shot of Maria strolling across a campus.”¹⁸⁹ Maria likes the second film because of the studio ending (which strips Carter of his control). She interprets the ending as indicating that “the girl on the screen seemed to have a definite knack for controlling her own destiny.”¹⁹⁰ However, the novel soon makes clear that the deepest source of Maria’s despair comes not from a lack of independence from the nuclear family, but from a lack of control to make decisions within the nuclear family. It is not her destiny that Maria wants to control; she instead wants control over both the life of her daughter and, once she realizes that she is pregnant, the decision about whether or not to have an abortion. Instead, Carter makes decisions that Maria cannot live with, and which lead to her eventual institutionalization.

Recognizing the relationship between these decisions about what takes place in the nuclear family and Maria’s dread will help explain why Maria, in the novel’s striking opening scenes, finds driving therapeutic. Critics have tended to read Maria’s driving as an unsuccessful attempt to gain freedom. For instance, Geherin writes that the driving is ultimately unsatisfying because, “Driving is both free and tightly ordered; she can flow along aimlessly but only in the direction the road dictates.”¹⁹¹ But readings like Geherin’s misunderstand that what Maria finds

¹⁸⁸ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 19.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 19-20.

¹⁹¹ Geherin, “Nothingness and Beyond,” 67. Patrick O’Donnell makes a similar point, noting that “there appears to be little that is ‘free’ or systematic about a roadway system that is gridlocked more often than not, and whose development over time has been more dependent on fluctuations of speculation, land grabs, and political deals than any form of rational regional planning.” O’Donnell, “Postwar Los Angeles: Suburban Eden and the Fall into History,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Los Angeles*, ed. Kevin R. McNamara (New York: Cambridge UP, 2010), 63. O’Donnell provides a detailed account of development in the Postwar era, but I am more concerned not with whether Maria possesses complete freedom, but over the

valuable in driving is about control rather than freedom. Didion portrays the freeway as the one place where Maria can exercise her will. Dressing with a “sense of purpose,” Maria is on the freeway by 10:00 AM. Maria returns “again and again” to “an intricate stretch” of freeway where “successful passage” requires “a diagonal move across four lanes of traffic.” When she finally makes this move “without once braking,” she feels exhilarated and sleeps “dreamlessly” at night.¹⁹² When she reaches the end of the freeway, where “the flawless burning concrete just stopped, turned into common road,” Didion writes that she had to “keep *in careful control*, portage *skillfully* back, feel for the first time the heavy weight of the becalmed car beneath her.”¹⁹³ Maria’s intense focus creates an immersive experience. This explanation of what Maria finds valuable and therapeutic about the freeway makes Wolff’s explanation of these scenes unrecognizable: she writes that Maria “drifts out and back, going nowhere in particular...the freeway, with its formless aridity, becomes the definitive sign that when ‘everything goes,’ everything of value really disappears.”¹⁹⁴ In contrast to Wolff’s account, Maria does not “drift.” She makes abrupt and dangerous diagonal moves that she can only execute because of her great focus and skill. The most convoluted stretches, requiring advanced maneuvers across multiple lanes of traffic, cannot slow her down. The fact that she sets out without a destination does not make her driving “aimless,” but means she has the ability to change course, and thus has control

therapeutic effects of the freeway. Barry Chabot’s characterization of the driving scenes comes closer to making this point, when he writes that the driving is a “magical gesture...by which she hopes to reassert at least the illusion of control over her life.” Chabot, “Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays* and the Vacuity of the ‘Here and Now,’” 56. But even here the problem is less that the control on the freeway is illusory and more that it does not provide the particular kind of control she needs.

¹⁹² Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 16.

¹⁹³ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 17; emphasis added.

¹⁹⁴ Wolff, “*Play It As It Lays*: Didion and the Diver Heroine,” 492.

over her destination. On the freeway, Maria possesses control over her destiny, just like her character at the end of *Angel Beach*.

Maria finds these moments of immersion, focus, and control therapeutic. She begins driving the freeway “in the first hot month of the fall.”¹⁹⁵ An unclear separation has taken place with Carter in the summer, but it is related to her affair with Les Goodwin and the affairs Carter no doubt has while on set in the desert. When “images of Les Goodwin” occur to Maria, she feels “dread overtake her,” but she never thinks about “the irrevocability” of the split with Carter while on the freeway.¹⁹⁶ The therapy of driving is not illusory: it truly does seem to keep the dread at bay. However, in a telling moment, Maria thinks about calling Les Goodwin to relay a funny anecdote: “When she got home she thought about calling him, but instead she went upstairs and lay face down on Kate’s empty bed, cradled Kate’s blanket, clutched Kate’s baby pillow to her stomach and fought off a wave of the dread. The time seemed to have passed for telling Les Goodwin funny stories.”¹⁹⁷ This passage provides evidence of a shift that Maria has undergone before the novel begins. At some point in the past, Maria could tell Les Goodwin funny stories, but now she cannot. We see repeated instances of characters commenting on Maria having “lost” her sense of humor.¹⁹⁸ This passage links this loss of a sense of humor to Kate’s absence. Rather than call the man with whom she has had an affair, she grasps the objects that remind her of Kate. To put the scenes of driving together with this scene of the absent Kate, it becomes clear that while the driving is therapeutic, it cannot bring Kate back. The driving is not

¹⁹⁵ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 18.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 23.

¹⁹⁸ See Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 27 and 35.

illusory, but it does not solve the issue that, more than her relationship with Carter or with anyone else in the novel, causes Maria to feel like she has failed.

The first explicit mention of barbiturate use described earlier comes at the end of this freeway section. Maria imagines the conversation with Carter and takes the two Fiorinal tablets. Didion writes, “after that Maria did not go back to the freeway except as a way of getting somewhere.”¹⁹⁹ Though tranquilizers are mentioned sparingly in the novel, their appearance in this scene is significant. Because of the therapeutic nature of the freeway driving, Maria feels almost confident enough to call Carter and try to repair the relationship. Carter has made the decision to place Kate in the institution. This moment at the end of the freeway driving seems Maria’s best opportunity to re-take control of this decision. As Maria anticipates, this conversation with Carter will be difficult. But with Didion’s writing in essays such as “On Morality” in mind, we should understand her view that life always has been and always will be difficult. We might no longer go West in wagon trains, but life still requires toughness. In her excellent reading of Didion as part of a “tough minded” tradition of postwar female writers, Deborah Nelson puts Didion’s understanding of toughness in terms of emotional pain toleration and control: “the inability to tolerate one’s own pain—that is, to ‘control’ one’s own self pity—begins the slippery slide from moral softness...to self-delusion.”²⁰⁰ In this scene, we see exactly the “slippery slide” Nelson describes: Maria cannot go through with the call because she anticipates the pain it will cause her. Because she cannot tolerate this pain, she takes pity on herself and refuses to make the difficult decision. And what she does instead of having the painful conversation, and thus taking responsibility for the wellbeing of her children and

¹⁹⁹ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 33.

²⁰⁰ Deborah Nelson, *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 154.

potential children, is take the drug that will “clear her head” and make it so that she does not need to think about Carter or the decisions he has made. We thus see Maria participating in what Richard Nixon called the American “culture of drugs,” in which “people come naturally to expect that they can take a pill for every problem.”²⁰¹ The novel implies that she continues to take the pills, when about two-thirds of the way into the novel, the pharmacy informs Maria that her doctor will “no longer renew her barbiturate prescription.”²⁰² Didion enters this conversation about female tranquilization from a standpoint that both recognizes the difficulty of Maria’s situation, yet does not withhold moral judgment from Maria because of this difficulty. According to Didion, Maria should have the toughness to exercise control over decisions about how to protect her family, regardless of the circumstances.

Didion makes clear the moral stakes of Maria’s passivity in scenes where Maria makes feeble attempts to regain control of her family. After Maria informs Carter that she is pregnant and implies that Les Goodwin might be the father, Carter gives her the number of a doctor who can take care of it. “I’m not sure I want to do that,” Maria tells him. Didion makes clear the competitive nature of this game for control in Carter’s response: “‘All right, don’t do it. Go ahead and have this kid.’ He paused, confident in his hand. She waited for him to play it through. ‘And I’ll take Kate.’”²⁰³ Though Maria recognizes that Carter is fighting for control, she seems unable to fight back: “If I do this, then you promise I can have Kate? You promise there won’t be trouble later?” Carter responds: “I’m not promising anything...I said we’ll see.”²⁰⁴ In the work of

²⁰¹ Richard Nixon, “Remarks to the American Medical Association’s House of Delegates Meeting in Atlantic City, New Jersey,” <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-american-medical-associations-house-delegates-meeting-atlantic-city-new-jersey>.

²⁰² Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 139.

²⁰³ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 54.

²⁰⁴ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 54-55.

a different writer, Carter's actions might be subject to critique. But Didion is interested in these moments where circumstances *seem* to be beyond control, but when supposed helplessness really provides evidence of an abdication of responsibilities, as she puts it in "On Morality." It is for this reason that the driving scenes are crucial: they show us a non-passive Maria, a Maria who can maneuver through complex, difficult situations. In contrast, with Carter, Maria fails to negotiate or use leverage. She does what Carter wants her to do and has the abortion, which causes psychological torment, and in doing so she fails to extract concessions from him.

During the abortion, Maria has thoughts that seem straight out of *The White Album* in their avowal of a loss of faith in narrative that renders all action without meaning: "No moment more or less important than any other moment, all the same: the pain as the doctor scraped signified nothing beyond itself, no more constituted the pattern of her life than did the movie on television in the living room."²⁰⁵ She tries to make herself believe that no individual moment has more importance or meaning than any other moment, a belief that would render mute questions of ethics or morality, since according to any ethical system some actions have more significance (either positive or negative) than others. Yet this scene shows how the attempt to downplay the significance of any action, and thus to view the world from a position of moral skepticism, is both the product of and squares uneasily with what Maria seems to perceive as her own acts of maternal abandonment. The narrative goes on to undermine Maria's attempt to view the abortion as insignificant and no different than "any other moment": the abortion haunts Maria during the following weeks, first physically and then in nightmares.²⁰⁶ As we see throughout her writing

²⁰⁵ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 82.

²⁰⁶ Weeks after the abortion, Maria cannot stop bleeding. The bleeding only ends after she passes part of the placenta, the imagery of which re-occurs in dreams she has, where kitchen and bathroom pipes clog with "hacked pieces of human flesh." Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 97.

from the 1960s and 1970s, Didion's moral skepticism reaches its limit when parents (and especially mothers) abandon or fail to care for their children.

Throughout the novel, Maria's single strong source of motivation is removing Kate from the institution (thus not abandoning her), but in the one scene where Kate comes home for a visit, Maria again fails to exercise control. In a sentence that indicates how challenging Maria finds trying to control Kate, as well as Maria's psychological response, Didion writes, "They drove up and down La Brea looking for a Christmas tree and had Christmas dinner at Les and Felicia Goodwin's new house and Kate smashed the Victorian doll Felicia had given her against a large mirror."²⁰⁷ Three separate events take place in at least two locations, but we encounter them in the space of a sentence. Rather than giving reasons why Kate smashes the doll, Maria can only register the "fact" that she has smashed it, a fact that she states as if it were equivalent to looking for a Christmas tree and eating dinner. Stating these three events as equivalent facts indicates Maria's significant emotional detachment. After she smashes the doll, Kate notices the tension it causes between the adults: "Kate's eyes darted from Maria to Les to Felicia and back to Maria and then, preternaturally attuned to the threat of voices not even raised, she began to scream."²⁰⁸ As Kate continues to scream, Maria's detachment from the events goes even further, as the prose shifts from using the names "Maria and Kate" and instead refers to them as "the mother" and "the child": "The mother apologizing, the child screaming, the polished floor covered with shards of broken mirror and flesh-colored ceramic, they left the Christmas dinner."²⁰⁹ This sentence again registers a series of images that do not have a causal order, and indicates the way

²⁰⁷ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 99.

²⁰⁸ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 99.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

Maria detaches herself (so that she no longer even is “Maria,” but instead is “the mother”) when she feels she has lost control.

Aware of her failure with Kate, after she takes Kate back to the institution Maria fixates on the memory of newspaper stories about violence done to children: “four-year-olds in the abandoned refrigerator, the tea party with Purex, the infant in the driveway, rattlesnake in the playpen.”²¹⁰ Maria thinks about how “the mothers were always reported to be under sedation. In the whole world there was not as much sedation as there was instantaneous peril.”²¹¹ “Under sedation” here should be read not as the type of daily sedatives Maria takes, but the long-acting tranquilizer used to sedate people for extended periods after traumatic events, which becomes important in the final sentence from this section: “Maria ate frozen enchiladas, looked at television for word of the world, thought of herself as under sedation and did not leave the apartment on Fountain Avenue.”²¹² After her unsuccessful attempt to take care of Kate for just a short period, she recognizes the danger she poses to Kate. The comparison she makes between herself and the mothers in the newspaper stories indicates that what worries her is potential negligence: that she might have a slip of the mind, a temporary lapse in focus, and Kate might meet a gruesome end. Maria has demonstrated the type of mental state that could lead to disaster: grogginess, fixation on mundane details, and an inability to register what is happening around her, and I would argue that this mental state has been occasioned by her tranquilizer use. Recognizing the potential danger she may pose to Kate, and what this means about her failures as a mother, she feels traumatized, and wishes she were under strong enough sedation that she no longer had to be awake.

²¹⁰ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 99-100.

²¹¹ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 100.

²¹² *Ibid.*

Maria does in fact fall asleep in the novel's final, climactic moment of abdicated responsibility. At this point in the novel, Mara has joined Carter on set, in another attempt to repair their relationship. Just before she joins him in the desert, she finds "a doctor who would give her barbiturates again."²¹³ One night on set, while Carter is elsewhere, BZ comes to Maria's hotel room at nine o'clock. BZ pulls a bottle from his pocket and asks if Maria knows what they are. As he pours "twenty or thirty capsules onto the bed," she answers, "Grain-and-a-half Seconal," highlighting her familiarity with the pills.²¹⁴ BZ then invites her to join him in suicide; she declines, yet also does not demonstrate the willpower or control necessary to keep BZ alive. In fact, Maria hardly puts up a fight. Maria and BZ lie down on the Seconal-covered bed to go to sleep. Maria is "almost asleep" when she hears BZ moving:

"Don't." After she had said it she opened her eyes.

He was swallowing the capsules with a glass of water. There were not very many left on the bed.

"Don't start faking me now." BZ turned off the light and lay down. "Take my hand. Go back to sleep."

"I'm sorry," she said after a while.

"Hold onto me," BZ said.²¹⁵

Maria's passivity again renders her ineffectual. She mutters a half-hearted command ("*Don't*") but does as BZ tells her and takes his hand. As with her acquiescence to Carter to get the abortion, and with her inability to care for Kate, Maria is not tough enough to withstand difficulty, and instead allows herself to be pacified. The final passage before Maria is put into the institution in which she begins the novel shows the extent of her detachment:

When Maria woke again the room was blazing with light and Carter was shaking her and Helene was screaming. Maria thought she had never heard anyone scream the way Helene screamed. She closed her eyes against the light and her ears against Helene and

²¹³ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 180.

²¹⁴ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 212.

²¹⁵ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 213.

her mind against what was going to happen in the next few hours and tightened her hold on BZ's hand.²¹⁶

Tranquilized, ineffectual, sleepwalking Maria must shut herself off from Helene's pain. Rather than show Maria undergo an emotional reaction, or consider her moral culpability, Didion portrays her as clinging to objective, external fact: "Maria thought she had never heard anyone scream the way Helene screamed." Juxtaposed with the circumstances (in this moment she is holding the hand of a corpse), Didion uses a minimalist style in order to indicate the Maria's strategies of avoidance and detachment have not reduced her moral culpability. In a brief section from Helene's first-person perspective near the beginning of the novel (but in the narrative's present), Helene places all the responsibility on Maria, characterizing Maria as having "killed BZ."²¹⁷

Whether or not we find this characterization fair, what is beyond dispute is that Maria ends the novel further from the one goal she has had throughout the novel. In ending the novel this way, Didion demonstrates her ability to critique both Maria for her individual actions, while showing the way the medical system, and the tranquilization of women, only exacerbates the issues it tries to solve. The novel ends by returning to Maria's first-person perspective and the narrative present:

One thing in my defense, not that it matters: I know something Carter never knew,
or Helene, or maybe you. I know what 'nothing' means, and keep on playing.
Why, BZ would say.
Why not, I say.

In other words, Maria has confronted the same despair that led BZ to commit suicide, yet she has chosen to keep living. While her glib answer to the question of why to keep living makes for a

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 12.

good ending to a bleak, minimalist novel, it does not quite accord with what she has said earlier. Earlier, she says, “What I play for here is Kate. Carter put Kate in there and I am going to get her out.”²¹⁸ But given the fact that her lack of ability to care for those around her has now ended in her institutionalization, this goal seems futile. The medical system has responded to Maria’s anxiety by pacifying her, rather than letting her toughen up, and now has even more control over her. *Play It As It Lays*, an extended depiction of the maternal absence that often appears in quick images in Didion’s work from this time, ends by indicating that Maria will continue to be absent from Kate’s life, unable to care for her family, which, according to Didion, is “the only kind of ‘morality’ that seems...to have any but the most potentially mendacious meaning.”²¹⁹

II. “Kids and Cocaine” in *Less Than Zero*

While Didion’s moral critique makes clear that the pacification of women leads to maternal abandonment and absence, rather than responsible care, in *Less Than Zero*, Bret Easton Ellis shows the type of world this abandonment and absence leads to. Because of the novel’s attention to brand names and the homogeneity of its bleached blond, white, well-off, Los Angelenos, many critics have read the novel as a critique of consumerism or neoliberalism. For instance, Elizabeth Young reads of the novel as a social critique of consumer capitalism. Young notes that “every generation of post-war youth” is inevitably viewed as “disaffected” or “affectless” by previous generations: “This notion of the moral zombie whose soul has somehow been sucked away by televisual violence is a true contemporary bogeyman, a constant fret to the

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 159.

chattering classes.”²²⁰ She does not dispute that “affectlessness” is one of Ellis’s main themes, but she wants to differentiate Ellis from the “chattering classes” who scapegoat teenagers as moral zombies while letting themselves off the hook. (According to Ellis, when Simon and Schuster were considering publishing the book, one editor called it “a novel about coke-snorting, cock-sucking zombies.”²²¹) She argues that his portrayal ultimately goes beyond the teenagers and implicates the entire postmodern, consumerist culture. But while it may be the case that, as Young puts it, “the defining of teenage rebels as ‘affectless’ has diminishing resonance as *everyone* in society is increasingly reduced to that state of immaturity requiring instant gratification,” the horrific reaction Ellis creates depends on the reader’s perceived difference from the characters in the novel, and his choice to set the novel among teenagers demonstrates an understanding of fears about teenage drug use that intensified during the 1980s.²²² Though critics often characterize the novel as critiquing the shift to neoliberalism, the novel’s residual moral reaction to drug use—which exists as an elegiac expression of the need for strong parental influence and control—demonstrates the tension inherent in accounts of neoliberalism. In other words, the novel critiques the consumerism of the neoliberal Reagan 80s by producing a version of the drug panic that the Reagan administration itself would turn into the most punitive War on Drugs policies, enacted in the years following the novel’s publication. I argue that the novel thus illustrates how depictions of drugs in contemporary literature register an ongoing attempt to

²²⁰ Elizabeth Young, “Vacant Possession: Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero*,” in *Shopping in Space: Essays on America’s Blank Generation Fiction* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 30.

²²¹ Quoted in Jon-Jon Goulian, “Bret Easton Ellis, The Art of Fiction No. 216,” *The Paris Review*, 2012, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6127/bret-easton-ellis-the-art-of-fiction-no-216-bret-easton-ellis>.

²²² Young, “Vacant Possession,” 31-32.

create normative values that have a complicated, at times paradoxical relationship to the neoliberal turn.

Published in 1985, the novel anticipates what sociologists James Orcutt and Blake Turner argue was “an unprecedented and well-documented ‘feeding frenzy’ of drug coverage” in the middle of 1986, when media coverage dedicated to drug issues rose from around one percent to nearly five percent of total media space and time.²²³ According to Orcutt and Turner, one of the most significant causes of this increase in attention was *Newsweek*’s blockbuster cover story from March 1986, titled “Kids and Cocaine: An Epidemic Strikes Middle America.” This article is strikingly reminiscent of *Less Than Zero*. I am not claiming that the novel influenced the *Newsweek* article; instead I want to show the set of cultural issues that the—largely trumped up—fears about teenage drug use revolved around, in order to highlight the novel’s residual moral sentiments.

Like *Less Than Zero*, the *Newsweek* article is about a “generation of American children” who are “increasingly at risk to the nightmare of cocaine addiction,” because “cocaine in all its forms is seeping into the nation's schools.”²²⁴ The authors attribute the appeal of cocaine to its

²²³ James D. Orcutt and Blake J. Turner, “Shocking Numbers and Graphic Accounts: Quantified Images of Drug Problems in the Print Media,” *Social Problems* 40, no. 2 (1993): 191-192.

²²⁴ Tom Morganthau et al., “Kids and Cocaine,” *Newsweek*, March 17, 1986. To lend sociological heft to their article, the authors cite an annual survey by the Institute of Social Research at the University of Michigan. Though this survey had showed that drug use had leveled off or declined for almost all young people since the 1970s, the authors of the article picked one supposedly damning data point: the rate of high-school seniors who had tried cocaine had gone from nine percent to 17.3 percent over the last ten years. As Orcutt and Turner point out, the *Newsweek* authors created a visualization that only showed the years 1980-1985 (though the major increase in cocaine use had happened from 1975-1979) to make the spike in cocaine use from 1984 to 1985 look dramatic, when in reality it had gone from 16 percent to 17 percent. This insignificant change is the main rationale for them asserting that the crisis was especially acute at the time they were writing, and that drugs were both “seeping” into schools and kids were becoming mindless addicts.

high-class status: “Coke is *it* in the 1980s—the most glamorous, seductive, destructive, dangerous drug on the supersaturated black market.”²²⁵ As the end of this quote implies, lurking within the glamor and seductiveness of this drug is great danger. The authors use anecdotes from teenagers who now are patients at an addiction treatment center in Orange County to show what this danger looks like:

To Amy, “coke was the wonder drug, and freebasing was better than sex. I had no morals: I’d do anything with my body for coke.” Dan, a bleached-blond 15-year-old from Orange County, stole from his parents, from his employer and from neighbors. “I used all the cash for drugs,” he says. “I didn’t care about food, I didn’t care about a bed. It was scary on the street, but the cocaine made it all right.” Dan says about half the kids at his old high school now use coke.²²⁶

These “bleached-blond” teenagers (the novel uses the word “blond” to describe characters around 32 times) are focused on cocaine at the exclusion of all else. Though the study cited by the *Newsweek* article in fact showed that most teenagers who tried cocaine did not become addicted, the article centers on teenagers willing to surrender anything—including food and shelter—in order to keep doing the drug, and makes no distinction between these teenagers and the many more teenagers who tried or used coke without becoming addicted.²²⁷ As we will see with the character of Julian in *Less Than Zero*, these teenagers are willing to go to great lengths to support their habit, to “do anything” with their bodies. In this passage Amy says she “had no morals,” indicating that, as in the novel, morality cannot coexist with cocaine use, a terrifying proposition given the ubiquity of young people supposedly doing coke.²²⁸ (The article quotes

²²⁵ Morganthau et al., “Kids and Cocaine.”

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ See Orcutt and Turner, “Shocking Numbers,” 198.

²²⁸ Carl Hart identifies this picture of addiction, where the desire for drugs overrides all other desires, as originating in the “dopamine hypothesis of addiction” in the 1950s. He writes that the desire for drugs was thought “to be so overwhelming as to ‘hijack’ the brain’s ‘pleasure center,’” and because drugs would “increase the activity of dopamine neurons” more than “ordinary pleasures,” addicts would have “their brains taken hostage by these unnatural experiences,” and

Dan's contention that "half the kids" at his high school use coke without comment.) The novel provides a picture of this generation of zombies, who need increasingly extreme pleasure.

The novel thus plays up the horror—using many of the same sensational beats as the anecdotes in the *Newsweek* story—of becoming a “coke-snorting zombie.” *Less Than Zero*'s plot (such as it is) follows Clay during the four weeks of Winter Break of his first year of college. He has returned to Los Angeles from a fictional university in New Hampshire and spends the break either aimlessly driving or going to clubs and parties with old friends. He also does plenty of drugs, sticking mostly to marijuana, cocaine, and Valium; his friends take Quaaludes, heroin, meth, Nembutal, lithium, ether, acid, Decadron, Celestone, Percodan, and others. As in *Play It As It Lays*, *Less Than Zero* features brief chapters, which critics often relate to the novel's many references to MTV music videos. This similarity implies that the characters in the novel do not have the attention span to watch full-length movies or even television shows, and can only focus on videos that last for three or four minutes.²²⁹ Though the novel jumps quickly from one brief narrative to the next, it features an overarching narrative progression in the gradually building intensity of disturbing events that Clay witnesses throughout the novel.

Similar to *Play It As It Lays*, *Less Than Zero* depicts the effects of the abandonment and breakdown of the nuclear family, but this time focuses on the effect that this would have on the

thus “were seen as inevitably doomed to lose control over their behavior. The need to chase more dopamine would leave them begging, borrowing, stealing, dealing, even killing for more drugs as a result.” He goes on to argue that “a growing body of evidence casts doubt on this simplistic view of reward.” Hart, *High Price*, 75-76 and 78. I examine this understanding of addiction, and the “hijacking” metaphor, at length in Chapter Four.

²²⁹ On connections between the novel and MTV, see Sonia Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction: Writing Between High and Low Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 46-47; Michiko Kakutani, “Books of the Times; The Young and the Ugly,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 1985, <https://nyti.ms/29wvBo5>; and John Rechy, “Less Than Zero,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 1985.

generation of children raised by people like Maria Wyeth. (We could imagine Kate being a character in *Less Than Zero*. She would be about the same age as Clay and they both are raised in Los Angeles.) Though he has returned home to see his family for Christmas during his first year of college, it is not his family but his on-again off-again love interest, Blair, who picks Clay up from the airport at the beginning of the novel. They have a conversation that will infiltrate Clay's consciousness as signs of the depraved state of the world. "People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles," Blair says in the novel's famous opening line, which Clay fixates on for "an uncomfortably long time."²³⁰ Blair proceeds to gossip about the anorexia of Muriel, a mutual friend. (This conversation and these phrases are important because they will come back later.) After Blair drops him off, Clay enters his house: "Nobody's home. The air conditioner is on and the house smells like pine...I walk upstairs, past the new maid, who smiles at me and seems to understand who I am...I take my shoes off and lie on the bed and feel my brow to see if I have a fever. I think I do."²³¹ Banal as it might seem, Ellis sets up the dynamic that will grow increasingly disturbing as the novel progresses. No family greets Clay. Even the maid is new, not someone he recognizes. Amidst this lack of familiarity or warmth (in a house where the air conditioner runs in the wintertime), Clay begins to feel ill. Ellis then depicts how Clay uses drugs to safeguard himself from everything he found disturbing in his conversation with Blair: "and I can still hear people are afraid to merge and I try to get over the sentence, blank it out. I turn on MTV and tell myself I could get over it and go to sleep if I had some Valium and then I think about Muriel and feel a little sick as the videos begin to flash by."²³² Clay is sensitive enough to be made "sick," by the suffering he perceives. Yet his response is to "blank it out," possible only

²³⁰ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 9.

²³¹ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 10-11.

²³² Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 12.

with the sleep provided by Valium. To survive in the hostile world is not to change or escape it but to “get over it,” a blank stoicism enabled by drugs like Valium. As we will see, this coping method proves ineffective, as the blankness provided by the drugs exacerbates the problems the drugs are supposed to solve. What we are left with is longing for the restoration of hierarchical family structures (the loss of which we saw clearly in *Play It As It Lays*), where parents would have the authority and power to protect kids from their own worst impulses and the hostile world outside the home.

The novel takes careful note of how the parents act in relation to the teenagers’ partying and drug use, emphasizing the parents’ absence, inaction, and self-involvement. Daniel’s parents notably are absent at the party he throws a couple days before Christmas. When Clay asks where they are, Daniel isn’t sure, thinking they might be shopping in Japan, or maybe in Aspen.²³³ Daniel seems to be in a bad mood, a result Clay finds out later of being “slipped... a bad Quaalude.”²³⁴ When Clay accuses his 13-year-old sisters of stealing cocaine out of his bedroom, his mother says nothing.²³⁵ Clay does a line of cocaine before going to meet his father for lunch. His father tells him he looks “thin” and “pale,” to which Clay mumbles, “It’s the drugs,” in response; his father pretends not to hear him.²³⁶ At a party at Blair’s house, her parents’ self-involvement leads them not to bother with the teenage drug use. Her father attends the party with his “really young and blond and tan,” boyfriend, Jared, but tries to seduce a different teenager.²³⁷ Her mother sits observing the interaction between Blair’s father and his boyfriend, while

²³³ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 55.

²³⁴ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 63.

²³⁵ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 25.

²³⁶ Ellis, *Less than Zero*, 43.

²³⁷ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 15-16.

“drinking a vodka gimlet, her hands shaking as she brings the drink to her mouth.”²³⁸ Alana and Clay watch Blair’s mother and Alana says, “Oh, God, I wish Blair’s father wouldn’t invite Jared to these things. It makes her mother so nervous. She gets totally bombed anyway, but having him around makes it worse.”²³⁹ Blair’s parents are too preoccupied to notice—or simply do not care—that Alana is “obviously coked up out of her mind.”²⁴⁰ In depicting the parents’ lack of concern with their children’s drug use, Ellis in many ways shows the progression of the Hollywood culture that Didion portrayed fifteen years earlier. The novel highlights a social world quite different from either the conservative backlash to drugs embodied by Nancy Reagan’s Just Say No campaign (which she launched in 1984, a year before the publication of the novel), or from teenage drug use in the 1960s. In Haight-Ashbury, young people abandoned their families in order to “turn on, tune in, and drop out,” and work to rid their conformist society of its repressive power structures. The young people in *Less Than Zero* are neither rebelling against the authority of the nuclear family (the nuclear family now holds no authority) nor embarking on a project of consciousness expansion or social change. Portrayed as the product of parental abandonment, the goal of the teenagers in *Less Than Zero* is to “blank it out.”

Less Than Zero—a short novel that takes place over a single month—includes at least 40 references to characters doing, searching for, or otherwise discussing cocaine. As the novel progresses, the heavy cocaine use begins to have consequences. These consequences and the disgust they are designed to elicit demonstrate the residual moral sentiment at the novel’s core. In other words, in the teenagers’ shocking or deviant behavior, we see the loss of all “morals” that the *Newsweek* article connected explicitly to frequent cocaine use. In some cases, this

²³⁸ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 16.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

deviance is related to the teenagers progressing to using drugs marked as more dangerous than cocaine. For instance, Clay, Blair and several of their friends watch Muriel shoot heroin in the shadows of a candle-lit room.²⁴¹ The friends react to Muriel with a mixture of fascination and nervousness, an excitement distinct from the tedium of their typical interactions. One friend says, “Don’t do it,” but “her lips are trembling and she looks excited” and has the “beginnings of a smile.” Another friend says, “Oh, man, this is wild.” Clay’s “hands shake” as he lights a cigarette.²⁴² It might seem odd that teenagers with their noses full of coke would be scandalized by heroin use. Associated throughout the 1960s and 1970s with minority communities, the counterculture, and Vietnam War veterans, heroin use had largely dropped off by the 1980s.²⁴³ Cocaine’s initial wave of popularity in the late 1970s was in large part because it was not associated with countercultural or minority groups. According to Tom Feiling, it was a “product available only to the affluent,” compared in the media in the late 1970s to “Dom Pérignon champagne, a sign of the sophisticated good taste of the upper echelons of society.”²⁴⁴ Given cocaine’s association with affluence, and heroin’s association with minority and countercultural groups, the affluent teenagers seem to view heroin use as more degrading and dangerous, both physically and symbolically. After Muriel has completed the injection, she starts “crying and drooling all over, looking like she’s laughing really and her lipstick’s smeared all over her lips and nose and her mascara’s running down her cheeks.”²⁴⁵ Overwhelmed by disgust, Blair leaves

²⁴¹ Young helpfully explains that “one of the central issues in Ellis’s novel is how the self-indulgent paradise of California teen-hood is simultaneously the Gothic hell that Clay observes.” We see this gothic element in the shadowy, candle-lit room where the heroin use takes place. Young, “Vacant Possession,” 25.

²⁴² Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 86.

²⁴³ See Schneider, *Smack*, xiv.

²⁴⁴ Tom Feiling, *Cocaine Nation: How the White Trade Took Over the World* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2009), 37.

²⁴⁵ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 86.

the room. Ellis seems to want to elicit a similar disgust from his reader and show what use of a drug like cocaine—supposedly for the white and affluent—might lead to.

Beyond leading to the use of other dangerous drugs, frequent cocaine use also, in one of the novel's central plotlines—which aligns directly with Amy's story in the *Newsweek* article—leads Clay's longtime friend Julian to start doing sex work in order to pay for his cocaine habit. Clay loans Julian money at one point, and Julian later promises to pay Clay back if he comes with him to see a man named Finn, who turns out to be Julian's pimp. Finn wants Clay to go with Julian on his next call, because the man wants a second person to watch the encounter. Julian, who "has the shakes" and doesn't seem well, tells Finn he wants to quit, but Finn coerces Julian into doing heroin and then going on the call.²⁴⁶ As they leave Finn's penthouse, Clay has an epiphany: "I also realize that I'll go with Julian to the Saint Marquis. That I want to see if things like this can actually happen." In a moment of blatant symbolism, in which the descent to the parking garage below a penthouse is figured as a descent into hell, Ellis writes, "And as the elevator descends, passing the second floor, and the first floor, going even farther down, I realize that the money doesn't matter. That all that does is that I want to see the worst."²⁴⁷ Clay's phrasing when he expresses the desire "to see if things like this can actually happen" suggests a desire for authenticity, to have an experience he may have read about or seen represented but that is distinct from his typical experience, and marked as "real" because of its danger. Timothy Aubry has noted the "widespread perception that members of the American middle class are doomed to lead inauthentic lives" that dates back to the 1950s, and argues that "the most quintessential, cliched, but inexhaustibly alluring gateway" to authenticity "for the American

²⁴⁶ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 170.

²⁴⁷ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 172.

middle class in the past few decades has been drug use, due in part to its hyperbolic demonization by the media...Hard drugs, especially, offer a transgression of normative middle-class boundaries not only because of their potentially destructive capacities, but also because of widely accepted associations between them and urban minority populations.”²⁴⁸ This desire for authenticity helps explain why the teenagers in *Less Than Zero*, who are exclusively white and well off, both consume a substantial amount of drugs, and often feel the particular combination of fascination, excitement, and revulsion when witnessing certain events, such as Muriel’s heroin use or Julian’s sex work. In a world of shiny consumer boredom, they are disgusted and elated to see for themselves that “things like” heroin use and prostitution, which they likely associate with minority groups, “actually happen.”

While the characters do seem motivated by this desire for authenticity, and thus put themselves in the position to either see or enact “the worst,” as the novel progresses it becomes clear that Ellis wants to portray these events in order to elicit a moral reaction from his reader. In particular, Ellis wants to show the world that the Maria-Wyeth generation created with their absence and self-obsession. We can see the way Ellis attempts to elicit this reaction in his portrayal of Julian’s encounter with the middle-age man from Muncie, Indiana who has hired him. The man’s “hand drops down to Julian’s Jockey shorts and Julian closes his eyes” and the encounter begins:

“You’re a very nice young man.”
An image of Julian in fifth grade, kicking a soccer ball across a green field.
“Yes, you’re a very beautiful boy,” the man from Indiana says, “and here, that’s all that matters.”
Julian opens his eyes and stares into mine and I turn away and notice a fly buzzing lazily over to the wall next to the bed...I tell myself I could leave...But, again,

²⁴⁸ Timothy Aubry, “The Pain of Reading A Million Little Pieces: The James Frey Controversy and the Dismal Truth,” *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 22, no. 2 (2007): 155–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2007.10815180>.

the words don't, can't, come out and I sit there and the need to see the worst washes over me, quickly, eagerly."²⁴⁹

The man seems particularly attracted to Julian's youthfulness, calling him "a very nice young man" (a phrase a person would typically use to refer to a child or young adolescent) and a "boy." Ellis juxtaposes the image of Julian in the fifth grade "kicking a soccer ball across a green field" and Julian, in order to support his drug addiction, standing with a middle-aged man's hand down his pants. Characteristic of Clay's narration, he has a reaction to what he sees, yet cannot bring himself to articulate a response or to act in any way that would resist what he witnesses.

We see a similar dynamic in scenes where Clay observes the way his friends' appetite for pleasure grows more extreme. At one party, a group of fourteen people gather in a room to watch a television screen. Clay notices they all "look the same" (which is also how Clay looks): thin, tan bodies, short blond hair, blank look in the blue eyes, same empty toneless voices."²⁵⁰ They watch a snuff film, where a man uses a chainsaw to castrate a 16-year-old boy and an ice pick and nails to mutilate and murder a 15-year-old girl.²⁵¹ Clay leaves the room before the film is over, but his friends stay. Clay gives no reason for leaving. He simply notes, "I leave quickly as the black man tries to push a nail into the girl's neck."²⁵² As Clay stands outside on a deck near the room, he again provides an account of external events, while giving little access to the effect of what he's seen on his thoughts or emotions:

I sit in the sun and light a cigarette and try to calm down. But someone's turned the volume up and so I sit on the deck and I can hear the waves and the sea gulls crying out and I can hear the hum of the telephone wires and I can feel the sun shining down on me and I listen to the sound of the trees shuffling in the warm wind and the screams of a young girl coming from the television in the master bedroom.²⁵³

²⁴⁹ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 175.

²⁵⁰ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 152.

²⁵¹ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 153.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 154.

Hemingway's influence is clearly evident in this passage. Similar to Hemingway and Didion, Ellis often uses short, direct sentences, only to shift abruptly to a sentence that extends through multiple uses of the word "and." David Wyatt writes that Ernest Hemingway's famous use of "paratactic 'ands,'" suggest that the narrator or point-of-view character has "surrender[ed] control."²⁵⁴ Ellis uses the same stylistic technique. Clay is trying "to calm down," though this is the only explicit information about his emotional state he provides. It is primarily through Clay's frantic attempt to describe the ocean, sun, and breeze only to be interrupted by the sounds of violence that demonstrate how he cannot bear to watch the video but also will not allow himself to articulate why the video troubles him. As mentioned above, Wyatt argues that the effect of Hemingway's famous early style—that similarly worked via the omission of explicit references to internal emotion—was "to make people 'feel more,'" and thus Hemingway's style did not "embrace emotional reticence" but set out "instead, to measure the cost of it."²⁵⁵ While we can apply the same logic to Ellis's depiction of Clay, we should note how he measures the cost of moral, rather than emotional, absence. The evidence for why we should think in moral rather than emotional terms is the extremity of the behavior Ellis chooses to portray in this scene. He both provides enough details for us to imagine a graphic rape and murder, while showing that Clay leaves before these actions take place. With Clay, Ellis depicts an always-unarticulated moral response. Clay does not take the same pleasure out of the snuff film that his friends do. He is not like his friend Trent, who "walks back outside, twenty, thirty minutes later, after the screams and yelling of the girl and boy stop," and "has a hardon."²⁵⁶ Unlike Trent, the violence

²⁵⁴ Wyatt, *Hemingway, Style, and the Art of Emotion* 14.

²⁵⁵ Wyatt, *Hemingway, Style, and the Art of Emotion*, 3.

²⁵⁶ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 154.

causes Clay to feel anxiety rather than pleasure. Yet for Clay to make the case against the procurement and display of a snuff film—which one character estimates as costing fifteen thousand dollars—would mean to stand out explicitly from the homogenous blond crowd, something he cannot bring himself to do. Instead, Clay copes with his social circle full of teenage zombies by trying to “blank it out,” as he puts it earlier in the novel, often through his constant use and search for cocaine. In this world, drug use both leads to acts of extreme violence and depravity (because the desensitized teenagers need more intense thrills) and to the lack of response from people inclined to have a moral reaction.

He gets closer to registering a moral objection when his friend and drug dealer Rip shows him a drugged 12-year-old girl tied to a bed. As Clay leaves the room and Rip follows him, Clay tries to confront the situation, rather than leave. He does so by simply asking, “Why?”²⁵⁷ At first confused about what Clay is even referring to, Rip finally says, “Why not? What the hell?” and “Hey, don’t look at me like I’m some sort of scumbag or something. I’m not.”²⁵⁸ When Clay finally tries to articulate the moral issue with the actions he has observed through the entire story, the novel foregrounds his tentativeness: “It’s...I don’t think it’s right.”²⁵⁹ Clay hesitates, unsure of himself, then tempers his normative assertion through subjectivizing it. Clay’s need to qualify his intervention seems almost laughable in light of the actions he has witnessed. His desire to act with great diplomacy, in spite of the fact that he has witnessed the drugging and planned rape of a pre-teen girl, demonstrates how rare moral consideration is for the teenagers. Rip can barely believe what he has heard and reacts defensively: “What’s right? If you want something, you

²⁵⁷ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 189.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

have the right to take it. If you want to do something, you have the right to do it.”²⁶⁰ Clay responds, “But you don’t need anything. You have everything.”²⁶¹ An almost word-for-word reproduction of Walter Benn Michael’s description of neoliberal ideology (“we are allowed to do what we can afford to do”), Ellis clearly seems to indict a culture where material affluence begets not satisfaction but an ever-larger appetite.²⁶² Yet he does so through reproducing a different culturally dominant narrative about drug use and teenagers who have become amoral zombies.

The gradual narrative descent into worse and worse behavior mirrors the teenagers’ need for their thrills to grow in intensity, and, in creating a picture of the vapid and violent world that results from parental inaction, Ellis expresses a nostalgia for a world that had not lost its structured family hierarchies. At one point in the novel Clay fixates on his mother’s “closed probably locked” bedroom door.²⁶³ (Shutting herself in her room during the day brings to mind the way Maria Wyeth’s Seconal use often leads her to sleep during the afternoon.) Clay zeroes in on the way the parents have shut their children out and left them to raise themselves in the last lines of the book. Clay thinks about a song he has heard called “Los Angeles” that is full of “harsh and bitter” imagery.²⁶⁴ He says these images are “of people being driven mad by living in the city”; in particular, he remembers a line about “parents who were so hungry and unfulfilled

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Walter Benn Michaels, “Plots against America,” 298. Young’s reading of this scene largely aligns with mine: “Clay criticizes a friend’s morally repellent behaviour on the grounds that he shouldn’t act like that because ‘you have everything.’ This is a crucial moment, a deep fissure in the book; Ellis is raising a fundamental question about human needs in the post-war world. Why, here in consumer heaven, in the ultimate high-tech playpen, are these people so wretched, so twisted? Ellis’s own response to their behaviour, and this remains constant throughout his work, is essentially one of puritan disgust.” Young, “Vacant Possession,” 25-26.

²⁶³ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 40.

²⁶⁴ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, 207.

that they ate their own children.”²⁶⁵ In *Play It As It Lays*, Maria has the moral sense but not the moral resources to escape the constant self-absorbed dramas in which she repeatedly gets ensnared—with Les Goodwin, with Carter, with BZ—so that she might remove her daughter from the institution. Instead, she herself ends up institutionalized, forced to spend her days finding the “cock” in the “inkblot,” as she puts it.²⁶⁶ The effect of this self-absorption on the children of Kate’s generation is that, according to Ellis, they have begun to destroy themselves and others, with drugs, sex, and violence. I have used the term “residual morality” to describe these texts, and done so to communicate the yearning after “forms of experience which can no longer be had in an authentic way,” that Karl Mannheim famously defined as a foundational element of conservatism.²⁶⁷ Though these texts believes the nuclear family who takes responsibility for each other’s care has been lost, they still believe in its normative weight. As political theorist Corey Robin argues about conservative thinkers, a “narrative of loss” is often used to push a “program of recovery.”²⁶⁸ The complexity of Didion and Ellis lies in the way they depict a world of individualism, consumerism, and materialism (all supposedly aspects of Reagan’s neoliberalism) as responsible for this loss of strong family structures, yet do so through the representation of drug use. It would be precisely the crackdown on drugs that Reagan would use as a “program of recovery”; rather than let drugs continue to tear “our communities apart,” Nancy Reagan promised that the government would “no longer let the casual user continue without paying the moral penalty.”²⁶⁹

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Didion, *Play It As It Lays*, 4.

²⁶⁷ Quoted in Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*, Second Edition (New York: Oxford UP, 2018), 23.

²⁶⁸ Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, 23.

²⁶⁹ Reagan and Reagan, “Remarks.”

Chapter Three

The Dis-ease of Addiction

In a notable passage from David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* (1996), Wallace catalogues various things "you" would learn if you spent time at the "Substance-recovery halfway facility" called the Ennet House. This includes details about hygiene and sleep habits, well-worn recovery advice, and revelations about the psychological makeup of those with addiction. One of the things you would learn is that the definition of addiction is contested and ambiguous:

That addiction is either a disease or a mental illness or a spiritual condition (as in 'poor of spirit') or an O.C.D.-like disorder or an affective or character disorder, and that over 75% of the veteran Boston AAs who want to convince you that it is a disease will make you sit down and watch them write *DISEASE* on a piece of paper and then divide and hyphenate the word so that it becomes *DIS-EASE*, then will stare at you as if expecting you to undergo some kind of blinding epiphanic realization, when really (as G. Day points tirelessly out to his counselors) changing *DISEASE* to *DIS-EASE* reduces a definition and explanation to a simple description of a feeling, and rather a whiny insipid one at that.²⁷⁰

In spite of what Geoffrey Day avers at the end of the passage, the hyphenated "dis-ease" does in fact constitute a "blinding epiphanic realization" for Wallace. For someone like Day, the word "disease" is a precise socio-medical concept, and as such carries with it a meaning distinct from other concepts. As a signifying concept its meaning might be compatible with "mental illness," but it cannot be compatible with "spiritual condition," "O.C.D.-like disorder," "affective" disorder, and "character disorder" all at once. As Saussure famously claimed, for a sign to

²⁷⁰ David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 1996), 203.

possess meaning it must be put in opposition to other terms, and to claim that cancer is a disease equivalent to bad character is to render disease a meaningless concept. Day, a junior college professor and parody of a self-aggrandizing intellectual, will no doubt want to debate this concept until he finds its definition coherent. He thus feels irritated when veteran Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) members—used to dealing with people like Day—remove the signifying content from the word. By turning “disease” into “dis-ease,” they make debate impossible, because the feeling of dis-ease (of not feeling at ease) *is* compatible with mental illness, spiritual conditions, and every disorder imaginable.

That Day would rather debate concepts or try to figure out what exactly it means for him to have a disease called addiction, rather than accept that he feels bad and figure out what he needs to do in order to feel better, is why Wallace writes that “it is statistically easier for low-IQ people to kick an addiction than it is for high-IQ people.”²⁷¹ Many “substance-addicted people” are prone to the “addictive-type thinking” that Wallace calls “*Analysis-Paralysis*”; removing conceptual content from “disease,” turning it instead into a matter of affect, is, according to the novel, an effective strategy that AA members have developed over the years for helping those in moments of desperation find an escape from the neurotic, spiraling thoughts that set their minds ablaze.²⁷² My goal in this chapter is not to adjudicate the effectiveness of these measures—or AA more generally—for helping people in the throes of addiction. (I address AA and the disease-model of addiction more substantively in Chapter 4.) As many critics and readers have found, *Infinite Jest* is remarkable in both its great scope and because of how its themes interconnect. I would like to examine the themes that resonate in these sections dealing with addiction in light of

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid.

the novel's setting: a near-future consumerist dystopia. In other words, the dis-ease exists in *Infinite Jest* both as how certain individuals relate to certain substances, and also as a society-wide diagnosis of the problems of late capitalism.

In Wallace's dystopia, which Adam Kelly characterizes as a "technocapitalist world of hyper-entertainment," corporations have free reign to addict people to every imaginable consumer good.²⁷³ To use the (now somewhat notorious) phrase from Francis Fukuyama, this society is notably post-historical: the United States itself no longer exists, and there is an ongoing violent and dangerous terrorist backlash to the current political order, but the novel imagines no ideological threat (or alternative) to liberal capitalism.²⁷⁴ Wallace makes overt the end of history and the triumph of capitalism in the fact that calendar years are now corporate-sponsored advertising (the novel takes place in "Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment," "Year of the

²⁷³ Adam Kelly, "Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace," *Post45*, 2014, <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2014/10/dialectic-of-sincerity-lionel-trilling-and-david-foster-wallace/>.

²⁷⁴ Lee Konstantinou recognizes as much in his essay on Wallace as a postironist believer, noting Wallace's "lack of interest in remaking society along any particular institutional lines." Because Wallace viewed our current institutions—by which Konstantinou means something like liberal capitalism and the institutions of art forced to rely on the marketplace—as insurmountable, he instead focused his energy on "overthrowing" the "ironist." Konstantinou argues both that "Wallace's idea of politics—to the degree that he articulates one—rests within a tradition of symbolic action and countercultural individualism," and that "The means [Wallace] drew on to untangle the antinomies of the End of History were themselves arguably liberal and individualist in character: put crudely, he sought to defeat bad institutions using a symbolic toolkit." Lee Konstantinou, "No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief," in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa: U of Iowa P, 2012), 105-106. I find Konstantinou's discussion and assessment of Wallace clarifying, though I would note that Wallace's decision to set *Infinite Jest* in a dystopia indicates not so much a lack of interest in institutions or the importance of social structure than a lack of belief in the possibility of changing it, placing him, as Konstantinou rightly argues, within the bounds of typical End of History thinking. The way I would like to extend this argument is to examine how it functions in Wallace's understanding of drug use and addiction. Because Wallace does not see a different set of ideas about how to structure society as possible or helpful, he instead turns to the question of how to create habits of mind and body that will help us endure within this society, a reaction we also find in the purveyors of affect theory and post-critique, as I explore below.

Whopper” etc.). Given that the novel connects consumerism to addiction, then to exist after history—to exist within days and months on the new calendar that are always making reference to consumer products—is to have the dis-ease constantly aggravated. The addictive, unfulfilling consumption pushed by state-enabled corporations is one manifestation of how the dis-ease spreads, and in both this addictive consumption and other instances of compulsion (such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, which is rampant throughout the novel), Wallace imagines a society in which external objects have altered the populous irrevocably.

In the 1990s—as Wallace’s conceived of and published his influential novel describing a society of people who cannot control the compulsions of their bodies—notable critics in the humanities adopted what has come to be known as “affect theory,” as a new way of understanding human emotion, culture, and politics. In *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique*, Ruth Leys argues that the foundational agreement among a group of otherwise diverse postwar scientists—including among others Paul Ekman and Silvan Tomkins—was that affect could be separated from cognition and meaning. Leys traces the influence of this theory of non-intentional affect to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and subsequent affect theorists in the humanities.²⁷⁵ Leys writes, “The whole point of the turn to affect...is to shift attention away from considerations of meaning or ‘ideology’ or indeed representation to the subject’s subpersonal material-affective responses, where, it is claimed, political and other influences do their real

²⁷⁵ Given what Stephen J. Burn points out about Wallace’s engagement with postwar psychologists—such as R. D. Laing—it seems plausible that Wallace took this understanding of affect straight from the psychologists, rather than through Sedgwick, whose turn to the study of affect most likely occurred too late to have had a direct influence on Wallace. However, tracing this influence on Wallace would require further time spent at Wallace’s archive at the Harry Ransom Center and is beyond the scope of this chapter. Stephen J. Burn, “‘Webs of Nerves Pulsing and Firing’: Infinite Jest and the Science of Mind,” in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 72.

work.”²⁷⁶ To extend Leys’s argument and make apparent the connection between affect theory and *Infinite Jest*, if we accept the argument that our “subpersonal material-affective responses” do the real political work, rather than our beliefs, intentions, and convictions, then drugs become especially important, since they have the power to alter and shape our emotions and bodily experiences, regardless of what we think or intend. This meaning might be menacing, since drugs might alter our emotions and bodies in terrifying ways, or it could be emancipating, since drugs might cause us to feel an increased sense of connection to others. If we should focus our attention not on the concepts we can debate (disease as mental illness versus disease as spiritual condition) but on embodied affect (dis-ease), then taking drugs or abstaining is enormously important, not just for our health or for how we feel, but because it is fundamental to our political identities, conceived of as ontological rather than ideological.²⁷⁷ Following in the wake of the affect theorists of the 1990s and early 2000s, critics such as Elizabeth Freudenthal have argued that it is precisely this turn to affect, embodiment, and materiality, and away from interiority and agency, that allows *Infinite Jest* to imagine resistance to “oppressive political, economic, and social forces.”²⁷⁸ However, I will argue that a scene dealing with methadone treatment—that has gone overlooked in critical accounts of the novel—showcases that something beyond effect/affect must be at stake for Wallace. Wallace demonstrates the way he views drug use as an

²⁷⁶ Ruth Leys, *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique* (U of Chicago P, 2017), 322.

²⁷⁷ Walter Benn Michaels locates this distinction between ideological and ontological conceptions of political identity in Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*. Michaels writes, “Biopolitical ‘struggles,’ say Hardt and Negri, are ‘struggles over the form of life,’ and struggles over the form of life are ‘ontological’ rather than ideological; they have nothing to do with the question of what is believed and everything to do with the question of what is.” Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton UP, 2004). As I will show, drugs are essential to imagining this ontological conception of political identity (even when not explicitly cited), precisely because they seem to change “what is” without necessarily changing what we believe.

²⁷⁸ Elizabeth Freudenthal, “Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectification, and Identity in *Infinite Jest*,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 1 (2010): 192, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.0.0145>.

issue with moral stakes when he indicates a preference for abstinence promoted by the Ennet House over the methadone treatment center, yet this relies on a certain moral judgment and belief that the understanding of addiction as a bodily “dis-ease” tries to downplay. Drugs thus persist as a subject of moral consequence.

Wallace’s impact on contemporary American literature has as much to do with his critical essays as it does his fiction.²⁷⁹ In essays and creative nonfiction, most notably “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” and “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again,” Wallace set the terms of reference for a large number of successful US writers who succeeded him, and for the critical conversation about Wallace. The argument that has proved most influential—for both critics and other contemporary fiction writers, such as Jonathan Franzen, Dave Eggers, Jeffrey Eugenides—from this long, discursive essay is Wallace’s claim that irony no longer possesses the same social use it had for postwar writers, and that fiction writers need to find a way of depicting the problems with contemporary society that goes beyond negation.²⁸⁰ Wallace argues that in the 1960s and 1970s the work of revealing hypocrisies, of “exploiting gaps between what’s said and what’s meant, between how things try to appear and how they really are,” within mainstream American culture done by Ken Kesey, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, William S.

²⁷⁹ Though Andrew Hoberek does make a persuasive case for the impact of Wallace’s maximalist style on the fiction of the early 2000s. Hoberek argues that Wallace shifted the literary culture away from the ascendant minimalism of the 1970s and 1980s, back towards a maximalism that would dominate in the early 2000s. He thus argues for seeing Wallace as stylistically continuous with the postmodernists of the 1960s and 1970s to whom critics have tended to put Wallace in opposition. Hoberek’s essay is helpful for distinguishing between this stylistic continuity and the ideological or political break between Wallace and the postmodernists (that Hoberek recognizes), a distinction that was much needed in Wallace criticism. Andrew Hoberek, “The Novel after David Foster Wallace,” in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. Stephen J. Burn and Marshall Boswell (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 211–28.

²⁸⁰ By irony, Wallace means the various verbal and visual strategies used to signal that “I don’t really mean what I’m saying,” usually in order to criticize, negate, or debunk.

Burroughs, William Gaddis, and Robert Coover (all of whom Wallace mentions by name) “wasn’t just credible as art; it seemed downright socially useful in its capacity for what counterculture critics called ‘a *critical negation* that would make it self-evident to everyone that the world is not as it seems.’”²⁸¹ However, he argues it also relied on a “frankly idealistic” assumption: “that etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure, that a revelation of imprisonment led to freedom.”²⁸² Wallace criticism thus tends to judge his fictional oeuvre—sometimes obliquely, when not explicitly making a judgment about his work—as either succeeding or failing based on the standards Wallace himself set, specifically in terms of whether his fiction imagines an escape from ironic self-reference and cultural narcissism. In recent years, critics such as Hoberek, Holland, Kelly, Baskin, and Konstantinou have made detailed and sophisticated use of Wallace’s nonfiction, a necessary corrective to early, less nuanced Wallace criticism.²⁸³ Critics who attempt to challenge the applicability of “E Unibus Pluram” to *Infinite*

²⁸¹ David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 66.

²⁸² Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 65 and 67.

²⁸³ In his review of the early edited collection *Consider David Foster Wallace*, Stephen J. Burn points out the way the collection seems “to hang on the master’s words,” and how this “near-deification” of Wallace allows “him to define the terms of his own critical reception too completely.” Burn goes on to cite the use of “E Unibus Pluram” “to explain Wallace’s total body of work,” as an example of what he means. He provides a helpful bit of cautionary nuance: “while the essay is undoubtedly important, it belongs to a particular moment in Wallace’s early career—specifically, it was begun when Wallace was just twenty-eight—and in later interviews he incrementally distanced himself from some of its claims.” Stephen J. Burn, review of *Consider David Foster Wallace*, edited by David Hering. *Modernism/modernity* 18, no. 2 (April 2011), 467. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2011.0044>. Burn’s cautionary note is most directly applicable to those using the essay as an interpretive lens for Wallace’s later fiction (such as *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* or the posthumous *The Pale King*). However, Wallace began writing the essay in 1990 and it was first published in 1993, the years during which much of *Infinite Jest* was also composed. As I expand on below, Burn’s note of caution is appreciated, yet (understandably, because of how often the essay is cited) he swings too far the other direction, making its core claims seem irrelevant or opposed to *Infinite Jest*, a position I do not believe to be defensible.

Jest—such as Stephen J. Burn—end up inadvertently demonstrating just how strong the thematic links between the two are.²⁸⁴ Since the applicability of Wallace’s ideas about irony and postmodernism to *Infinite Jest* seems almost indisputable, I accept the argument that *Infinite Jest* follows from Wallace’s polemical ideas about the limits of irony and the need for fiction to go beyond negation, while questioning an assumption in *Infinite Jest* that most critics have not addressed: that drugs and addiction tell us anything meaningful about the cultural and political disease Wallace diagnoses in both his nonfiction and in *Infinite Jest* itself.

²⁸⁴ In particular, Burn rejects a prescriptive reading of the novel—he calls it the “orthodox” reading—based on Wallace’s call for non-ironic fiction at the end of “E Unibus Pluram,” which views the novel as providing both a diagnosis and treatment to the cultural despair of postmodernity. Burn counters this reading by positing that *Infinite Jest* resists “ordinary textual cohesion” and demonstrates an “antiteleological spirit” (61). Though Burn cautions against using “E Unibus Pluram” to shape one’s interpretation of *Infinite Jest*, his argument also relies on his assertion that in the essay Wallace “challenges the facile assumption that ‘etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure’” (62). Burn uses Wallace’s recognition that diagnosis does not, on its own, entail a specific cure to build his case that *Infinite Jest* privileges diagnosis, that “the diagnosis is painstakingly exact, but the final steps—whether cure or resolution—hardly ever come” (Ibid.). Yet the point of this quote in Wallace’s essay is to argue against a *merely* diagnostic fiction; he claims that fiction should go *beyond* diagnosis, which is the opposite of Burn’s contention. We can see here that Burn, in his attempt to avoid the thematic linkage between Wallace’s essays and fiction, still uses Wallace’s essay to illuminate his own reading of *Infinite Jest*, while misreading the essay. (There is an interesting question to be asked about the essay’s ending, which seems to retreat back to irony after its call for non-ironic fiction. Acknowledging this, however, does not discount the essay’s critique of mere diagnosis; it instead raises the possibility that Wallace was unable to succeed on the terms he set, which is not a critique Burn provides.) I would argue that what motivates the misreading of Wallace’s argument about diagnosis and cure in “E Unibus Pluram” is the conflation Burn makes repeatedly in his article between narrative resolution and social prescription. One can make the coherent argument that the novel’s prescription *is* antiteleological: that the novel proposes the forestalling of “gratification” (as Burn puts it) as the solution to a culture of constant consumption. This is not the argument this chapter is concerned with making, but I believe it indicates that even a strong, thorough essay like Burn’s cannot successfully defend the position that the themes of “E Unibus Pluram” are opposed or irrelevant to those of *Infinite Jest*. Stephen J. Burn, “‘Webs of Nerves Pulsing and Firing’: *Infinite Jest* and the Science of Mind,” in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 59–86.

Infinite Jest is famously maximalist, complexly organized, and difficult to summarize.²⁸⁵

I will provide a very brief summary of its major themes here. The novel has three primary plotlines, involving the Incandenza family, the Ennet House, and Quebecois terrorists. The patriarch of the Incandenza family—James—has, before the events of the novel, both founded a tennis academy and committed suicide by blowing up his head inside a microwave. He is survived by three sons, Orin, Hal, and Mario, and his wife Avril. The novel opens with a scene that occurs at the latest point chronologically, from the first-person perspective of Hal in a college interview, where he seemingly has lost the ability to speak, a mystery that the novel never clearly explains. Though one could explore any number of themes suggested by the novel, perhaps the most persistent are the inability of characters to communicate with each other (as we see with Hal in the opening scene), and the possibly related phenomenon of compulsion caused by the relationship between the body and external objects. Addiction becomes a central example of this sort of compulsion, especially with Don Gately and the Ennet House, on which this chapter will primarily focus. Hal often represents the intersection of these themes, as we see in his addiction to marijuana, which leads him to isolate himself. Yet the compulsion in the novel is not limited to addiction; it can also be found in the many examples of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Perhaps the most significant example of a character with OCD is the president, Johnny Gentle, who, because of his obsessive-compulsive focus on hygiene, embarks on a

²⁸⁵ The complex organization of the novel has provoked fascination among critics, though the structure of the narrative is not my focus in this chapter. On Wallace structuring the novel according to the interlocking triangles of the Sierpinski Gasket, see Greg Carlisle, *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest* (Slideshow Media Group, 2007), 20 and 24. On the various mathematic models Wallace might have used to shape the narrative along with the physical spaces within the novel, see Roberto Natalini, "David Foster Wallace and the Mathematics of Infinity," in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 43–58.

“Reconfiguration” of the borderlines of North America, so that the waste from nuclear power—which in this near future provides the main energy source—can be dumped in Quebec (and thus at a greater remove from Gentle himself). Quebecois terrorists respond by seeking (and perhaps getting ahold of) a lethal video (named *Infinite Jest*) that is so entertaining the viewer can do nothing else but watch until dying. To give some idea of how intricate and complex the plot of the novel is, I will just note that James Incandenza created this compulsively entertaining video in order to cure what he perceived as Hal’s inability to communicate (though he does so chronologically before Hal seems to exhibit any communication issues). Gentle’s second-in-command is Rodney Tine, who makes the deal to “subsidize time” by selling calendar years to corporations, which is required in order to finance the costly process of Reconfiguration. Gentle’s OCD, predicated on the fear of impure external objects, leads both to time itself being a source of further consumption for the populous at large, and creates the possibility that the country could be decimated by the compulsively entertaining video.

Thus in the world of *Infinite Jest*, every aspect of life is both a cause and consequence of the unbridled consumption and “compulsive...thinking” that characterizes the dis-ease.²⁸⁶ In other words, Wallace’s vision of how we respond to drugs (or analogous external objects) constitutes how he imagines the entirety of contemporary life. What is not available is any sort of action or thinking that can take place in addition to or outside of compulsion. For the critics who find Wallace successful by the standards he sets, they do so because of how he imagines life within this orientation, specifically in the scenes at the Ennet House that deal with substance-abuse recovery. For instance, in *Ordinary Unhappiness: The Therapeutic Fiction of David Foster Wallace*, Jon Baskin claims that Alcoholics Anonymous “emerges as a *successful*

²⁸⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 203.

therapeutic model,” because of the way it does not try to enact change in the world, create new knowledge, or instill any particular beliefs, but instead positions the addict to find relief even as the dis-ease continues.²⁸⁷

In contrast to Baskin, Mary K. Holland, in her article about narcissism in *Infinite Jest*, provides a forceful account of why the novel’s construction of values is unworkable, yet she fails to see that the problem lies in the novel’s diagnosis, which leads directly to its unsatisfying prescription. Holland explicates the “looping pathology” or “recursivity” of narcissism in the novel, by which she means narcissism functions as both cause and effect of the characters’ inability to communicate with or relate to others. Applying this specifically to the characters at the Ennet House, she writes that “they turn to drugs out of the narcissist’s ultimate need to escape a self that can no longer find sustenance in the world,” and by privileging “the nihilism of a good drug binge” above all other needs or desires, they become the novel’s “ultimate example of the solipsism of narcissism.”²⁸⁸ What distinguishes Holland’s argument from the many other critics who deal with solipsism in the novel—such as Baskin, Kelly, and Freudenthal—is her argument that the “cures” offered in the novel, including AA, contain the “risk of narcissism,” and thus are potentially as dangerous as the disease they address.²⁸⁹ Holland describes how AA utilizes, and forces one into, the same recursivity that characterizes addiction:

the [AA] member’s job is not to figure out his or her story or path to recovery but blindly submit his or her will to the universal experience of the program. When the program asks its members to ‘Identify’ with each other, it is requiring them to empathize with this standard story that each member tells, with their own story, with themselves. In this way, the AA and NA programs ultimately ask not that members reach out to empathize with

²⁸⁷ Jon Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness: The Therapeutic Fiction of David Foster Wallace* (Stanford UP, 2019), 41; emphasis in original.

²⁸⁸ Mary K. Holland, “‘The Art’s Heart’s Purpose’: Braving the Narcissitic Loop of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*,” *Critique* 47, no. 3 (2006): 232-233.

²⁸⁹ Holland, “The Art’s Heart’s Purpose,” 232.

strangers but that they recognize their own place in this infinitely repeating sameness, the recursivity of addiction.²⁹⁰

In Holland's telling, focusing on one's own "story or path to recovery," would no doubt lead one to once again circle the loop of solipsism, yet an appeal to universality, an identification with others who share one's pain, also leads one back to the self (since the universal will include oneself). Thus AA only appears as a call to connection with others; it actually causes the members to once again think about their own pain. Holland argues that Wallace leaves this "deadly undertow" of narcissism "unfaced and unresolved," but how would one face a problem exacerbated by both individuality and universality, with any attempt to focus on the other revealed as a further focus on the self?²⁹¹

Holland's analysis relies on both her acceptance that a "pathological narcissism" which affects us all is the correct cultural and political diagnosis, is what needs to be faced and resolved, and her assertion that Wallace does not "seem to consider the difficulty of positioning himself outside the society that he consciously critiques or the impossibility of successfully critiquing a society whose sinister and powerful underpinnings remain unacknowledged."²⁹² Yet *Infinite Jest* provides exactly this recognition of one's immersion in, and inability to escape, the dis-ease that permeates the society to such an extent that it has become ubiquitous. At one point, Holland makes an oblique reference to the unwillingness of the characters "to endure the pain, or unpleasure, necessary to break out" of the recursive loops in which they find themselves.²⁹³ This

²⁹⁰ Holland, "The Art's Heart's Purpose," 233.

²⁹¹ Holland, "The Art's Heart's Purpose," 225.

²⁹² Holland, "The Art's Heart's Purpose," 220.

²⁹³ Holland, "The Art's Heart's Purpose," 238. According to her psychoanalytic reading, it is because of their unwillingness to endure pain that the characters choose pleasures she describes as infantile, signaling their desire to re-enter the womb since in the womb all needs and desires are provided, which constitutes a sign of narcissism.

reference to enduring then breaking out of pain and displeasure both accords with and fails to understand the limitations of the way Wallace issues his diagnosis in primarily affective terms. Thus Holland fails to see that the reason Wallace cannot convincingly get his characters out of this trap is because of his skepticism of what we think, and the importance he therefore places on what we consume, to what goes inside our bodies.

In a scene that is fundamental to my understanding of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace contrasts the recovery philosophy of the Ennet House to that of a methadone clinic housed nearby. For Wallace, these two institutions provide diametrically opposed approaches to recovery: while the Ennet House preaches strict sobriety, the methadone clinic continues to give drugs to those with addiction. It is worth examining the history of this debate between methadone treatment and what were known initially as therapeutic communities (of which the Ennet House is an example). Scientist Vincent Dole and physician Marie Nyswander developed methadone treatment in the US in the early 1960s. Dole and Nyswander rejected the premise that addiction treatment always should lead to abstinence and wanted to instead see if they could use medication to help curb the most severe effects of addiction on a long term basis. According to Dole and Nyswander, the ultimate goal should be “social rehabilitation,” a return to productive social roles, rather than abstinence as an end in itself.²⁹⁴ Dole and Nyswander began to study methadone as addiction treatment in 1964, and it proved effective: methadone both substantially “relieved drug cravings” and “prevented withdrawal symptoms for twenty-four to thirty-six hours.”²⁹⁵ The subjects of their study seemed less interested in their next heroin fix, instead focusing on activities such as

²⁹⁴ Schneider, *Smack*, 167.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

painting or working towards a high-school-equivalency diploma.²⁹⁶ Dole and Nyswander found similarly positive results in an expanded study in 1966. Based on the positive results from their research, the number of methadone treatment centers exploded by the early 1970s.²⁹⁷

Not surprisingly, given that methadone itself was an addictive substance and that using it to treat addiction meant one must continue using it indefinitely, the treatment was controversial from the outset. Some of the most virulent critics of methadone treatment were leaders and members of therapeutic communities. Early therapeutic communities—the first of which was Synanon, founded in Santa Monica, California in 1958—were notable for their brash approach to confronting addiction, which relied on group “confrontation and ridicule to force participants to confront their moral defects,” confrontations which “took place in an intense, rule-governed familial environment.”²⁹⁸ The leaders of these therapeutic communities did not argue that methadone was ineffective, but that it was immoral. The director of Synanon called methadone “insidious,” “immoral,” and argued that “it treats the symptoms but not the disease.”²⁹⁹ A director of another therapeutic community said sarcastically, “I think methadone maintenance is a great idea... We should give money to bank robbers, women to rapists, and methadone to

²⁹⁶ Dole, Vincent P., and Marie Nyswander. “A Medical Treatment for Diacetylmorphine (Heroin) Addiction: A Clinical Trial with Methadone Hydrochloride.” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 193 (1965): 646–50.

²⁹⁷ The reason both mayors from large cities and the Nixon administration were willing to try this new, controversial treatment method largely had to do with their hope that it would reduce crime rates, which had doubled between 1960 and 1968. If methadone could keep former-heroin users gainfully employed, rather than committing crimes to maintain their habit, a substantial decrease in crime might follow. See Schneider, *Smack*, 159.

²⁹⁸ Claire D. Clark, *The Recovery Revolution: The Battle Over Addiction Treatment in the United States* (Columbia UP, 2017), 10. Therapeutic communities and methadone treatment centers vied for federal funding as Nixon expanded federal investment into addiction treatment, and both received substantial investment. Clark, *The Recovery Revolution*, 13.

²⁹⁹ Quoted in Schneider, *Smack*, 169.

addicts.”³⁰⁰ Synanon itself grew increasingly cult-like and notorious over the course of the 1970s, but, as Claire D. Clark argues in her history of recovery and addiction treatments in the US, the “hierarchical, drug-free, long-term, peer-based treatment structure” would become the standard for the treatment industry throughout the following decades.³⁰¹ The sociologist Kerwin Kaye explains how private therapeutic communities often receive patients from drug courts, which began in 1989 and expanded greatly throughout the 1990s and 2000s. If one “fails” at treatment in a therapeutic community, one likely will end up in prison.³⁰²

In *Infinite Jest*, we find a version of this criticism that methadone does not substantially treat the “disease,” along with a sympathetic portrayal of a tough, hierarchical residential treatment facility. The Ennet House was founded by a tough ex-felon who would make people eat rocks to show that they were serious about getting sober, and even now that they have ended that policy, what they “ask newcomers to do and believe seem not much less whacko than trying to chew feldspar. E.g. be so strung out you can feel your pulse in your eyeballs, have the shakes so badly you make a spatter-painting on the wall every time somebody hands you a cup of

³⁰⁰ Quoted in Schneider, *Smack*, 174.

³⁰¹ Clark, *The Recovery Revolution*, 140 and 14.

³⁰² Kaye’s description of the sort of “therapy” one receives in these communities aligns with the confrontational, rule-governed approach described by Clarke: “Rule enforcement in general occurred less through exhortation and encouragement than through an almost constant, berating refrain concerning ‘dope fiend behaviors’... Through this critique of ‘dope fiend behaviors,’ every instance of rule-following—the way one makes one’s bed, for example—is made into an occasion that either confirms one’s therapeutic progress or one’s identity as a deviant and recalcitrant drug addict. The core elements within criminal justice sponsored treatment programs thus concern waking up early, following orders (a specific ‘emotional management skill’ noted by De Leon), learning bureaucratic procedures, and doing unpleasant, boring and repetitive tasks without complaint, and the need to do these tasks and to obey all rules is emphasized much more than any conventional counseling practice concerning drug use itself.” Kaye, Kerwin. “Rehabilitating the ‘Drugs Lifestyle’: Criminal Justice, Social Control, and the Cultivation of Agency.” *Ethnography* 14, no. 2 (2013): 217.

coffee.”³⁰³ Wallace presents the tough treatment of the residents of the Ennet House, and their zero-tolerance policy for relapse, as difficult but admirable. As I will argue, Wallace’s depiction of the conflict between methadone treatment and the Ennet House constitutes both his normative account of drug use, but also the breakdown in his attempt to describe addiction as an affective “dis-ease” of the body.

In this scene, Gately recalls sitting on a fire escape outside the Ennet House, watching people line up at the methadone clinic to get their daily dose. Wallace, who repeatedly uses the word “customers” (rather than patients) to describe the people receiving their dose of methadone—connecting it to the consumerism for which addiction functions as a metaphor—explains that when standing in line they “do not congregate”; instead they stand “arms crossed, alone, brooding, solo acts, stand-offish—50 or 60 people all managing to form a line on a narrow walkway waiting for the same small building to unlock its narrow front door and yet still managing to appear alone and stand-offish.”³⁰⁴ Gately finds remarkable the “the movements and postures necessary to maintain this isolation-in-union,” describing it as “balletic.”³⁰⁵ While in line, the methadone customers maintain a self-imposed isolation, a fear of connection with the other “customers.” These people then “leave the building deeply changed, their eyes not only back in their heads but peaceful, if a bit glazed, but anyway in general just way better put-together than when they arrived.”³⁰⁶ Though they feel better when they leave, their self-isolation indicates that methadone has not provided a cure for the issues that underlie addiction.

³⁰³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 138.

³⁰⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 194.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Extrapolating from this passage, Wallace makes addiction (or, more precisely, compulsiveness) unavoidable in the fictional world of *Infinite Jest*, yet imagines different responses to addiction which lead to the creation of two distinct identities, which I will call the “junkie” and the “addict.”³⁰⁷ The ubiquity of the dis-ease demonstrates how Wallace conceives of his diagnosis of and prescription for late capitalism in terms of an ontological shift in embodied affect. Wallace makes clear that the people lined up to receive methadone are still junkies when Gately pulls a prank by putting a “Closed Until Further Notice” sign on the door of the methadone clinic. Gately has “never seen anything like the psychic crises and near-riot among these semi-ex-junkies” when they line up and find this sign:

pallid blade-slender chain-smoking homosexuals and bearded bruiser-types in leather berets, women with mohawks and multiple sticks of gum in, upscale trust-fund-fritterers with shiny cars and computerized jewelry who’d arrived, as they’d been doing like hyper-conditioned rats for years, many of them, arrived at sunup with their eyes protruding and with Kleenexes at their noses and scratching their arms and standing on first one foot and then the other, doing basically everything but truly congregating, wild for chemical relief, ready to stand in the cold exhaling steam for hours for that relief, who’d arrived with the sun and now seemed to be informed that the Commonwealth of MA was suddenly going to withdraw the prospect of that relief, until (and this is what really seemed to drive them right over the edge, out there in the lot) until Further Notice. *Apeshit* has rarely enjoyed so literal a denotation.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁷ I would like to note that since 2017 the Associated Press stylebook has cautioned writers not to use the words “*alcoholic, addict, user* and *abuser*,” and instead use a formulation such as “people with addiction.” Journalist Zachary Siegel explains the rationale in an article about the change: “as someone who once had a heroin addiction...being called an ‘addict’ defines my humanity with one small facet of my identity, essentially erasing the rest of me.” Zachary Siegel, “Journalists, Stop Using Words Like Addict and Drug Abuser,” *Slate.com*, June 6, 2017, <https://slate.com/technology/2017/06/the-associated-press-removes-words-like-addict-and-drug-abuser.html>. I continue to use the terms “addict” and “junkie” because defining the person in terms of this “one small facet” of their identity is essential to Wallace’s novel. Thus, even if it is not considered helpful when reporting stories about addiction, it is in fact an accurate representation of how Wallace conceptualizes addiction in the novel, which is my goal.

³⁰⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 195.

The diversity displayed in this passage signals *junky* as an identity that cuts across other identity lines: the mental and bodily need for the substance renders class, race, gender, and sexual orientation unimportant. Wallace undermines the colorful individualized styles on offer to the consumer (the berets, the mohawks, the computerized jewelry) with a simile to homogenous “hyper-conditioned rats.” Rather than listen to what these people say about themselves through their fashion choices, Wallace indicates that we should listen to how addiction speaks through their bodies. He stuffs the passage with descriptions of physical discomfort: “protruding” eyes, tissues in noses, scratches on arms, fidgeting feet, etc. A person who chooses to wear a beret might think of himself as quite different than the person who opts for a Mohawk, but, because both continue to seek the relief of methadone, both remain junkies. No matter how they try to differentiate themselves, when their methadone is threatened, they all riot.

The methadone junkies understand the causal effect of drugs, but do not recognize that this effect entails anything specific about their identities, and do not understand their continued use of a drug in moral terms. The drugs they have consumed have created an effect (first a high and then, after repeated highs, an addiction), which they now take into account by taking methadone. But after taking methadone, they walk away from the clinic and presumably go about their day. Daily ingestion of methadone is important for continuing to feel relief, but they view nothing meaningful to be at stake beyond this relief. They have not built their relationships around their ingestion of methadone, as we can see from the fact that they do not communicate with the other methadone junkies. Nor have they built their identities around it. We have a lack of detail about the “women with mohawks” but we might suppose that they have built their identities around a punk subculture because of their ideological interest in resisting bourgeois norms, which they signal through a fashion choice. The women with mohawks might avoid

speaking to the “upscale trust-fund-fritterers” because they do not betray the same interest in resisting bourgeois norms and might be hostile to anyone with anti-capitalist commitments. The differences in their commitments and the commitments of the “trust-fund fritterers” are not overridden by the fact that both of their bodies require relief from methadone. My argument is that Wallace has a moral reaction—similar to the directors of the therapeutic communities—to the methadone “customers” precisely because they do not orient their lives around their abstaining from drugs. According to this picture, all aspects of life not focused on recovery are understood as distracting and meaningless. The point is that people who view the problem of drug use as merely causal will want to find relief because they do not like what the drug has caused them to feel, but the addicts (as opposed to the junkies) in the novel go well beyond relief in their response. The addict instead treats the drug effect as an issue that requires a particular moral response—namely, abstinence.

Freudenthal notes the ubiquity of compulsiveness in *Infinite Jest*, represented either by addiction or obsessive-compulsive disorder, and argues that these disorders, which force one’s body into uncontrollable repetitive action, constitute a “mode of identity” she calls “anti-interiority.” She explains that anti-interiority is “founded in the material world of both objects and biological bodies and divested from an essentialist notion of inner emotional, psychological, and spiritual life.”³⁰⁹ Freudenthal identifies a rise in scholarly and cultural interest in “biomedical” approaches to identity (rather than ones based on interiority) since the 1990s, noting both affect theory and research “on objects and things as crucial to establishing human experience,” (by which she seems to mean something along the lines of actor-network theory

³⁰⁹ Freudenthal, “Anti-Interiority,” 192.

(ANT) or New Materialism).³¹⁰ Freudenthal ties the rise of this scholarship to changes in drug consumption, noting a coterminous “increase in psychiatric medications which act upon neurochemical processes.”³¹¹ Freudenthal helpfully connects these threads of affect theory, ANT, and cultural works concerned with drugs (such as Wallace’s). Her article also proves telling in the way it collapses the space between “establishing human experience” and identity formation. Objects in the world undoubtedly establish our experience in various ways. But what for Freudenthal and for proponents of affect theory and ANT does the recognition that we exist in, that our experiences are “founded in,” a world full of objects and bodies entail? Rita Felski (the scholar who has done the most to popularize ANT in the humanities) argues that literary scholars should pay attention to, and conceive of literary texts as, “nonhuman actors” which she defines as “any and all phenomena whose existence makes a difference.”³¹² She notes that these nonhuman actors are “not freighted with assumptions about intention, consciousness, or autonomy.”³¹³ Because objects, nonhuman actors, and/or our emotions—conceived of as divorced from cognition—create the conditions of possibility for what we experience, they are taken as meaningful. When thinking about ourselves, we need not privilege “interior” characteristics like “intention,” “consciousness,” and “autonomy,” since we know that external objects—or automatic internal emotions—have played a role in *causing* our experiences.

Wallace makes clear the power of drugs as objects that make a difference in an evocative early scene, wherein the minor character Ken Erdedy “gather[s] his intellect, will, self-knowledge, and conviction” in order to cure his addiction to marijuana.³¹⁴ Over the course of 10

³¹⁰ Freudenthal, “Anti-Interiority,” 192-194.

³¹¹ Freudenthal, “Anti-Interiority,” 193.

³¹² Rita Felski, “Latour and Literary Studies,” *PMLA* 130, no. 3 (2015): 738.

³¹³ *Ibid.*

³¹⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 22.

dense pages, split into only four separate paragraphs and featuring two paragraphs that are four pages each, Erdedy proves both highly intelligent and determined to quit marijuana. His idea for how to quit, while clever, betrays the hold of the drug on his body: he plans to smoke such a large amount of marijuana that the feeling becomes unpleasant and creates bad associations with the drug. He plans, in other words, to “cure himself by excess.”³¹⁵ However, it becomes clear that Erdedy’s clever plan constitutes a rationalization for why he should continue to use. Because he wants to use so badly—though intellectually he is aware that it no longer provides any pleasure—he will go to extraordinary lengths to convince himself that using is his best option, even in the case of trying to quit.

In other words, the drug itself seems to have caused certain habits of thought in Erdedy. Wallace—using indirect discourse—provides a striking account of these habits, as Erdedy anxiously fixates on how the woman who said she would supply him with marijuana refused to take payment up front:

This arrangement, very casual, made him anxious, so he’d been even more casual and said sure, fine, whatever. Thinking back, he was sure he’d said *whatever*, which in retrospect worried him because it might have sounded as if he didn’t care at all, not at all, so little that it wouldn’t matter if she forgot to get it or call, and once he’d made the decision to have marijuana in his home one more time it mattered a lot. It mattered a lot. He’d been too casual with the woman, he should have made her take \$1250 from him up front, claiming politeness, claiming he didn’t want to inconvenience her financially over something so trivial and casual. Money created a sense of obligation, and he should have wanted the woman to feel obliged to do what she’d said, once what she’d said she’d do had set him off inside. Once he’d been set off inside, it mattered so much that he was somehow afraid to show how much it mattered.³¹⁶

Every sentence in this passage features words and ideas repeated within the sentence and/or from previous sentences. For instance, in the first sentence, the “casual” arrangement makes Erdedy

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 19.

anxious which leads to him being “more casual.” In the next sentence, Erdedy thinks his casual tone might have made it sound as if he “didn’t care at all, not at all,” which worries him because, at the end of this sentence and in the next sentence, he realizes, “it mattered a lot. It mattered a lot.” This passage is one of many in this scene (and within the novel) that takes the form of a giant, dense paragraph. Because Erdedy desperately needs marijuana, he thinks in particular ways, marked both by constant repetition and excess. The mass of text—often stretching for pages without paragraph breaks—gives the sense that Erdedy cannot shut his brain off, yet the repetition signals how all of this thinking leads him in circles. By the end of the passage, Erdedy has demonstrated his “self-knowledge,” yet this knowledge does not move him forward. Even though he knows his own tendency to mask how he feels, he still fears revealing himself, just as he did in the first sentence of the passages. If two of the inscriptions in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi were “know thyself” and “nothing to excess,” Erdedy’s self-knowledge only exacerbates his excess, both in terms of his marijuana consumption (since he has used his self-knowledge to hatch his plan to “cure himself by excess”) and his thought patterns (since his constant interrogation of himself makes his thoughts speed out of control, creating the excessively long paragraphs). Baskin notes how the alcoholic’s failure “to cure herself of her ‘Dis-ease’ . . . is connected to her philosophical and rhetorical commitments, as opposed to being addressed by them.”³¹⁷ Wallace shows how the effect of an external object like marijuana causes certain habits of mind that are not just difficult to escape, but render “intellect, will, self-knowledge, and conviction” (the attributes one would use to create or sustain commitments) useless. He famously calls this type of thinking, common among those with addiction, *analysis paralysis*.

³¹⁷ Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness*, 41.

Wallace thus clearly attributes great causal power to nonhuman objects in the novel, such as drugs or nuclear waste, to “make a difference” and alter our bodies and brains. But it is here that the different responses to the drug’s causal power by the methadone junky and the addict become important. My argument is that Wallace can only provide the addict’s response as a possible prescription for the ills of late capitalism, and juxtapose the addict’s response to the junky’s response, if he conflates objects that cause experiences with the question of drug use possessing moral weight. Wallace devotes large portions of *Infinite Jest* to the strategies and rituals developed in AA that emphasize the centrality of the substance to the addict’s identity. Yet these scenes highlight the effect of the rituals, and often counterpose effect and meaning. As Freudenthal makes clear in her invocation of the anti-interior identity, even when these rituals involve the saying of words, these words are about materiality rather than meaning: the point is the saying rather than what is being said. For instance, when the addict stands up in an AA meeting and says, “My name is Don and I’m an addict,” Don’s physical location is as important as the specific claim to addiction. If Don only ever said, “My name is Don and I’m an addict” to himself in an empty room, his words would hold little value. Likewise, Don standing up in an AA meeting and saying, “My name is Don and I’m an addict, but my interpretation of the word ‘addiction’ might be a little different than yours,” would also prove problematic, not because they would be offended that Don has a different interpretation (as we have already seen, one hears all sorts of interpretations of the word addiction in the Ennet House), but because Don would be bringing interpretation into it at all, when AA is simply interested in its participants telling stories that follow the same narrative pattern. Don can move from junky to addict if, in the correct locations using predetermined signifiers, he repeatedly acknowledges the agency and power of the substance. If he does so, he will never go back to being a junky (even if he

relapses). The point of the addict identity is not to rid oneself of this identity but to retain it, to enact the identity by proclaiming it.

To return briefly to Holland's analysis, she argues that it is a failure of the novel that it does not imagine enduring pain and then moving from infantile narcissism into adulthood. But Wallace imagines moving from the junky identity to the addict identity, and imagines it in very similar terms: those in AA—unlike the customers of the methadone clinic—move from the former to the latter precisely because they are willing to endure the pain of sobriety, and have created norms and rituals oriented around helping the addict endure. Given that the goal is endurance, rather than progress, what one thinks or believes (one's particular interpretation of the word "addiction," for instance) is irrelevant. We can see this distinction clearly in a scene where Gately is having his patience tried by Geoffrey Day over Day's dislike of AA slogans. As was hinted at earlier, Day's main problem is his scholarliness. Wallace writes that he "taught something horseshit sounding like social historicity or historical sociality at some jr. college up the Expressway in Medford and came in saying on his Intake he also manned the helm of a Scholarly Quarterly."³¹⁸ Reiterating the point we see in the above passage, Wallace writes, "It's the newcomers with some education that are the worst, according to Gene M. They identify their whole selves with their head, and the Disease makes its command headquarters in the head."³¹⁹ These "newcomers with some education" have a more difficult time with recovery, precisely because they recoil from AA slogans and clichés. They pay too much attention to the signifying content of the cliché (to what is said) instead of recognizing that phrases such as "I Didn't Know That I Didn't Know," "Ask For Help," "Turn It Over," and "Keep Coming" are not meant to be

³¹⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 272.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

thought about, discussed, or debated—they are meant to be experienced; they are meant to help one endure.

Like other people who place too much stock in thinking, Day is in danger of not letting himself experience the effect of these slogans that exists in spite of the fact that they possess very little meaning. Gately makes this clear when he thinks through why these clichés are helpful: “even if they are just clichés, clichés are (a) soothing, and (b) remind you of common sense, and (c) license the universal assent that drowns out silence; and (4) silence is deadly...if you’ve got the Disease. Gene M. says you can spell the Disease *DIS-EASE*, which sums the basic situation up nicely.”³²⁰ This list reveals that clichés are not intended to provide new knowledge, or to say anything at all. For both (a) and (c), the point is to induce an embodied reaction that renders the mind irrelevant, by either “soothing” you or eliciting a vocalized assent. For (b), the mind is engaged, but barely: to be reminded of common sense is to bring to mind something you already know or believe; it is not to ask you to consider something you have not thought about before. The function of clichés, then, is in direct opposition to critical thinking, to the type of work one would do if one “manned the helm of a Scholarly Quarterly,” which is also to say, in direct opposition to meaning making or interpretation. In contrast to Day’s earlier reaction to learning about the dis-ease, Gately models the appropriate response to the non-signifying advice given in AA when he accepts the disease spelled dis-ease without issuing an objection or applying critical thinking.

When Gately does struggle with AA advice, he struggles with an issue where meaning is harder for him to ignore: that he must turn his “Diseased will over to the direction and love of

³²⁰ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 278.

‘God as you understand Him.’”³²¹ Though Gately “still as yet [has] no real solid understanding of a Higher Power,” he nevertheless

takes one of AA’s very rare specific suggestions and hits the knees in the A.M. and asks for Help and then hits the knees again at bedtime and says Thank You, whether he believes he’s talking to Anything/-body or not, and he somehow gets through the day clean. This, after ten months of ear-smoking concentration and reflection, is still all he feels like he “understands” about the “God angle.” Publicly, in front of a very tough and hard-ass-looking AA crowd, he sort of simultaneously confesses and complains that he feels like a rat that’s learned one route in a maze to the cheese and travels that route in a ratty-type fashion and whatnot. W/ the God thing being the cheese in the metaphor. Gately still feels like he has no access to the Big spiritual Picture. He feels about the ritualistic daily *Please* and *Thank You* prayers rather like a hitter that’s on a hitting streak and doesn’t change his jock or socks or pre-game routine for as long as he’s on the streak. W/sobriety being the hitting streak and whatnot, he explains.³²²

Usually good at accepting AA bromides at face value, Gately struggles with whether or not he should take belief in God literally. When he requests help from God or says thank you to God, do these words have *meaning*? Do they suggest a particular entity helping him and receiving his thanks? What makes Gately the novel’s hero, and what differentiates him from Day, is that Gately goes through the motions even when he feels an acute lack of understanding. Gately never comes any closer to belief in God, but Gately does begin to feel he “understands” something about the “God angle.” What he “understands” is that he has dropped to his knees twice a day since he has been in recovery, and while doing so he has remained sober. Gately demonstrates the, for AA, exemplary ability to replace a question of meaning or truth (Does God exist?) with an insight about cause and effect (the experience of praying has caused him to remain sober). Wallace uses “rat” as a metaphor for both Gately—the novel’s exemplary addict—and the methadone junkies. However, Wallace describes the junkies as “hyper-conditioned rats” in that they come back day-after-day to the methadone clinic. Wallace depicts

³²¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 443.

³²² *Ibid.*

Gately, on the other hand, as “a rat that’s learned one route in a maze to the cheese.” Gately has learned what works from experience. After traveling various routes through the maze, he has found one that leads to sustenance. Gately still “travels that route in a ratty-type fashion”; he cannot conceptualize or interpret why when he moves his body in certain ways, turning certain corners, he ends up at the cheese. He simply knows he arrives there.

In Wallace’s telling, AA does not help the addict escape the influence of the substance, but teaches the addict to adopt habits of body and mind that soothe the pain, even as addiction persists. Though the pain will seem insurmountable, and even as time seems to stand still, Wallace provides examples of enduring it. The clearest depiction of what this coping can look like comes near the end of the novel when Gately, after taking heroic action to save the lives of some residents at the Ennet House, receives multiple gunshot wounds. In the intensive care unit at the hospital, Gately is unable to speak, but he manages to inform his doctors not to give him narcotics for the pain. (He believes receiving this medication would trigger a relapse of his narcotics addiction.) Suffering intense physical pain, Gately has an epiphany:

No one single instant of it was unendurable. Here was a second right here: he endured it. What was unendurable-with was the thought of all the instants all lined up and stretching ahead, glittering. And the projected future fear...It’s too much to think about. To abide there. But none of it’s as of now real. What’s real is the tube and the Noxzema and pain. All this could be done just like the Old Cold Bird. He could just hunker down in the space between each heartbeat and make each heartbeat a wall and live in there. Not let his head look over. What’s unendurable is what his own head could make of it all. What his head could report to him, looking over and ahead and reporting. But he could choose not to listen; he could treat his head like...clueless noise. He hadn’t quite gotten this before now, how it wasn’t just the matter of riding out the cravings for a Substance: everything unendurable was in the head, was the head not Abiding in the Present but hopping the wall and doing a recon and then returning with unendurable news you then somehow believed.”³²³

³²³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 860-861.

Without recourse to the bodily rituals or community of other addicts, Gately must take what he has learned and apply it in the most unfavorable circumstances imaginable. Gately feels crushing physical pain. The doctors have recommended that he take narcotics and find his refusal to do so irrational. Within these circumstances, Gately realizes that the physical pain is only “unendurable” when paired with certain types of thinking: specifically, meaning making and projecting himself into the future. His “head” tries to analyze the situation or “make” something “of it all,” by “looking over and ahead and reporting.” When his head tries to project him into the future, he will think about how long he must exist with this staggering pain, and his need for bodily relief will grow more powerful, leaving him vulnerable to the doctor’s suggestion that he accept the narcotics. Gately is experiencing a heightened version of the AA cliché to take it “one day at a time,” except he must deal not with days in this instance but with individual seconds. As Gately himself puts it, AA clichés may sound trite, but to “live them” is difficult. We can see why in this example. The ability to project ourselves into the future is a necessary part of living. If we were never to make plans or think about the future, we would find ourselves one day without food or shelter. However, in a moment of overwhelming pain, future thoughts become unbearable, because one projects the pain into the future; one cannot imagine what it will feel like without the pain. Thus, if the addict, while intensely craving the substance, starts to think about how she cannot have a drink right now and also will not be able to have a drink tomorrow and the next day, and starts to add these days up until they become years, she might just go ahead and have a drink. And Gately, if he starts adding up all the seconds in which he will experience this pain, might acquiesce to the narcotics. What we have to do in these moments, according to Wallace, is turn off this function of the brain, and treat our heads like “clueless noise.”

The critics who see the novel as providing a prescription to our cultural and political ailments of irony and excess consumerism typically point to this scene as an allegory for how to live under late capitalism.³²⁴ Yet Wallace's attempt to provide a prescription that focuses entirely on effect and what will prove effective regardless of meaning (i.e. praying even if one does not believe that God exists) cannot also suggest a distinction between addict and junky, and certainly cannot privilege the former over the latter. If the question is simply one of what works, what causes one not to feel the dis-ease, certainly methadone seems as dependable as the intense devotion to AA practices that Wallace describes. The methadone junkies do need to take methadone every day, which is susceptible to a variety of threats. But, after describing how the methadone junkies riot when they think the clinic is closed, Wallace also describes what happens to a friend of Gately's, referred to as the "methedrine addict," who helps him pull the prank. Gately and the methedrine addict soon get caught because the methedrine addict laughs so hard that she drops the pair of binoculars they are using to observe the chaos. They are placed on probation in the Ennet House. Soon the methedrine addict starts using again and is "given the old administrative boot" from the Ennet House.³²⁵ This outcome is common at the Ennet House: "over a quarter of incoming Ennet House residents get discharged for a dirty Urine within their first thirty days."³²⁶ She ends up on the streets, is soon arrested, and then "found one morning in her bunk with a kitchen-rigged shiv protruding from her privates and another in her neck."³²⁷ Gately's counselor Gene M. invites "him to see the methedrine addict's demise as a clear case of There But For the Grace of God Goeth D.W. Gately."³²⁸ This scene raises the question: if no

³²⁴ See Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness*, 75-76. See Freudenthal, "Anti-Interiority," 206.

³²⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 195.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*

³²⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 195-196.

³²⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 196.

meaning or value exists beyond effect (or effectiveness), then what serves as the basis for Wallace moral preference for AA over the methadone clinic? If we are concerned with effect, should we not prefer the methadone clinic, since it most likely would have kept the methedrine addict out of prison and alive, unlike the Ennet House?

Freudenthal emphasizes the refusal of interpretation or belief as what proves nourishing and productive. She writes, “Gately fights addiction by replacing his compulsive drug use with this kind of repetitive, performative, bodily ritual. He doesn’t use talk therapy, he doesn’t articulate how he feels, he cannot intellectualize how or why it works.”³²⁹ In contrast to Holland, who finds all recursive activity a sign of pathological narcissism from which one should escape, Freudenthal argues that Wallace opposes the recursivity of addiction with the recursivity of his “performative” rituals. In other words, Wallace “models recovery” *from within* an ontologically altered world.³³⁰ In finding Gately an example of how we should live without relying on articulation or critical thinking, Freudenthal aligns with scholars of “post-critique,” such as Mitchum Huehls, who in *After Critique: Twenty-First-Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age*, argues for an “ontological form of meaning-making,” wherein one inhabits an ontologically altered, neoliberal world in order to “reconfigure the positions, relations, and connections that it establishes among the beings and objects of the world,” instead of “pointing to and revealing what’s wrong with neoliberalism (that would be the critical approach that relies on representation to show us the world in a specific way).”³³¹ Freudenthal and Huehls premise their work on the fact of irrevocable change that has taken place in the world. Because of these changes in political

³²⁹ Freudenthal, “Anti-Interiority,” 192.

³³⁰ Freudenthal, “Anti-Interiority,” 206.

³³¹ Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique: Twenty-First-Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2016), xii.

economy or technology, we are new beings that, for one reason or another, do not have recourse to interiority or representation as a way of instigating change. As Wallace shows, from within this world one can instead put one's body in various positions, and make connections with others through addiction stories that, because an effect of the substance, all follow the same pattern. (Huehls characterizes connection of this sort as deriving "value from the configuration and interrelation of beings, human or otherwise."³³²)

Yet by including the methadone junkies in his fictional world, Wallace inadvertently illustrates that within these attempts to describe anti-interior or ontological meaning making are ascriptions of moral preference that go beyond causal effect. If the issue truly is one of ontology and affect, rather than one of morality, why is methadone not the solution to the problem Wallace describes? If the problem truly is the feeling of dis-ease that needs no recourse to ideas, interpretations, or referentiality, and thus does not require us to believe anything in particular, why not simply ingest the methadone and no longer have that bad feeling? Wallace ascribes value to the endurance of pain and suffering—which he opposes to the quick fixes of consumerism—but it is unclear what this value consists of, considered in purely affective terms. Rather than the turn to affect allowing Wallace to escape normative prescription, he instead privileges values (for instance, sobriety over medication-assisted treatment) that are unexplainable in the terms of affect.

We find analogous unacknowledged ascriptions of value when Freudenthal slips repeatedly into evaluative language that requires the sort of "intellectualize[d]" articulation that her article rejects.³³³ Her argument is that anti-interiority has a politically progressive function; it

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Freudenthal, "Anti-Interiority," 192.

“works against oppressive political, economic, and social forces” and “destructive social orders.” Yet why are these forces oppressive and destructive? She argues that anti-interiority accomplishes this political work “not in the ideal realm of interiority, with its normative modes of agency and its metaphysical connotations,” yet she cannot describe how it functions without using normative language, such as oppressive and destructive.³³⁴ Huehls does something similar in *After Critique* when he uses Colson Whitehead’s zombie novel *Zone One*—at the end of which the protagonist, Mark Spitz, decides to stop resisting the zombies and instead joins them—as doing anti-capitalist work without recourse to ideological engagement: “Instead of critiquing and resisting, instead of imagining alternatives external to neoliberal totality, *After Critique* joins Mark Spitz in saying, ‘Fuck it,’ let’s see what happens when we swim with the zombies.”³³⁵ *Zone One* serves as Huehls’s example because the zombies are mindless yet in effect tear down the neoliberal world in which the novel is set. But recognizing the value in this destruction of capitalism—or in the opposing of destructive social forces—requires a non-zombie who, for already existing ideological reasons, opposes capitalism and knows which social forces count as destructive and which do not. True complicity is not a zombie *tearing down* the neoliberal world. It is the investment banker working to entrench that world. It is the consumer who exists within late capitalism by merely continuing to consume.

What I believe Wallace finds intolerable about the methadone junkies is the very fact that, in their treatment of drugs as merely causal, they make drugs insignificant. If the disease is manageable without much attention or effort (as the methadone junkies themselves indicate), then the question of how to spend one’s time is still open. In contrast, at the Ennet House, all

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Huehls, *After Critique*, x.

activities that involve an interest in or attention to anything besides addiction, are described as potentially dangerous: “That gambling can be an abusable escape, too, and work, shopping, and shoplifting, and sex, and abstention, and masturbation, and food, and exercise, and meditation/prayer.”³³⁶ Wallace continues this list in a footnote:

Not to mention, according to some hard-line schools of 12-Step thought, yoga, reading, politics, gum-chewing, crossword puzzles, solitaire, romantic intrigue, charity work, political activism, N.R.A. membership, music, art, cleaning, plastic surgery...the development of hard-line schools of 12-Step thought, ad darn near infinitum, including 12-Step fellowships themselves, such that quiet tales sometimes go around the Boston AA community of certain incredibly advanced and hard-line recovering persons who have pared away potential escape after potential escape until finally, as the stories go, they end up sitting in a bare chair, nude, in an unfurnished room, not moving but also not sleeping or meditating or abstracting, too advanced to stomach the thought of the potential emotional escape of doing anything whatsoever, and just end up sitting there completely motion-and escape-less until a long time later all that’s found in the empty chair is a very fine dusting of off-white ashy stuff that you can wipe away completely with like one damp paper towel.³³⁷

On the one hand, this line of thought seems intentionally ridiculous (signaled with the phrase “ad darn near infinitum”), yet we get precisely a version of this paring away of all potential escapist thought with Gately in the hospital. In that scene, Wallace makes any potential escape impossible for Gately. In the hospital, he must confront the substance directly; he has no opportunity to become distracted. But what is the value of this direct confrontation? If we cannot make claims based on judgment or morality (i.e. sobriety is morally superior to medication-assisted treatment), because these would require intellectual commitments and beliefs, why should we value direct confrontation with the substance over methadone treatment, or simply busying oneself with a different practical identity (thus indulging in the sort of “escapes” mentioned above) until enough time passes that the pain from the dis-ease lessens in severity?

³³⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 202.

³³⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 998; n. 70.

Wallace's insistence on immersion within the confines of the dis-ease means that what he can represent reaches certain limits. For instance, because the junkies temporarily have the pain of the dis-ease removed, Wallace cannot provide a vision of what the junky might do after a dose of methadone, when "peaceful, if a bit glazed, but anyway in general just way better put-together than when they arrived." Because of Wallace's ontological and society-wide view of the dis-ease, even sober characters must orient their lives around, or against, the substance. But the junky who takes methadone is temporarily relieved of the dis-ease, thus has no need to think about the substance until the next morning. In this span of time, the junky can simply get on with every aspect of life that does not involve addiction, yet it is these non-pathological aspects of life that Wallace cannot represent. (The novel cannot follow the junky away from the clinic.) Though the junkies have not escaped recursivity—they will need to be back in the same place tomorrow morning—what might be done with the 23 hours of the day they do not spend at the methadone clinic? Might the junky, during this time, persuade other people of a political agenda which would make methadone freely and consistently available to all, or make corporate-advertising illegal? But Wallace has no answer for, and thus cannot represent, how one should spend one's time, if not in addiction or in the fighting of addiction. The novel cannot follow the methadone junkies away from the clinic, and the novel imagines Gately's heroism in the all-encompassing pain of saying no, rather than in what he will do with his life when released from the hospital.

CHAPTER FOUR

Horror in the Thrall or Horror in the Zeitgeist?

In her critically acclaimed, bestselling memoir *The Recovering: Intoxication and Its Aftermath* (2018), Leslie Jamison lists several popular stories associated with addiction, as well as one that is rarely told:

“addiction” has always been two things at once: a set of disrupted neurotransmitters and a series of stories we’ve told about disruption. Addiction becomes a contagious epidemic, a willful abnegation of civic duty, a valiant rebellion against the social order, or the noble outcry of a tortured soul. It depends on who is doing the telling, and the using. Columbia University neuroscientist Carl Hart writes about the drug story that *hasn’t* gotten much airtime, the “not particularly exciting nonaddiction story that never gets told,” which—as Hart reminds us—is the experience of most drug users. Yet addiction has been presented as both inevitable and unilaterally devastating in order to serve various social agendas—most notably, the War on Drugs.³³⁸

Jamison’s argument is similar to the one I have made throughout this dissertation: narratives that ascribe moral and political meaning to intoxication have continued to shape the American cultural understanding of drug use throughout the neoliberal era. I have written about drug use as “contagious epidemic,” which underlies the notion that drugs will destroy entire communities, found in public statements by Richard Nixon and Nancy Reagan, the journalism and fiction of the anti-imperialist New Left, and the minimalist fiction of Bret Easton Ellis. As I write about in Chapter One, the same anti-imperialist New Left found in drugs like LSD and marijuana the liberatory potential to symbolize and spread “valiant rebellion against the social order.” Jamison

³³⁸ Leslie Jamison, *The Recovering: Intoxication and Its Aftermath* (Little, Brown and Company, 2018), 62.

writes that these narratives depend on “who is doing the telling, and the using,” but this obscures the way that writers otherwise dissimilar in their personal relationship to drugs and in their political aims have characterized drug use as a normative moral or political matter.

Recognizing the arbitrariness and contingency of the American understanding of intoxication, Jamison’s book attempts to go beyond simply recounting her own addiction story, in order to interrogate these stories about disrupted neurotransmitters. For instance, Jamison unpacks and dismantles the “dreamlike tales of dysfunction” mythologized in the inebriated romanticism of writers such as Raymond Carver, John Cheever, John Berryman, and Denis Johnson, which often leads to the belief that one needs an exceptional (often exceptionally depraved) experience in order to write about addiction.³³⁹ Combining her personal narrative with her cultural analysis, Jamison narrates how she falls under the sway of this myth, followed by the slow and painful recognition that she does not need sensational dysfunction to write well or find creative inspiration. She interrogates a diverse range of popular narratives about addiction and, in order to complicate these narratives, provides counterstories taken not only from her own life but from literature, history, sociology, and journalism. Yet one story is notably missing: the non-addiction story.

Jamison argues—in the passage quoted above—that an exclusive focus on addiction stories does not represent most people’s experience with intoxicants, and even perpetuates disastrous social policies like the War on Drugs, yet she refuses to tell non-addiction stories. Her memoir is thus an apt place to turn in order to interrogate the tendency in contemporary American literature—especially within the genre of the memoir, which exploded in popularity

³³⁹ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 17. She often quotes from Jack London’s *John Barleycorn* (1913), which describes how drunkenness bestows on some the “white light of alcohol,” allowing the drinker to see “through all illusions.” Quoted in Jamison, *The Recovering*, 18.

during the neoliberal era—to think about drug use first and foremost as an issue of addiction, which, as we will see, is typically described as both disease and identity. Though at times described as related to genetics, in Jamison’s text we more often see addiction function as a normative identity in the way it does for Wallace: as an identity one *should* take on and enact, even in a text careful to qualify any normative claim. Of course, *The Recovering* is a memoir, not a work of dystopian fiction, so Jamison cannot claim that the addict identity is the solution to contemporary social issues in the way Wallace does. Yet Jamison makes the formal decision to pair the stories she tells—which always foreground addiction—with a large-scale history and cultural analysis of intoxication, and, in doing so, depicts the addict identity as a moral response to intoxication.

To begin, I would like to clarify what I understand a non-addiction story to be. After all, contemporary literature often features characters going to bars, smoking joints, even snorting cocaine without developing addictions. What then does Jamison mean when she writes, “addiction has been presented as both inevitable and unilaterally devastating”? Though left implicit in her statement, I believe the type of non-addiction story to which Jamison refers is one that defies the reader’s expectations about addiction and challenges the notion of addiction as a disease/identity. These often-unconscious expectations, and the difficulty in defying these expectations, result from the disease model providing the conceptual grounding for the main non-reactionary understanding of addiction in America since the mid-twentieth century. The disease model owes much of its current prominence to the role it plays in Alcoholic’s Anonymous (AA), which, in the *Big Book*, calls alcoholism “an ‘allergy’ afflicting only certain ‘types’ of bodies,” and “a progressive illness,” from which alcoholics only “get worse, never

better.”³⁴⁰ Beyond AA, government institutions responsible for conducting research and informing the public about drug-related issues, such as the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), have endorsed the disease model. In 1999, while director of the NIDA, Alan I. Leshner published an influential article for *Science* titled “Addiction is a Brain Disease—And It Matters.”³⁴¹ The NIDA partnered with *HBO* in 2007 to distribute a documentary titled *Addiction*, which was “aimed at helping Americans understand addiction as a treatable brain disease.”³⁴² Similarly, in 2018 *PBS* began providing schools and community organizations with free copies of their documentary, also titled *Addiction*, about how “drugs of abuse alter the brain and drive behavior.”³⁴³

It is worth examining Leshner’s influential article in order to understand some of the conceptual underpinnings of the disease model. It is beyond the disciplinary scope of this chapter to scrutinize Leshner’s central piece of scientific evidence, that “addiction comes about through an array of neuroadaptive changes and the laying down and strengthening of new memory connections in various circuits in the brain,” and whether or to what extent this distinguishes addiction from the other habits that “rewire” the brain.³⁴⁴ More pertinent is a simile Leshner uses

³⁴⁰ Quoted in Robyn Warhol, “The Rhetoric of Addiction: From Victorian Novels to AA,” in *High Anxieties: Cultural Studies in Addiction* (U of California P, 2002), 99. I want to acknowledge that many people see AA as a positive influence in their life, and what I write is not intended to undermine any process or institution that has helped make one feel more in control and less dependent on a substance. However, as I point out, there are theoretical limitations to the disease model, and I thus want to question the almost-exclusive hold that the AA-influenced disease model has had on narratives of addiction.

³⁴¹ Alan I. Leshner, “Addiction Is a Brain Disease, and It Matters,” *Science* 278, no. 5335 (October 3, 1997): 45–47, <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1126/science.278.5335.45>.

³⁴² “HBO Addiction Project,” March 16, 2007, <https://www.drugabuse.gov/news-events/public-education-projects/hbo-addiction-project>.

³⁴³ “Addiction,” NOVA: Addiction, accessed January 3, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/education/addiction/>.

³⁴⁴ Leshner, “Addiction Is a Brain Disease,” *Issues in Science and Technology* 17, no. 3 (2001): 75. (For this analysis, I am using a slightly longer version of Leshner’s article.) The question

to describe the addicted brain: “It is as if drugs have highjacked the brain’s natural motivational control circuits, resulting in drug use becoming the sole, or at least the top, motivational priority for the individual.”³⁴⁵ “Hijacked” has become a standard disease-addiction metaphor for the brain on drugs. Because addiction hijacks the brain, it logically follows that, according to Leshner, this “compulsive craving...overwhelms all other motivations,” and “is the root cause of the massive health and social problems associated with drug addiction.”³⁴⁶ Leshner makes clear—though he repeatedly notes that initial use of the drug is voluntary, so the individual maintains some responsibility for their use—that once addiction takes hold the user has virtually no control. Overwhelmed by the craving, the addict can see other human beings as nothing but a means to an end, which is why the “craving” “destroys...an individual’s functioning in the family and in society.”³⁴⁷ (We have seen an extended version of this portrayal with the teenagers in *Less Than Zero*.) We can see both the moral and political stakes of this supposedly scientific explanation of addiction: when the craving overwhelms the individual’s brain, she loses her ability to make moral decisions, given that she has an exclusive focus on the drug. Leshner goes on to claim that once addicted, the drug user can never return to a casual relationship with the drug. One cannot move “from user to addict, then back to occasional user, then back to addict,” because “once addicted, the individual has moved into a different state of being.”³⁴⁸ This claim, similar to AA’s understanding of addiction as a “progressive illness,” is one of the most influential to come out

would be what is the relationship between the various habits we try (and often fail) to alter and a “brain disease,” given that these other habits also coincide with “neuroadaptive changes.” Would it make sense to say, for instance, that how late one habitually sleeps, or whether or not one goes to the gym every day, is accurately described by the word “disease”?

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Leshner, “Addiction is a Brain Disease,” 76.

³⁴⁷ Leshner, “Addiction is a Brain Disease,” 75.

³⁴⁸ Leshner, “Addiction is a Brain Disease,” 76.

of disease-addiction discourse. One can mitigate the worst effects of the addiction disease, but can never be cured. When a person becomes an addict, she undergoes an ontological shift (moves “into a different state of being”).

To some extent, these efforts—from Leshner, AA/NA, PBS, etc.—admirably promote sympathy for drug users, harm reduction methods, and medication assistance, rather than criminalization. Yet critics have pointed out limitations of the disease model as a theory of addiction. Neuroscientist Carl Hart (who is quoted by Jamison above) argues that “virtually no data” exist to support the notion that “addiction is a disease of the brain, in the way that, for instance, Huntington’s or Parkinson’s are diseases of the brain.”³⁴⁹ Hart has conducted research that disputes Leshner’s claim that addiction “overwhelms all other motivations,” and found instead that people with addictions still possess the ability to weigh their desire for drugs with many other short and long-term desires.³⁵⁰ Influential drug researcher Maia Szalavitz also rebuts this view of addiction “hijacking” the brain: “Rarely, if ever, do people with addiction inject drugs in front of the police or in a court room: unlike those who have no self-control, they can clearly plan to obtain their drugs and make attempts to hide the addiction.”³⁵¹ Szalavitz points to the large gap between what we commonly see and what the rhetoric of addiction would lead us

³⁴⁹ Carl L. Hart, “Viewing Addiction as a Brain Disease Promotes Social Injustice,” *Nature Human Behavior* 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/doi:10.1038/s41562-017-0055>. That Jamison cites Hart while still using the disease model as her conceptual framework is representative of how the range of sources she uses are often in conflict with each other. As I will show, she rarely resolves these conflicts and oftentimes does not address the fact that a conflict exists.

³⁵⁰ Hart’s research looks at how users of crack cocaine responded when given the opportunity to choose between crack cocaine and what Hart calls an “alternative reinforcer,” which in this case was a small monetary award. He found that they often chose the money, demonstrating that they possessed the ability to weigh these competing desires with at least some amount of rationality. See Hart, *High Price*, 2.

³⁵¹ Maia Szalavitz, “Squaring the Circle: Addiction, Disease and Learning,” *Neuroethics* 10 (2017): 84, <https://doi.org/DOI.10.1007/s12152-016-9288-1>.

to believe. The very fact that people hide their drug use so as not to get caught implies a level of rational decision-making that belies the metaphor of a hijacked brain overwhelmed by craving. A final objection to the disease model is that, in contrast to the claim that addiction is a “progressive illness” that worsens over time (as it says in *The Big Book*), research indicates that the majority of people who at one time have an addiction will stop using the substance in question without treatment, usually before the age of 30.³⁵²

The influence of the disease model is evident in how drug use is often narrativized. Robyn Warhol convincingly argues that the disease model often leads to narratives of addiction that are either dysphoric (in which the protagonist does not reach sobriety and tragically dies) or euphoric (in which the protagonist does become sober and pledges to remain so, primarily through lifelong participation in AA, wherein she will retell the euphoric story over and over).³⁵³ According to Warhol, AA and proponents of the disease model do not allow addiction narratives that are “ambivalent, contingent, or conflicted.”³⁵⁴ Put slightly differently, the lack of these ambivalent narratives demonstrates the extent to which drug use gets represented in moral terms. As we will see, stories about certain types of drugs (such as heroin) are viewed as inherently dangerous if the user *does not* become addicted, or if this addiction does not conform to dysphoric or euphoric generic expectations.

³⁵² Psychologist G.M. Heyman writes, “The relevant research shows most of those who meet the American Psychiatric Association’s criteria for addiction quit using illegal drugs by about age 30, that they usually quit without professional help, and that the correlates of quitting include legal concerns, economic pressures, and the desire for respect, particularly from family members.” Heyman, “Addiction and Choice: Theory and New Data,” *Front. Psychiatry* 4, no. 31 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2013.00031>. This is not to say that people should not seek out treatment for addiction. I only want to point out that the “progressive illness” thesis is disputed.

³⁵³ Warhol, “The Rhetoric of Addiction,” 98.

³⁵⁴ Warhol, “The Rhetoric of Addiction,” 108.

Nowhere has the dysphoric and euphoric addiction narrative been more prevalent than in the late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century memoir. In *Memoir: A History*, Ben Yagoda notes that in the 1970s addiction memoirs—and other memoirs that baldly “chronicled dysfunction”—replaced the middle-class “normative memoir,” which was hugely popular in the mid-twentieth century.³⁵⁵ However, the addiction memoir has continued to play a similarly normative role in the culture: if dysphoric, it shows a life the “normal” person should be at pains to avoid, and, if euphoric, provides a model of how to overcome addiction and get “back” to normal. A number of critics have explicated why the addiction memoir, in particular, serves this normative function in the neoliberal era. Megan Brown argues that the addiction memoir teaches us how to care for our mental and emotional health in a world where, because of neoliberal policies, public services have been stripped away. According to Brown, the addiction memoir illustrates “possibilities for reentering the realm of the normal, the productive, [and] the well-managed,” but does so in a way that reinforces the privatization of public goods, rather than interrogating these values or imagining systemic change.³⁵⁶ Daniel Worden addresses the same set of concerns about neoliberalism, but in doing so tries to recoup the memoir as a productive contemporary genre, by demonstrating how some memoirists have used the form to reject these concerns with neoliberalism. In his reading of Mary Karr’s *Lit*, Worden argues that for Karr “the personal is balanced with the structural.” In her ability “to survey not just the personal but the structural, and find a web of determining relations between the two,” Karr demonstrates the way memoir can

³⁵⁵ Ben Yagoda, *Memoir: A History* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), 228.

³⁵⁶ Megan C. Brown, “Learning to Live Again: Contemporary US Memoir as Biopolitical Self-Care Guide,” *Biography* 36, no. 2 (2013): 360, <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2013.0015>. For other notable accounts that broadly align with this argument see Melissa Bender, “Dysfunctional Family Values: United States Memoir in the Neoliberal Age,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 51, no. 2, 2018: 535, and Leigh Gilmore, “American Neoconfessional: Memoir, Self-Help, and Redemption,” *Biography* 33, no. 4 (2010): 658, <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2010.1006>.

“imagine through the very focal point of neoliberal culture, the isolated individual, a way of being that would create new networks and patterns that run counter to the accelerated debt, labor, and consumption normalized today as successful life.”³⁵⁷ I agree with Worden that there is nothing about the addiction memoir’s focus on an individual life that closes off the possibility of the writer imagining something outside of, or challenging, normative life under neoliberalism. However, I will argue that the focus on the memoir’s relationship to neoliberal individualism misses the more pernicious effect of the addiction-memoir genre: not that it directs people to care for themselves rather than to seek professional care, but that the notion of “addiction” that it upholds is one that views drug use as a primarily moral issue, even when using seemingly medical language. By allowing little room for ambiguity, by not allowing narratives that defy our expectations of what addiction is or how it works, addiction memoirs often project addiction as, in Jamison’s words, an “inevitable and unilaterally devastating” response to intoxication.

Jamison’s *The Recovering* serves as a representative example of the continued influence of the disease model on the addiction-memoir genre. At various points in the book, Jamison worries about writing an addiction memoir, given the glut of the genre. She sits down and searches the phrase “just another addiction memoir” on Google, which “yields several pages of results, mostly blurbs insisting that a certain book isn’t ‘just another addiction memoir.’”³⁵⁸ She decides to push back on this “cynical take on interchangeability” and take issue with “the accusation of sameness,” deciding that “a story’s sameness is precisely why it should be told. Your story is only useful because others have lived it and will live it again.”³⁵⁹ This embrace of

³⁵⁷ Daniel Worden, “Memoir,” in *American Literature in Transition: 2000-2010*, ed. Rachel Greenwald Smith (New York: Cambridge UP, 2018), 125 and 132.

³⁵⁸ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 310.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

“sameness” functions as a rejection of the neoliberal individualism that the critics of the memoir point out, and leads to her ambitious formal decisions to make *The Recovering* a hybrid work of sociological, historical, and literary scholarship, personal narrative, and journalistic investigation, that foregrounds a large number of stories of people in recovery.³⁶⁰ Resonant with her metaphor of a chorus of recovery, these stories share a powerful similarity: the characters in them will possess the addiction disease/identity for life. Thus, while *The Recovering* can address the problems with neoliberalism that Brown, Bender, Gilmore, and Worden point out, and gesture toward the “structural” and not just the individual, it also continues the project of thinking about drug use in normative terms, and provides story-after-story in which intoxication overpowers the agency of the user and lasts for life.

Ann Marlowe, on the other hand, deviates from the story in *How to Stop Time: Heroin from A to Z* (1999), a memoir that, though well received at the time of publication, has received little scholarly attention. Marlowe’s book provides an alternative account of how memoir can substantively reevaluate our understandings of drug use and addiction. Marlowe uses experiments with form—the book is told alphabetically rather than chronologically—in order to illuminate the psychological predisposition toward nostalgia, which she believes has led to her

³⁶⁰ Reviewers have noted the book’s ambition. In *GQ*, Jamie Green notes how Jamison has “expanded her ambition” and composed “a beautiful behemoth, the kind you only get to write with the blank check of literary success.” Jamie Green, “Leslie Jamison Wants You to Rethink Your Drunk Literary Heroes,” *GQ* (blog), April 2, 2018. In *The Atlantic*, Sophie Gilbert writes, “*The Recovering* is a sprawling, compelling, fiercely ambitious book that considers excess with full control,” and is “the most significant new addition to the canon” of literature about alcoholism “in more than a decade.” Sophie Gilbert, “Writing and Alcohol: A Reckoning,” *The Atlantic*, April 6, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/04/leslie-jamison-the-recovering-review/557306/>. When critics speak about ambition, they refer—in addition to the size of the book, which is over 450 pages—to the book’s incorporation of literary scholarship, sociology, and history.

addiction. Jamison also notes elements of her psychology that made her susceptible to addiction (chapters are titled after a number of these: “Abandon,” “Blame,” “Lack,” “Shame,” etc.), yet Marlowe follows the logic of this self-investigation into ambiguous and controversial territory. For instance, her belief that nostalgia—always looking backwards—underwrites her addiction leads her to argue that the AA/NA program exacerbates rather than helps addiction, since AA/NA forces the participant to retell her story over and over. Marlowe shows how the stifling of dissent from the normative dysphoric/euphoric narrative encourages such a reductive understanding of the different ways people can relate to intoxicants.

I. Jamison and the Thrall

In the chapter “Chorus,” Jamison provides a journalistic account of the Seneca House in Maryland. Her Whitmanesque catalogue of the different characters she interviews from the rehab reveals her delight in the Seneca House’s diversity. She writes that the Seneca House was “full of ambassadors and bikers, Navy guys and diplomats’ wives, long-distance truckers and oil executives, housewives with Valium habits; a Navy commander, a dentist, a Rhode Island gigolo, and an elderly hypochondriac who wore his shirt unbuttoned to the waist; all swapping stories of grit and regret.”³⁶¹ Jamison highlights their particular identities, quirks, and circumstances, yet ultimately renders these differences mute with her introduction of each person: “His name is Sawyer, and he’s an alcoholic”; “Her name is Gwen, and she’s an alcoholic”; “His name is Marcus, and he’s an alcoholic and an addict”; etc.³⁶² Robyn Warhol points out that, when using this AA introduction, a person adopts “a specific subject position, an

³⁶¹ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 319.

³⁶² Jamison, *The Recovering*, 320, 330, 331.

identity ascribed to him by AA rhetoric,” and this identity entails that “because of who the alcoholic is, drinking is ‘not an option,’ no matter how the drinker might seek to change his or her behavior.”³⁶³ In other words, no changes in behavior, habits, social environment, or material circumstances can alter one’s identity as an alcoholic or addict. These introductions to Sawyer, Gwen, and Marcus are not quotations; they are written by Jamison in the third person, indicating that the text itself confers this ascription of identity to each person. For Jamison, then, the fact that each story follows a similar trajectory—a descent into addiction, struggle, relapse, and a euphoric ending—is not a defect; it is the point. If a person possesses the addict identity/disease, their story cannot follow a trajectory other than a dysphoric or euphoric one. For the alcoholic/drug addict, addiction must last for life.

Admittedly, my use of categorical terms (“cannot” and “must”) seems at odds with Jamison’s frequent celebration of narrative “messiness.” For instance, Jamison praises Lee Stringer’s memoir *Grand Central Winter* for “its willingness to let recovery be messy.”³⁶⁴ She quotes from *Beautiful Boy*, David Sheff’s bestselling memoir about his son’s heroin addiction, in which he writes, “Sometimes I tire of the convoluted, messy truth.”³⁶⁵ Jamison argues that embracing this messiness is “how humility gets built into hope.”³⁶⁶ Jamison has a strong belief in telling diverse, messy stories as a balm to all sorts of ailments. Jamison admits that her wide range of material spanning not only different stories from different perspectives but different methodologies and genres might contain contradictions, but she believes that this messiness can be generative. At one point, Jamison quotes a review of Malcolm Lowry’s novel about addiction,

³⁶³ Warhol, “The Rhetoric of Addiction,” 99.

³⁶⁴ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 252.

³⁶⁵ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 275.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Under the Volcano, which called it “an anthology held together by earnestness.”³⁶⁷ She then writes, “an anthology held together by earnestness? It’s one of the most apt descriptions of a recovery meeting—its particular beauty—that I’ve ever heard.”³⁶⁸ This passage also works as a statement of purpose. It is clear that she hopes her book will possess this particular beauty—a beauty wherein the range of stories might threaten narrative stability, where the project might be in danger of falling apart, but where the messiness and earnestness will come together to create something transcendent and generative.

However, Jamison’s frequent invocation of messiness and her (delighted) worry about the large number of stories holding together overstates the book’s conceptual complexity. Certain stories Jamison tells do point to a “messy” understanding of, for instance, the relationship between intoxication and addiction, but in these moments Jamison works to elide or soften the evident ambiguity. We can see how Jamison downplays moments of true tension when she writes about Bill Wilson, one of AA’s founders. Wilson believed that a spiritual experience was necessary to help people stay sober, but recognized that this type of experience was hard to generate from the outside. In 1957, Wilson experimented repeatedly with one method of creating spiritual experiences for even the most cynical: LSD. Jamison spends a few paragraphs on this part of Wilson’s story, ultimately explaining that though “most AAs were violently opposed to his experimenting with a mind-altering substance,” she understands “Wilson’s fascination with acid” as “an organic extension of his commitment to one of the core principles of AA recovery: the elimination of the ego, that barrier between a self and everything beyond it.”³⁶⁹ Jamison here demonstrates her characteristic empathy. (She has written repeatedly about the importance of

³⁶⁷ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 295.

³⁶⁸ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 296.

³⁶⁹ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 219.

empathy in her nonfiction work, including in her breakout book of essays *The Empathy Exams* (2014) and in her recent collection *Make It Burn, Make It Scream* (2019)). Other people in recovery might view Wilson's use of LSD suspiciously, but she does not: she can understand it in the context of his life; she can understand why he might have made the decisions he did. She signals her willingness to let uncomfortable ideas or parts of stories exist. Jamison briefly describes other attempts by Wilson to eliminate the ego, such as automatic writing (or "spook sessions," as he called them), and also mentions his inability to quit smoking cigarettes. She then makes a final reference to his LSD use before concluding her section on Wilson: "Wilson's spook sessions and his acid trips and his nicotine addiction aren't the parts of his story that sit most comfortably inside his legend, but for me they don't undermine the story of his sobriety they humanize it. They speak to the raggedness of his recovery, or anyone's—the ways it might always yearn for something more."³⁷⁰ Again, Jamison demonstrates that she can understand Wilson's point of view. Yet through her use of conspicuous empathy, Jamison refuses to engage with the tricky question of whether someone who possesses the addict-identity can continue to take acid, and whether or not this might qualify or change how we understand addiction itself. Through explicit empathizing, Jamison both highlights that she does not take Wilson's view of the positive effects of LSD use seriously, yet also does not put forward a counterargument. Wilson attributed his own recovery to a drug-induced mystical experience, and believed LSD could similarly benefit others who were struggling.³⁷¹ (Recent research suggests there might be

³⁷⁰ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 220-221.

³⁷¹ On Wilson's mystical experience and his belief in the potential of LSD for recovery, see Michael Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 152-153.

something to Wilson’s theory.³⁷²) Instead of engaging with the content of this idea, she writes that Wilson’s LSD use and advocacy “humanize” his story, by which she presumably means it shows him as a man who, in spite of his legendary status in AA, had flaws. Yet she chooses not to specify what this flaw is, or spell out how Wilson’s experimentation with psychedelics make his recovery story “ragged.”

The “raggedness” of Wilson’s recovery is coherent only if Jamison assumes that LSD use is incompatible with recovery from alcoholism. Jamison claims that she does not define sobriety as strict abstinence (a view that many in AA hold).³⁷³ In an Author’s Note that follows the main text of *The Recovering*, Jamison writes

We don’t always like the messy parts of sobriety stories, the epilogues and footnotes and afterwards: Bill Wilson’s experiments with acid; Charles Jackson’s returns to Seconal and booze; John Berryman’s relapses; Sober Carver smoking dope and snorting coke. But sometimes the story of getting better isn’t a story about absolute abstinence. Sometimes it’s a story about reducing danger and restoring health.³⁷⁴

Jamison does not view abstinence as necessary for sobriety because of her empathetic, pragmatic approach. While her promotion of harm reduction is laudable, the larger question is how she conceives of addiction. In this passage, Wilson’s “experiments with acid” are still the “messy” part of his sobriety—and what does “messiness” mean here if not the part of his story that requires honesty because it is contrary to the ends of sobriety? Jamison says in an interview that

³⁷² Because the study of psychedelics is still legally constrained, the studies that have taken place are limited in scope, though it seems that they will become larger and more frequent in the future. For an overview of recent scientific research into how psychedelics have been shown as effective in treating various addictions, including to nicotine, alcohol, and cocaine, see Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind*, 358-375.

³⁷³ For reporting on how NA groups often will not give a sober chip to those receiving medication treatment for addiction, see Hannah Beckler, “Who’s Sober in Narcotics Anonymous?,” July 9, 2018, <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/07/narcotics-anonymous-addiction-medication-treatment>.

³⁷⁴ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 451.

she defines sobriety as “liberation from dependence,” and notes that “an understanding of recovery that can only see abstinence can have a really toxic effect when it comes to policy or how we think about treating addiction, because it doesn’t make room for things like harm reduction and maintenance programs and certain kinds of medication-based treatment.”³⁷⁵ It is notable that these statements take place primarily in paratextual material, such as the Author’s Note and in interviews. Jamison does not devote space in the text itself to stories of people achieving “liberation from dependence” through medication-based treatment or safe-injection sites. If liberation from dependence is the goal, and if the addict-identity is not incompatible with intoxication, then the fact that neither LSD nor other popular psychedelics such as psilocybin are addictive would mean that they should not influence one’s ability to continue abstaining from other intoxicants. Instead of engaging seriously with Wilson’s use of psychedelics, or his view of their benefits, Jamison presents us with a euphoric recovery narrative, while demonstrating her empathy in the way she recognizes that it should be qualified. But believing Wilson’s use of psychedelics qualifies his recovery—that it makes it “ragged” or “messy”—assumes the incompatibility between recovery and intoxication that his story calls into question.

Though Jamison leaves it somewhat implicit in regards to Wilson, in other places she demonstrates how conceiving of addiction as a disease and identity means that addicts must for the rest of their lives be on their guard against any sort of intoxication (even to substances that have never been problematic for them). We see this belief most clearly in a section of Jamison’s personal narrative, after she has been in recovery for a substantial amount of time, and is a dedicated member of AA. Members of her regular AA group issue her a warning when they learn that she will undergo surgery:

³⁷⁵ Green, “Leslie Jamison Wants You to Rethink Your Drunk Literary Heroes.”

I'd shared about the surgery in a meeting, hoping for sympathy, but the main thing I got was: "Be careful with your painkillers." It turned out to be good advice. I was surprised by how much I looked forward to the drugs that would knock me out, and the ones I'd get afterward; by how obsessively I'd imagined the possibility of laughing gas or Valium. It was like a surge through my belly, this anticipation—unbidden and unexpected. In meetings, people sometimes said: *Your disease is always waiting for you outside. It's out there doing push-ups.* I pictured alcoholism as a small man with a mustache and a wifebeater.

It turns out I didn't even get the pre-op stuff I'd been hoping for, nitrous oxide or Valium. All my anesthesia did for me was make me vomit after the surgery into a bucket Dave held beside me."³⁷⁶

Why is it that Jamison needs to be careful about her painkillers? Before Jamison begins on her recovery arc, she consumes various drugs, including cocaine and marijuana. This drug use never becomes anything beyond a dalliance; only with alcohol does the relationship become one of dependence. Given that Jamison has never struggled with painkiller addiction in the past, it seems odd that she must be careful about them now. Her theory seems to be the following: because painkillers will make her feel different than she feels when sober, and alcohol also made her feel different than when she was sober, she might start to depend on painkillers (though the feelings themselves are distinct).

Jamison seems to worry that she might use painkillers to fill the same perceived lack she used alcohol to fill. At one point, Jamison addresses how lack functions in her addiction. Using the work of Eve Sedgwick, Jamison writes, "addiction isn't about the substance so much as 'the surplus of mystical properties' the addict projects onto it. Granting the substance the ability to provide 'consolation, repose, beauty, or energy,' [Sedgwick] writes, can 'operate only corrosively on the self thus self-construed as lack.'"³⁷⁷ Jamison relates this passage from Sedgwick to her tendency toward co-dependency in romantic relationships, but Sedgwick's

³⁷⁶ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 281; italics in the original.

³⁷⁷ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 111.

theory is also helpful when applied to the painkiller scene, precisely because it explains the impact that the advice Jamison receives from AA has on the desire she starts to feel for, and the anxiety she starts to feel about, the painkillers. Jamison feels “surprised by how much” she looks “forward to the drugs,” but this surprise comes *after* the AA members alert her to the danger the painkillers might pose (though painkillers have never posed a danger to her previously). AA foregrounds the dangers of the painkillers in this instance, and generally advises a hyper-awareness about any mind-altering substance, instructing one to never let one’s guard down. (“*Your disease is always waiting for you outside. It’s out there doing push-ups.*”) Jamison says that the warning turns out to be “good advice,” but not because what AA cautions her about actually occurs. Her surgery medication does not cause her to become addicted to painkillers or to relapse with alcohol. She sees it as good advice because once warned about the danger of the drugs, she starts fixating on their power. If we take seriously Sedgwick’s claim that substances have power not inherently but because we project power onto them, Jamison’s obsession with imagining the effects of painkillers exists as a direct result of AA forcing these “mystical properties” into her mind.³⁷⁸ AA constructs her desire for the pills.

Sedgwick’s theory thus seems to counter AA’s conception of addiction, and the hyper-alertness they advise. Jamison quotes Sedgwick’s essay “Epidemics of the Will.” In that essay, Sedgwick writes, “In the taxonomic reframing of a drug user as an addict, what changes are the most basic terms about her. From a situation of relative homeostatic stability and control, she is

³⁷⁸ Sedgwick’s description aligns broadly with what drug researchers call the construction of drug effects. Ido Hartogsohn writes that the “current research suggests that nonpharmacological effects are responsible for a major part, if not a majority, of therapeutic benefits in a variety of accepted drug treatments,” and more broadly “drug effects are shaped by social and cultural parameters” to a great extent. See Hartogsohn, “Constructing Drug Effects: A History of Set and Setting,” *Drug Science, Policy and Law* 3 (2017): 1–17, <https://doi.org/DOI:10.1177/2050324516683325>.

propelled into a narrative of inexorable decline and fatality, from which she cannot disimplicate herself except by leaping into that other, even more pathos-ridden narrative called *kicking the habit*.³⁷⁹ According to Sedgwick, it is the interpolation of the addict identity that delimits all stories about intoxication into either (though she does not use these terms) dysphoric or euphoric narratives. Sedgwick writes about how consumer capitalism happily promotes the addict identity in its quest to “pry the potentially unlimited trajectory of demand...from the relative homeostasis of need.”³⁸⁰ Given that Jamison cites Sedgwick, what are we to make of Jamison beginning so many of the stories she tells with an ascription of the addict-identity? (“His name is Sawyer, and he’s an alcoholic”; “Her name is Gwen, and she’s an alcoholic”; “His name is Marcus, and he’s an alcoholic and an addict.”) If Sedgwick is right that “granting the substance the ability to provide ‘consolation, repose, beauty, or energy...[can] operate only corrosively on the self thus self-construed as lack,’” the way to treat addiction seems like it would involve some combination of downplaying the power of intoxicants (of stripping their mystical properties from them), strengthening one’s sense of self, and possibly overthrowing or reforming capitalism so that we are not bombarded with advertising informing us that we “need” products of various sorts to fill a lack. Yet, in the scene above, AA does the opposite. Jamison is not worried that painkillers might pose a danger to her recovery until AA instills that worry in her. Constantly alert, an AA member can only ever see intoxicants as having the power to overwhelm and dominate—she can never view the casual use of intoxicants as an ordinary part of human existence. Following Sedgwick’s logic, we would have to conclude that constantly ascribing great power to substances

³⁷⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Epidemics of the Will,” in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993), 131.

³⁸⁰ Sedgwick, “Epidemics of the Will,” 135.

and foregrounding one's lack as integral to her identity—core components of AA ideology—works to ensure that she always will have the “disease.”

Of course, we might reject Sedgwick's theory of addiction, but it seems clear that the theory is not reconcilable with the “good advice” Jamison receives from AA. This tension between the AA philosophy (that Jamison accepts) and radical theoretical and sociological accounts of drugs (that Jamison cites) occurs throughout the book. These tensions become especially important when Jamison turns to the War on Drugs. In the chapter titled “Blame,” Jamison transitions between her personal narrative and a historical overview of the War on Drugs. Explaining her family history with alcoholism, she recalls, at the age of nine, asking her father why people drink: “my father told me drinking wasn't wrong, but it was dangerous. It wasn't dangerous for everyone, but it was dangerous for us.”³⁸¹ She then transitions into her overview of the War on Drugs with the following sentence: “Addiction has always been more dangerous for some people than for others. When Nixon launched the original War on Drugs in June 1971, he called drugs ‘public enemy number one.’ But it was actual human beings who were imprisoned.”³⁸² It's worth examining these two sentences closely. The concept of “danger” links these sections, but the word does different work in these two sentences. In the first instance, drinking is dangerous because it can lead to addiction. Not everyone who drinks becomes addicted to alcohol, but some do. People like Jamison, who have family histories of alcoholism, should be careful about drinking, because they could easily become addicted, and addiction itself is a bad outcome one should be at pains to avoid. The second sentence assumes addiction in a way that the first sentence does not. Rather than addiction being the outcome, it is the conceptual

³⁸¹ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 76. If we want to extend the analysis from Sedgwick, we can see how Jamison's belief in alcohol's danger was constructed from an early age.

³⁸² *Ibid.*

starting place. The danger now is imprisonment, a result of addiction rather than addiction itself being the dangerous result of drinking with a particular genetic makeup. The second sentence assumes that people incarcerated during the War on Drugs possess the addict-identity.

We can see the issues with describing the War on Drugs in this way when she gives her overview of the War on Drugs. In this section, she quotes Nixon's domestic policy chief, John Ehrlichman, who, after he left office, said, "'Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.' He said the Nixon administration couldn't make it illegal to be black, but they could link the black community to heroin. 'We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news.'"³⁸³ This is Jamison's evidence for her claim that "Addiction has always been more dangerous for some people than for others," yet in rhetorically conflating incarceration for drug offenses with addiction—when in fact many (probably the majority) of incarcerated dealers and users are not addicted—she portrays addiction as the inevitable consequence of drug use.

The description of the relationship between drugs and addiction as inevitable deflates the power of Ehrlichman's revelation. His revelation is powerful not because it shows that "addiction has always been more dangerous for some people than others," but because addiction was irrelevant to the policies enacted. He admits the Nixon administration was "lying about the drugs." What does this lie consist of if we still maintain that "addiction" is central to the danger of the War on Drugs? Rather than "addiction" being "more dangerous for some people than others," a more accurate interpretation of Ehrlichman's statement would be "it was more dangerous to be black than to be white during the Nixon administration, because black people were his political enemies," but this is not the statement Jamison provides, presumably because it

³⁸³ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 81.

would then make the story of her family’s addiction history, and in fact the whole topic of addiction and recovery, irrelevant.³⁸⁴ But the irrelevance of addiction to the War on Drugs is the point of Ehrlichman’s statement: inflating the dangers of drugs—even the dangers of addiction itself, no matter how accurate—was propaganda Nixon used for political expedience. People have disagreed with Ehrlichman’s assessment of the Nixon administration’s motives.³⁸⁵ But Jamison cites it approvingly while simultaneously describing the War on Drugs as primarily about addiction. Instead of recognizing Nixon’s exaggeration of the power of drugs, which he does in order to advance a political agenda that has nothing to do with drugs, Jamison reproduces its logic.

In her overview of the War on Drugs, Jamison deftly summarizes the theoretical and sociological work that has rejected mainstream or politically reactionary narratives about drugs and addiction over the last 30 years. She quotes Michelle Alexander’s influential argument that the War on Drugs was about “who is viewed as disposable—someone to be purged from the body politic—and who is not.”³⁸⁶ She includes Avital Ronell’s question—from *Crack Wars: Literature Addiction Mania*—“What do we hold against the drug addict?” and answers with Jacques Derrida’s quote, “We cannot abide the fact that his is a pleasure taken in an experience

³⁸⁴ Jamison also excises part of Ehrlichman’s quote. The “black community” is only one of the two communities Ehrlichman points to as political enemies of the Nixon administration, and who the War on Drugs was intended to “disrupt.” The other community was the “antiwar left,” whom the Nixon administration attempted to “associate...with marijuana.” For some reason, Jamison highlights the “black community” and elides “antiwar leftists,” when creating groups for whom “addiction has always been more dangerous.” The original quote comes from Dan Baum, “Legalize It All: How to Win the War on Drugs,” *Harper’s Magazine*, April 2016, 24.

³⁸⁵ Ehrlichman’s children have questioned the veracity of the quote altogether. See Tom LoBianco, “Report: Nixon’s War on Drugs Targeted Black People,” CNN, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/03/23/politics/john-ehrllichman-richard-nixon-drug-war-blacks-hippie/index.html>.

³⁸⁶ Quoted in Jamison, *The Recovering*, 61.

without truth.”³⁸⁷ She then provides a condensed history of the “drug-scare narrative,” which, as is often argued in sociological accounts of the War on Drugs, “singles out a particular substance as cause for alarm” in order to “scapegoat a marginal community.”³⁸⁸ In different ways, these scholars—like Ehrlichman—all highlight how the US government and media exaggerate drug effects and dangers of addiction in order to push other agendas. Jamison includes these arguments, but to tell stories—*The Recovering*’s raison d’être—that reflect these insights would require narratives that are contingent, ambiguous, or conflicted about the meaning or importance of addiction. Jamison instead tells stories that demonstrate the opposite. While she views the War on Drugs as destructive, the stories she tells are primarily concerned with how intoxication leads to an identity that necessitates a lifelong struggle with the substance and portrays this struggle as valiant.

In other words, Jamison makes no room in her 530-page book for non-addiction stories, in spite of the fact that much of the scholarship she cites argues that we must draw our attention away from addiction to larger social forces.³⁸⁹ Indeed, she even overemphasizes addiction in stories where addiction seems to have little relevance. For instance, Jamison writes about Joe Arpaio’s “Tent City” in Arizona, one of the sites of greatest brutality the drug war has countenanced. She provides stomach-churning details of inhumane treatment:

a group of incarcerated female addicts was working a chain gang in the Arizona desert. Their guards made them chant: ‘We are the chain gang, the only female chain gang.’ They wore T-shirts that said I WAS A DRUG ADDICT. Or: CLEAN(ING) AND

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 62.

³⁸⁹ This is not to say Jamison never describes non-addictive substance use. She describes an ex-boyfriend who would drink but did not develop an addiction. As mentioned previously, she uses drugs occasionally in the early part of her personal narrative, and her drug use, as opposed to her alcohol use, never becomes a problem. But any story she includes that is about substance use—as opposed to a passing reference—is an addiction story.

SOBER. They lived in Tent City, a cluster of sweltering tents full of scorpions on the ground and mice in the trash heaps. Temperatures in the tents often hit 140 degrees.³⁹⁰

In highlighting these details and showing that Joe Arpaio modeled his Tent City off the work of Harry Anslinger, she shows the ongoing disaster of waging military-style war against drug use, which has lasted over 75 years. Michelle Alexander or Jacques Derrida could be used here to reject the various premises underlying Tent City, by highlighting the irrelevance of addiction to the motivations for mounting a drug war, or by rejecting the state's power to determine what sort of pleasure a person experiences. When Jamison analyzes this situation, she instead emphasizes how Tent City ineffectively treats addiction. The paragraph containing the above description ends with quotes from journalists and scholars who say that this system seems "intended to keep people addicted," and that "chaining" and "humiliating" is "the best way to make [addicts] wish to keep using drugs."³⁹¹ While rejecting its methods, this framing grants the premise of Tent City, the stated goal of which was to rid society of addiction and promote sobriety. What Jamison seems to find inadvisable about Tent City is not the brutality, the way it marginalizes certain groups of people, or its paternalistic desire to choose which substances we consume; it is that it does not help society get sober in the most effective way and instead prolongs the desire for drugs.

Another goal of Tent City was to remind the incarcerated that "addict" was central to their identities (evident in the shirts they forced them to wear). The role of the addict-identity is important to keep in mind when looking at how Jamison tells the story of Marcia Powell. On a 106-degree day, the guards at Tent City placed Marcia in an outdoor cell that lacked any furniture or covering from the sun, denied her water when she asked for it, and, according to

³⁹⁰ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 404.

³⁹¹ Quoted in Jamison, *The Recovering*, 405.

other prisoners, laughed when she eventually collapsed. By the time the guards called an ambulance, Marcia had sustained first-degree burns on her face. Paramedics measured her body's temperature at 108 degrees. She soon died.³⁹² Jamison writes that Marcia “was serving time for solicitation, but her prostitution had been supporting her meth habit for years. Her addiction got her incarcerated, and it ultimately got her killed.”³⁹³ Jamison herself got sober for the first time the same year Marcia died. She points out this coincidence in order to highlight the addiction they had in common: “My story included the woman who died in a cage in a desert, or her story included me; not just because of my guilt—the guilt of my privilege, or my survival—but because we both put things inside our bodies to change how we felt.”³⁹⁴ Jamison must tell this panoply of stories in order to show that people like Marcia should be afforded the chance to walk “into meetings” and have her “body...treated as valuable simply because it was in the room, simply because it *was*,” instead of having her body placed “in a cage in the middle of the desert.”³⁹⁵ If addiction is fundamentally similar, Marcia and Jamison should not be treated differently.

Yet Johann Hari's reporting on Marcia—which Jamison uses as source material—troubles Jamison's assertion that Marcia's “addiction...got her killed.” Marcia did struggle with addiction for much of her life, but only after having been kicked out of the house by her adopted mother at the age of 13. Living on beaches and dealing with the constant fear of rape and murder, she began using drugs in order to help temper an increasing paranoia and “to snort and shoot the

³⁹² For the details of Marcia's story see Jamison, *The Recovering*, 405, and Johann Hari, *Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs* (Bloomsbury, 2015), 111.

³⁹³ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 405.

³⁹⁴ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 406-407.

³⁹⁵ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 406.

pain away.”³⁹⁶ After finding a partner (a man named Richard who told Marcia’s story to Hari), her circumstances became more secure, and she stopped using all drugs except for marijuana. “She started to do normal things,” Hari writes, “She mowed the lawn. She watched TV. She planted flowers. She started to draw flowers, too. ‘She was so happy to be stable,’ [Richard] says.”³⁹⁷ This stability was interrupted when the police arrested Marcia and put her in jail for possession of two joints. According to Richard, this arrest brought her paranoia back, caused her to start using again, and, eventually, led to her incarceration in Tent City. Richard says, “If Arizona hadn’t stuck her in jail for 1.5 grams of usable marijuana, we’d be in Illinois...I’d be twenty years with the railroad. We had a nice house there, a huge yard.”³⁹⁸ Jamison elides these details, instead portraying Marcia’s story as a dysphoric addiction narrative, wherein her addiction leads directly to death.

If Jamison wanted to explore Marcia’s story fully, it would require that she engage with details of her story that complicate or contradict the conception of addiction as a disease/identity. In order to quit using purportedly dangerous drugs (heroin and meth), Marcia did not require meetings. She needed stable relationships, improved material circumstances, and hope for the future. Once she had these things, she did not seem to struggle with using heroin or meth, though she continued to enjoy some amount of intoxication (with marijuana). Based on the only authority we have on Marcia’s story (Richard), it was not the marijuana that led to a relapse; it was prohibition against marijuana that re-traumatized her. Yet Jamison still attributes to Marcia an addict-identity and makes addiction the salient issue in her story, rather than neglect, poverty, mental health, or drug prohibition.

³⁹⁶ Hari, *Chasing the Scream*, 112-113.

³⁹⁷ Hari, *Chasing the Scream*, 113.

³⁹⁸ Hari, *Chasing the Scream*, 115.

Reflecting on Marcia’s story, Jamison writes, “What luck. What luck not to wake up in a cage, or a 140-degree tent in the Arizona desert; not serve time for the thrall that had already corroded me.”³⁹⁹ Jamison uses the word “thrall” here and several other times in the book to describe her relationship to alcohol. Thrall implies that alcohol—or meth, in the case of Marcia—possesses power, enslaves the user. Szalavitz—whom Jamison also cites approvingly—has written about how “the public perception of addiction as a disease...creates the sense that addicted people are zombies, so enthralled by the drug that they cannot control themselves and therefore, are appropriate targets for incarceration in order to protect the public.”⁴⁰⁰ Jamison unambiguously rejects the idea of incarcerating people for addiction, yet she retains the notion of the “thrall.” Szalavitz provides research that indicates that removing “all or most responsibility from the addicted person for the behavior” has “been found to *increase* addiction-related stigma, rather than reducing it by taking the blame away,” and notes that “While many people with addiction—myself included—have at times found the disease view to provide relief from self-blame and self-hate, the flip side of having no responsibility for your actions is to be treated like an animal or a child by others.”⁴⁰¹ Szalavitz description of viewing those who use drugs as animals is tragically apt, considering that Marcia died in a cage. Jamison dedicates *The Recovering* to “anyone addiction has touched,” but this granting of agency to substances (making them the subject and the users the object of the sentence), so that they are portrayed as taking control of one’s life and becoming an inescapable part of one’s identity, both does not reflect the vast majority of experiences with addiction, and necessitates a reductive account of how drugs and addiction functioned in Marcia’s life.

³⁹⁹ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 406.

⁴⁰⁰ Maia Szalavitz, “Squaring the Circle: Addiction, Disease and Learning,” 84.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid*; italics in original.

It is no doubt true that Jamison and Marcia “both put things inside [their] bodies to change how [they] felt.”⁴⁰² Yet Marcia’s story, as told by Hari, points to the way that intoxication is often more complicated than being enthralled by powerful chemicals, or being “touched” by addiction. Many people, like Marcia, frequently use intoxicants during a period of life and then stop using some or all of those intoxicants. For Marcia, the period of frequent intoxication coincided with general insecurity in her life, and her use of drugs decreased as her circumstances became more secure. The reasons and motivations for why people start, stop, or continue to use drugs casually or frequently are important and worthy of investigation. Yet these reasons and motivations often point to an ambivalent view of the power of drugs, and often do not align with the conception of addiction as an enthralling disease that gets progressively worse. While Jamison designs her book with neoliberal criticisms of the memoir genre in mind, and thus makes it less centered on her individual story, she nevertheless continues the project of seeing substance use as a moral issue that ends either in death (as in Marcia’s case), or in the “luck” and “privilege” to be able to walk “into meetings” and tell one’s recovery story over and over (as in her own case).

II. Marlowe and the Zeitgeist

What would rejecting the addict-identity but writing about one’s experiences with addiction look like? Though by her own account in *How to Stop Time: Heroin from A to Z*, Ann Marlowe was addicted to heroin, her memoir is about as close to the sort of non-addiction

⁴⁰² When Jamison writes that it is for this reason that they share a story, it is hard not to wonder whether their story also includes the 80% of people who use heroin to change how they feel yet never develop an addiction. (Statistic taken from “Can Using Heroin Once Make You Addicted?,” Drug Policy Alliance, accessed December 9, 2019, <http://www.drugpolicy.org/drug-facts/can-using-heroin-once-make-you-addicted>.)

memoir that Jamison both claims to be essential, yet nevertheless does not provide, as one is likely to find. Near the end of the book, Marlowe expresses ambivalence about the fact that she has written a book about drug use:

There's something arbitrary about looking at my life and our times through the lens of heroin. I might have picked tennis, or shoes or cooking, all of which have been important to me for years and have their own cultural resonances. From this angle, dope is just the lever I've chosen to move what I can. But no. Every thread would not be equal. Our culture has lent dark powers to narratives of drug use, more than to drug use itself, and I am taking advantage of them, like a painter using the severity of northern light.⁴⁰³

Marlowe admits that she has chosen to write about drugs because of the power the culture grants to drug narratives. Yet she also reveals that this power exceeds the drug use itself. By “taking advantage” of the dark powers our culture has given to narratives about drugs, she does not mean she reproduces the typical addiction narrative in order to make her book of interest to an addiction-narrative-obsessed public. Instead, she uses her knowledge of these narratives to defy the public's expectations about what heroin addiction looks like.

Marlowe shows that defying the expectations that heroin use necessarily leads to addiction, and about what addiction means, will provoke a vehement reaction. At one point in the book she recalls the response she received to a story about heroin she wrote for *The Village Voice* in 1994: “I got lots of nasty letters that all agreed on one thing: because I emerged from years of heroin use without noticeable health, career or financial effects, I wasn't qualified to write about dope. I didn't really have the experience, because the sign of really having the experience is ruining your life.”⁴⁰⁴ In this passage, Marlowe's critics decry the fact that she does not provide the expected heroin narrative, a narrative that has little to do with the actions immediately involved in heroin use. (Snorting or injecting a substance and feeling a set of effects

⁴⁰³ Ann Marlowe, *How to Stop Time: Heroin from A to Z* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 280.

⁴⁰⁴ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 153.

until they subside.) She describes no descent into squalor, no “bottoming out,” and, importantly, her ending is neither dysphoric tragedy nor euphoric uplift.⁴⁰⁵ These are the elements of the standard addiction narrative that Marlowe troubles.

Similar to Jamison, Marlowe also experiments with form in a way that deviates from the typical memoir genre, yet does so in order to highlight and clarify the particular, idiosyncratic set of issues involved in her addiction, and indicates how variable these issues can be. Organized alphabetically rather than chronologically, the book takes the form of a dictionary, with short entries given in definition of words such as “addiction,” “aging,” “arrest,” and “athletics.” Because of this structure, Marlowe’s book lacks the narrative build of memoirs organized chronologically: it does not provide a beginning which sets up her future heroin addiction, a middle in which she “hits bottom” or descends into squalor, or a clear conclusion of recovery or tragedy. In the only substantive work of scholarship that addresses *How to Stop Time*, Abigail Gosselin helpfully explicates how Marlowe’s formal strategy creates an aesthetic experience of time that aligns with Marlowe’s descriptions of heroin use. Gosselin notes that these “vignettes told arbitrarily and randomly” reflect the “lived experience of time as disordered” that Marlowe describes as fundamental to the heroin experience.⁴⁰⁶ Marlowe designs the form of her memoir in

⁴⁰⁵ The dysphoric narrative has been especially common in descriptions of heroin use in American culture. In the popular “urban fiction” subgenre from the 1960s and 1970s, writers such as Iceberg Slim, Donald Goines, and Claude Brown emphasized the sordidness and tragic violence of heroin addiction. Contemporary film and television often depicts heroin use as so powerful that it incapacitates the user not only in the moment of use, but, since the user cannot stop, for days or weeks at a time, and this incapacitation leads to both squalor and tragedy. For example, in *Trainspotting* (1996)—perhaps the most influential depiction of heroin addiction in cinema—the characters’ all-consuming heroin addiction leads to their disgusting environments, the causality indicated most clearly by the character Tommy, who begins the film without a habit living in a clean apartment, and ends the film an addict, sleeping on a mattress on the floor of his ransacked, filthy flat.

⁴⁰⁶ Abigail Gosselin, “Memoirs as Mirrors: Counterstories in Contemporary Memoir,” *NARRATIVE* 19, no. 1 (2011): 135-136.

order to avoid the typical addiction-narrative sequence that Jamison provides over-and-over again in *The Recovering*.

Gosselin is right to point out how the discrete vignettes are organized to blunt the emotional impact and forestall narrative payoffs that most traditional memoirs would provide, and these elements do connect to Marlowe's descriptions of what it feels like to use. However, Gosselin also claims that Marlowe provides an "alternative narrative structure" which rejects a "dominant paradigm" that "reduces the potentially transformative power of narratives."⁴⁰⁷ Gosselin's emphasis on counter-narrative ignores a crucial reason for the book's alphabetical form, namely to mitigate against nostalgia. Before examining the importance Marlowe places on nostalgia for her addiction, let us look at Marlowe's own explanation for the alphabetical form. In her entry for "alphabet," she writes, "alphabetical order is the schoolchild's first lesson in the implacability of fate: he may be assigned to a seat solely on the basis of his last name, and he will learn to listen for that name each morning in the roll call, in its proper place."⁴⁰⁸ This description implies that the student does not just learn the alphabet, but undergoes a process of Althusserian interpellation: morning after morning, he waits to be hailed by the letter that corresponds with his name, and the alphabet thus structures his identity and existence. Marlowe also describes the submission to the alphabet during early school years as something like a Foucauldian disciplinary measure: "Our early training in the alphabet is mainly about submitting for the first time to an arbitrary discipline. The implacable order of letters will not be rearranged to please the child; no cute pleas or frightening howls will change it."⁴⁰⁹ Though she references neither Althusser nor Foucault by name, these passages seem to indicate that the alphabet hails

⁴⁰⁷ Gosselin, "Memoirs as Mirrors," 134.

⁴⁰⁸ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 11.

⁴⁰⁹ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 12.

and disciplines us in order to reproduce the current ideological order. But these passages make Marlowe's choice to use this alphabetical structure in her book curious. After all, Althusser and Foucault point out these ideological and disciplinary measures in order to diagnose repressive facets of modernity—why reproduce the “arbitrary discipline” of the alphabet as the book's organizing principle? Gosselin claims that the alphabetical structure of *How to Stop Time* “subverts the dominant paradigm by accurately reflecting the lived experience of time as disordered.”⁴¹⁰ But in Marlowe's account, alphabetization seems to function as what Gosselin would describe as a “dominant paradigm”: alphabetization is both arbitrary and externally imposed on every schoolchild. Gosselin misses that rather than subverting a dominant paradigm or master narrative—which is how scholars in the critical theory tradition often describe works they find to do important work—Marlowe substitutes one dominant paradigm (alphabetization) for another (chronology).

In other words, Gosselin is far more suspicious of dominant paradigms than Marlowe.

Marlowe continues on to argue for the importance of what she calls “artificial forms”:

Memorizing the order of the letters is an induction into the child's inherited culture, a set of rules that initially appear equally arbitrary, but which make human society possible. Rules are the enemy of entropy. The sonata and the sonnet, the haiku and the lipogram, the blues lyric and Scrabble, the civil statute and the religious injunction all set up artificial forms that comfort distress at the uncertainty of human fate.⁴¹¹

Unlike much of the work in the critical theory tradition (including Gosselin's reading of Marlowe), Marlowe reveals the inherited, arbitrary “rules” and “artificial forms” that structure experience, but not to subvert them; instead she argues that without these rules and forms culture would be impossible and life would be unbearable. Rather than either avowal or skepticism of

⁴¹⁰ Gosselin, “Memoirs as Mirrors,” 134.

⁴¹¹ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 12.

form's ability to do political work generally, Marlowe uses the book's alphabetical structure to highlight one psychological impulse she believes causes her addiction: nostalgia. Marlowe writes, "addiction is essentially nostalgic, which ought to tarnish the luster of nostalgia as much as that of addiction."⁴¹² Of course, memoir by definition requires the writer to look back at her life and undergo an aesthetic reliving of the past. Marlowe writes, "That drive to return to the past isn't an innocent one. It's about stopping your passage to the future, it's a symptom of the fear of death, and the love of predictable experience."⁴¹³ In order to write *How to Stop Time*, Marlowe must "return to the past." The book could not exist otherwise. Possessing memories or looking back in order to learn something about oneself is not what Marlowe finds dangerous. The danger is being so enraptured by the reliving of the past that one cannot move forward. This reliving of the past is also how she understands heroin addiction: returning over-and-over again in order to have the same experience holds one back from moving forward.

Arranging the text alphabetically rather than chronologically is not inherently superior. Abstractly, alphabetization is neither more realistic nor more radical—it is just as artificial as chronological structure. But it provides one advantage for this particular case, which is related to how Marlowe understands her own psychological impulse towards addiction: alphabetization both highlights the importance of, and provides a safeguard against, nostalgia. When using chronological structure, one can always keep returning to the past and adding more, because the past continually grows.⁴¹⁴ In contrast, when Marlowe reaches the letter "z" the book must end;

⁴¹² Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 9.

⁴¹³ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 10.

⁴¹⁴ Famous examples of how autobiographical writing can seem to ensnare the writer in even the very recent past, so that the autobiographical project grows to seemingly unmanageable lengths, would be Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (which is over 4000 pages long) and Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* (3936 pages).

she cannot continue to ruminate. Marlowe describes both chronology and alphabetization as “artificial forms” that allow us to exist in the face death, entropy, and potential chaos, but in her acknowledgement of their artificiality, Marlowe can adopt the form best suited to the purpose at hand, rather than stop at the revelation that form is artificial, or make the odd claim that alphabetization is a more politically liberatory form than chronology.⁴¹⁵

In emphasizing the power and danger of nostalgia—which causes one to live in a safe past instead of moving on to an unknown future—Marlowe also rejects the existence of a particular addict-identity that one does not choose but also can never escape, for the addict-identity would amplify, rather than work against, nostalgia. In AA and NA, believing that one’s illness has been “cured,” that one can move on without continuing to attend meetings, or perhaps even consume responsibly, is anathema. Instead, one must perpetually re-live the past by re-telling the story of the first drink, bottoming out, and getting sober. For Marlowe, the alphabetical form both highlights and guards against this sort of nostalgia, and illustrates the problem with using nostalgia as the basis of a recovery program.

Marlowe explains the connection between nostalgia and heroin: because the user becomes accustomed to the effects of heroin so quickly, the user is perpetually trying to relive “the recapturable specialness” of the “first heroin high.” She writes, “heroin use is one of the

⁴¹⁵ My argument here is indebted to Toril Moi’s critique of post-Saussurean critical theory. She argues, in a reading of philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, that “there is only meaning in use”: “there is no meaning ‘behind’ ...use (for if there were, what kind of thing would it be? A mental [psychological] entity? A real thing in the real world?).” Moi goes on to suggest that, because meaning only exists in use, the purpose of a “work of theory would be an effort to reach clarity—to find a clear view—of that problem,” and that “to solve political problems we need to produce concrete analyses of specific cases.” (Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 29, 109 and 110.) I am arguing that Marlowe similarly emphasizes the importance of how an artist puts form to use, rather than believing she has chosen a form that, in itself, is more radical or realistic.

indisputable cases where the good old days really were. The initial highs did feel better than the drug will ever make you feel again.”⁴¹⁶ Though she notes that heroin induces a powerful impulse toward nostalgia, Marlowe still privileges nostalgia as the ultimate problem: “the love of predictable experience, not the drug itself, is the major damage done to heroin users. Not getting on with your life is much more likely than going to the emergency room, and much harder to discern from the inside.”⁴¹⁷ Marlowe does not assume that heroin possesses an abstract evil or danger. Instead, she places importance on the individual’s psychological makeup and social circumstances. In emphasizing nostalgia, she both concretizes and universalizes addiction: for her, addiction has resulted from a highly specific psychological impulse, but a psychological impulse shared by many people who never experience heroin addiction. By making the ultimate issue not moving forward with life, Marlowe opens up the problem so that it cannot be contained by drug use, and one cannot assume that sobriety will solve the problem. In other words, heroin use might be a manifestation of Marlowe’s impulse toward nostalgia, but this analysis confers importance on nostalgia, rather than on drug use as a moral issue.

Nostalgia is one safe retreat from such a future, but so is living in the present too intensely (it is another way of “stopping time”). Though heroin can lead users to indulge in nostalgia, or live in the present, to an unhealthy extent, Marlowe notes that it is neither unique as an activity that encourages these responses, nor is it powerful enough on its own to force the user to have these responses:

Heroin provides the all-absorbing, anxiety-deflecting presentness which we can also find in sports. In the middle of a good tennis or basketball game, the voices in my head that do not bear on the activity of the moment are stilled. I forget about not forgetting to buy garbage bags, about my date tomorrow, about my eventual death. And I emerge from the spell of the sports better able to focus on what is and isn’t important...Perhaps if you fall

⁴¹⁶ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 9.

⁴¹⁷ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 10.

out of the habit of playing a sport seriously, where those moments of immersion occur often, you are more vulnerable to a chemical substitute than someone who never knew those moments at all.”⁴¹⁸

Wanting to be immersed in an experience, so that we temporarily forget all other concerns, is common. Marlowe indicates that some people, as part of their psychology will have a stronger desire for repeated experiences with this type of immersion than others. She thus shows why some people are more inclined to addiction than others. Yet her analogy with playing sports also implies that many different experiences will suffice, and one can come away from the experience the better for having had it, “better able to focus on what is and isn’t important.”

Controversially, Marlowe states that heroin can have these positive outcomes as well. After turning to heroin because, as she describes above with sports, she “wanted to halt the flow of time...out of fear of the injuries time might bring,” she writes that, “for a while heroin worked. It gave me some years free of pain, in which I was able to start writing. And then it gave some more years free of pain, free of most other emotions too.”⁴¹⁹ Demonstrating her nuanced understanding of both the benefits of her time using heroin and the hazards of long-term use, she explains that heroin makes “you...feel free of burdens you were never conscious of before. For a short while this freedom can be a revelation. It can make you more productive, and more open to other people. But that anxiety was put there for a reason by evolution...Living in an eternal present is not good for us, however much we may want it.”⁴²⁰ Her use of the word “living” indicates that the problem with heroin use is not the experience or pleasure it provides. As with sports, having an immersive experience can provide psychological benefits once one returns to regular life. But *the return*, the moving forward, is necessary. Playing a rigorous pick-up

⁴¹⁸ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 16.

⁴¹⁹ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 294-295.

⁴²⁰ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 295.

basketball game, where all other concerns drop away, can make one return to daily life with renewed focus. A game of basketball that lasted for years or decades would be detrimental and absurd.

What then differentiates heroin from basketball? Why is it that, even for the most committed amateur basketball players, the game does not typically “interfere with important life functions like parenting, work, and intimate relationships,” and we do not hear about people continuing to play basketball “despite ongoing negative consequences”?⁴²¹ No doubt part of the answer is that if used regularly and for long enough one can have withdrawal symptoms from heroin, a sickness that causes one to continue using even if one desires to quit. But users experience the intensity of these symptoms differently. Marlowe does not find them particularly significant, writing that “all but the severest dope sickness is no more rigorous than a nasty flu,” and describes withdrawal as merely “unpleasant.”⁴²² For users who experience severe withdrawal symptoms, which can put them at risk of relapse and overdose, medications like methadone and buprenorphine are often an effective method of treating these symptoms.⁴²³

Rather than focus on the power of withdrawal symptoms, Marlowe indicates the way particular sociocultural settings created the conditions for her to orient her life around heroin use. We can see how the setting in which one encounters drugs can powerfully construct one’s

⁴²¹ For the full definition of addiction based on the *DSM* see Hart, *High Price*, 13.

⁴²² Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 230.

⁴²³ This is one place where Marlowe and Leshner seem to agree. Leshner rejects the emphasis put on the distinction between psychological and physical dependence. He writes, “From both clinical and policy perspectives, it actually does not matter very much what physical withdrawal symptoms occur. Physical dependence is not that important, because even the dramatic withdrawal symptoms of heroin and alcohol addiction can now be easily managed with appropriate medications. Even more important, many of the most dangerous and addicting drugs, including methamphetamine and crack cocaine, do not produce very severe physical dependence symptoms upon withdrawal.” Leshner, “Addiction Is a Brain Disease,” 76.

response to it in Marlowe's description of why heroin initially appealed to her. She situates her use in its historical moment. She arrives in college at Harvard in 1975 expecting to get into "radical politics," but finds the "the counterculture, Cambridge style" a "pallid thing" with "fresh-scrubbed ex-boarding school hippies."⁴²⁴ She gravitates instead toward "Glam and punk," "hard styles, hard like Wall Street, like the capitalism of the eighties, like the self I wanted to forge," and this attempt to create a "hard-edged" self involves using heroin.⁴²⁵ She writes, "There was no righteousness about dope, no 'hemp will save the world, pot will make us mellow' crap going on. Heroin was bad for you, period."⁴²⁶ The story she tells here is not that heroin provides a pleasure so dangerous it ensnares her. Nor does she claim that she "crossed" a "threshold" and took on the new, permanent "state of being" of addiction.⁴²⁷ Instead, she shows how, presented with a limited and historically situated number of options for how to live, she gravitated toward the most appealing option, and this option happened to include recurrent heroin use as one of its accepted signifiers. Given that her descriptions of the appeal of heroin rarely have anything to do with the drug itself, rather than its overdetermined significations, she indicates that heroin use—accepted both by the group itself and, through their disapproval, by those outside the group—was arbitrary and historically contingent.

Addiction occurs in the context of a limited and contingent set of historical options, yet Marlowe still attributes the choice to do the drug to the user, rather than attribute agency to addiction itself, as Jamison does. Marlowe writes,

My addiction, such as it was, was chosen. Most are. For some of us, once you realize addiction is out there, you have to try it. Or in my case, once you realize a flirtation with addiction is possible you have to explore it. Getting a habit isn't an accident, or the result

⁴²⁴ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 171.

⁴²⁵ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 173.

⁴²⁶ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 173.

⁴²⁷ The language here is from Leshner, "Addiction Is a Brain Disease," 76.

of the “power of the drug”; it’s what you were after. I took to dope from the start, but many people who later become junkies will tell you that the first time, or two times, or even every time they got high, they threw up. Would you order an entrée again if you threw up the first time you ate it? Would you go out on cold nights to dubious streets to buy it? Risk arrest?⁴²⁸

Marlowe glibly asserts that some people decide to “try” addiction, but she points to how our cultural narratives create both a desire for heroin itself and for addiction as well. People can be inspired to use drugs because of the way the perceived danger fits into cultural settings they view as preferable to their other options. If part of the appeal for Marlowe was the “hard-edgedness” of heroin, its perceived addictiveness is part of what gives it this edge, as opposed to marijuana, so using recreationally or a few times does not satisfy the craving. This is why “Addiction isn’t just a possible outcome, it’s a partial motivation for drug use.”⁴²⁹

Jamison and Marlowe both take seriously the idea that our cultural narratives can have a material effect on addiction. Jamison makes this point clearly when it comes to certain narratives, such as when she shows how the literary tradition of inebriated genius led her to search for truth at the bottom of the bottle. Yet, rather than telling another story about how drugs enthrall people into lifelong use, Marlowe argues that this narrative itself leads directly to some amount of enthralled, lifelong users. Rather than reassert that addiction has agency as Jamison does (“For anyone addiction has touched”), Marlowe questions this “popular view, encouraged by William Burroughs, of addiction as uncontrollable need.”⁴³⁰ She regards the eager American acceptance of this narrative with suspicion, and writes that “twelve step programs encourage this nonsense” because “they’d rather have someone stand up and testify that eight years after his last heroin he struggles every day against the temptation to do it again—a ridiculous notion—than

⁴²⁸ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 144-145.

⁴²⁹ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 180.

⁴³⁰ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 228.

send him to learn what he's really fascinated with."⁴³¹ Both Jamison and Marlowe attempt to uncover what is beneath their addiction, what fascinates them, but for Marlowe this work of analyzing herself and her social environment would be held back by a belief that her need for heroin is merely caused by the power of the drug, by her genetics, or by an immutable identity.

For those who study and write about addiction, Marlowe's emphasis on the user's agency might seem risky, given the history of criminalizing drug users for their behavior. Psychologist and addiction researcher Sarah Desmarais explains that "talking about addiction as a disease" rather than a choice was designed "to decrease stigma and encourage treatment."⁴³² Leshner clearly rejects the idea "that drug addiction is simply a failure of will or of strength of character."⁴³³ Yet, rather than attempting to avoid the criminalizing view of addiction as indicative of bad character by instead portraying people with addiction as helpless, Marlowe questions this binary. Marlowe has "put things inside" her body "to change" how she has felt, but she actively interrogates why she should care about putting this particular thing inside her body. At one point, she concludes, "What scares us is pleasure."⁴³⁴ This fear of pleasure leads to a limited set of options, often put in moral terms, for how to understand drug use. She writes, "It's OK to admit to having had a drug problem or an alcohol problem or trying to quit smoking, but just try to tell people that you are a recreational heroin user. They'll insist that you're lying."⁴³⁵

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² "The Message That Addiction Is a Disease Makes Substance Users Less Likely to Seek Help," ScienceDaily, accessed November 21, 2019, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/05/190528120324.htm>. Desmarais is the co-author of a study which found that removing the idea of agency from addiction often leads people not to seek treatment. See Jeni L. Burnette et al., "Mindsets of Addiction: Implications for Treatment Intentions," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 38, no. 5 (2019): 367–94, <https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2019.38.5.367>.

⁴³³ Leshner, "Addiction Is a Brain Disease," 76.

⁴³⁴ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 230.

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

Marlowe provides a clear account of why writing about drugs must fit into either a dysphoric or euphoric narrative structure, rather than ambiguous narratives about drug use, or non-addiction stories: use of drugs is admissible only if it causes problems for the user. Published twenty-four years after *How to Stop Time* and heralded as “the most significant new addition to the canon [of literature about alcohol] in more than a decade,” *The Recovering* demonstrates how little things have changed in this regard.⁴³⁶ Jamison cannot bring herself to write about intoxication as anything other than a problem: Bill Wilson’s LSD use is the “ragged” part of his recovery; Marcia Powell’s meth addiction leads directly to her death.

One might think that a moralistic response to pleasure would be at odds with consumerism. Yet corporate advertising often portrays their products as addictive in order to capitalize on the inevitability of falling sway to the “thrall.” Marlowe writes, “most advertising in this country, for items from sodas to cigarettes, sneakers to cars, invokes feverish need.”⁴³⁷ Marlowe does not take the advertising industry at its word when it invokes addiction as uncontrollable need; she instead indicates how this very conception of addiction helps reinforce both addiction and consumer capitalism. In rejecting the idea of uncontrollable need, of the product’s ability to “hijack” one’s brain, she questions both the disease model of addiction and presents a contrasting vision to other major works of anti-consumerism, such as David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* and the film *Trainspotting*. We can see the contrast with how Marlowe writes about consumerism and what occurs at the end of *Trainspotting*. Mark Renton, who has struggled throughout with heroin addiction, walks toward the camera with a bag of stolen drug money over his shoulder. In voiceover narration, he claims that he is “going to change”: “I’m

⁴³⁶ Gilbert, “Writing and Alcohol.”

⁴³⁷ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 229.

cleaning up and I'm moving on, going straight and choosing life...I'm going to be just like you." Yet, as his speaking speeds up and the film cuts to credits, the feverish pace of his words indicates that the normal life of the "you" watching the film is simply consumerist addiction: "The job, the family, the fucking big television, the washing machine, the car, the compact disc and electrical tin opener, good health, low cholesterol, dental insurance, mortgage, starter home, leisurewear, luggage, three-piece suit, DIY, game shows, junk food, children, walks in the park, nine-to-five, good at golf."⁴³⁸ *Trainspotting* reveals that the viewer who presumably has been alarmed and disgusted by the junkies on screen is helpless to the thrall of consumer goods. As Marlowe points out, corporate advertising pushes the exact same message. If a business can convince the average person that she is a consumerist junkie, then she will believe that she cannot live without its products.

We could imagine responding to this situation by creating a better conceptual understanding of addiction. We could downplay the power of drugs, rather than, like these famous works of anti-consumerism, portraying all consumer products as possessing a similar power. We could reject the notion that addiction must last for life. Or we could argue for reshaping the material foundations of society so that corporations hold less ideological power. None of these responses would attribute agency to the drug or create an identity centered on addiction. Marlowe explains how, instead, American culture has rendered writing about the non-disastrous heroin experience off limits; she argues that, because of this taboo, addiction has been constructed by these narratives: "The structure of addiction is maintained by this taboo about writing about it. The more heroin is hyped as ultimately powerful and irresistible—to the point that merely reading about heroin is thought to cause heroin use—the more people are going to

⁴³⁸ Danny Boyle, *Trainspotting*, 1996.

addict themselves to it.”⁴³⁹ Of course, some people do struggle with addiction for life. But the fact that the following passage still (decades later) is unusual in writing about addiction, though sociological research has shown it to be the more common experience, underscores Marlowe’s point: “People often ask me if it’s difficult no longer using heroin, and they’re surprised when I say no. That uncontrollable need...surely I miss it? But once I hadn’t done heroin in a few months, my desire to do it completely disappeared.”⁴⁴⁰

In *The Recovering*, Jamison occasionally voices similar thoughts, such as when, after having been in AA for a while, she thinks, “*Maybe I don’t need this. Maybe I just want it.*”⁴⁴¹ She quickly shows this to be incorrect: “Then I drank, and needed it again.”⁴⁴² At this point in her narrative Jamison has, similar to what Marlowe does at the end of her memoir, “disavowed the identity of being an alcoholic” in order to try to “drink moderately,” yet her obsessive thoughts indicate how misguided she is in giving up the alcoholic identity: “*Will we get drunk? Can I get drunk if he doesn’t get drunk? What will he think if he sees me trying to get drunk?*”⁴⁴³ She shows herself thinking through the questions about the construction of addiction that I have provided in this chapter:

I spent long chunks of time in my hot apartment trying to tell myself I had the drinking figured out. It had gotten bad because of my depression, but now I was medicated. Or it had gotten bad because of me and Dave, but now we would work better. Or it had been recovery itself, convincing me I was alcoholic with the Möbius strip of its logic: *If you don’t think you are an alcoholic, then you probably are one.* What bullshit was that? There was no way out of it. Sure it *felt true* that I wanted a drink every fucking night, but maybe I just felt that way because I’d sat through enough meetings where people talked about feeling that way. I’d taken on the identity because it had been a useful way to sort

⁴³⁹ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 155.

⁴⁴⁰ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 230.

⁴⁴¹ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 249.

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 250.

out my sense of self at the time. Now I resented meetings for polluting my relationship to drinking.⁴⁴⁴

I do not doubt Jamison's sincerity, nor do I doubt that her consideration of AA creating her desire through attributing to her an addict-identity did not help her quit drinking. Yet she provides no other narrative options in a book full of narratives. Characteristic of Jamison's prose throughout, she includes these ideas, presents no counterargument, and then refutes the line of thinking through the stories she chooses to tell. The effect of pairing this passage with her own and many other euphoric narratives (in which AA is essential) is to indicate that reducing the desire to drink to anything besides a disease/identity is faulty. Alcoholism cannot be the result of her mental health or her personal circumstances. She includes the theoretically interesting argument that AA plays a role in constructing the alcoholic's desire, but the only people who stop drinking in the book do so through intense involvement in AA.

Jamison ultimately locates the horror of addiction in the thrall. The issue is the intoxicant that hijacks the user's brain. The NIDA, in recent articles, continues to claim "the metaphor of hijacking remains pretty apt."⁴⁴⁵ The continued use of the hijacking metaphor signals something

⁴⁴⁴ Jamison, *The Recovering*, 255.

⁴⁴⁵ "What Does It Mean When We Call Addiction a Brain Disorder?," March 23, 2018, <https://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2018/03/what-does-it-mean-when-we-call-addiction-brain-disorder>. The author explains why the hijacking metaphor remains apt: "The highly potent drugs currently claiming so many lives, such as heroin and fentanyl, did not exist for most of our evolutionary history...Because they facilitate the same learning processes as natural rewards, drugs easily trick that circuitry into thinking they are more important than natural rewards like food, sex, or parenting." This statement raises several questions. What is the relative potency of drugs such as heroin and fentanyl versus the drugs humans have been using throughout history? If the notion of hijacking depends on recently developed, highly potent drugs, it would seem to suggest that more familiar, less potent drugs (such as alcohol) cannot be said to hijack the user's brain, since humans have been drinking alcohol throughout recorded history. (Though the term "evolutionary history" is vague and the author does not specify how far back into history a drug must exist in order for humans to evolutionarily adapt to it.) Is the disease model of addiction then not applicable to alcohol?

important about how disease-model advocates think about drug use. The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of hijacking demonstrates how the word implies a criminal actor: “To steal (contraband or stolen goods) in transit, to rob (a bootlegger or smuggler) of his illicit goods; to hold up and commandeer (a vehicle and its load) in transit; to seize (an aeroplane) in flight and force the pilot to fly to a new destination.”⁴⁴⁶ In attempting to reduce stigma, disease-model advocates displace criminality and agency from the user to the drug. In her idiosyncratic analysis, Marlowe indicates how this dark agency attributed to drugs like heroin led her not only to seek it out but to continue using until addicted: “I...bought into the cultural mystique of the drug more than I knew. Although I was skeptical of the mythos of abjection, I also suspected that if I hadn’t felt physical need, I must not have had the full experience.”⁴⁴⁷ Marlowe notes that “most people who’ve never used addictive drugs become suspiciously upset when you suggest that heroin isn’t that devilishly habit-forming, that we choose our addictions.”⁴⁴⁸ For Marlowe, the problem is not the pleasure provided by the chemical. The problem instead is the theories we have chosen to believe, and the stories we have chosen to tell. She thus writes that “the horror’s in the zeitgeist,” rather than in the thrall.⁴⁴⁹ In emphasizing the interplay between the narratives we tell, our willingness to believe these narratives, and our actions, Marlowe provides a much more complex understanding of drug use and addiction than a theory that simply attributes power and agency to the substance itself. In doing so, Marlowe showcases a way of depicting drug use—even problematic drug use—that does not demonstrate the same anxiety about pleasure, or

⁴⁴⁶ “Hijack,” in *OED Online* (Oxford UP, December 2019), <https://www-oed-com.proxy.libraries.smu.edu/view/Entry/86971?rskey=fpD24n&result=1> (accessed January 23, 2020).

⁴⁴⁷ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 229-230.

⁴⁴⁸ Marlowe, *How to Stop Time*, 230.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

the desire to think about drug use in primarily normative terms, that many of the other texts I have examined do. Instead, Marlowe acknowledges the futility and questions the desirability of the attempt to create a “drug free America.”

EPILOGUE

In Benjamin Kunkel's *Indecision* (2005), the protagonist of the novel, Dwight, is suffering from indecision, which the medical establishment in the novel is attempting to turn into a medical disorder. Indecision both results from the triumph of capitalism and constant consumer choices it forces us to make, and—through medicalization—will allow capitalism to continue unabated (by enriching the pharmaceutical companies who are developing a drug to treat indecision). Yet, the novel uses this premise to imagine Dwight at least trying to put an end to the end of history. Tellingly, Dwight only recovers political conviction, and is ideologically awakened, after a series of drug experiences that we could call placebo narratives. One of these involves a literal placebo of a drug in pharmaceutical testing (the one that is supposed to cure indecision). Like David Foster Wallace, Kunkel rejects the idea that a drug can cure a disease that is a manifestation of political economy. Unlike Wallace, Kunkel does not see sobriety as in any way indicative of the cure. The other placebo narratives in the novel feature drugs that work (that induce bodily experiences), yet in the buildup and then deflation that occur in these scenes, drugs are shown to be politically inconsequential. Dwight's use of ecstasy on the night before September 11, 2001, or his psychedelic trip while in South America, are bodily experiences, but neither provide nor hold him back from political answers. The conclusion the novel comes to—unsatisfying for the many mid-2000s reviewers still searching for “new solutions” to our longstanding problems—is that political answers can only be found in politics, which will require intention, persuasion, and a commitment to creating a better future. In other words, it

rejects the idea that moral and political meaning should be primarily found in what we consume.

Drug Free America: The Ethics and Politics of Drugs in Contemporary American Literature similarly has argued that excess social, moral, and political power has been granted to drugs, both positively and negatively, from the 1970s to the present. In explicitly radical, Chicano Vietnam War novels, we find the romanticizing of the use of some drugs—such as marijuana—while other drugs—such as heroin and crack cocaine—are seen as instituting an imperialist oppression. In the minimalist novels of Joan Didion and Bret Easton Ellis, drugs occasion a loss of control within the nuclear family, which the authors use to express a longing for the private hierarchies of the past. In David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, excess consumption has altered the entire population in his dystopia, and the only way to escape recursive consumption is through sobriety. In Leslie Jamison’s *The Recovering*, addiction is both a disease and identity, and one that forces all stories of intoxication into either a dysphoric or euphoric narrative mold.

While I have been concerned mostly with showing that this attribution of power to drugs is the case, and demonstrating the tension between the moralistic thinking behind this and the so-called neoliberal era during which the War on Drugs came into being, an expanded version of this project would consider the question of *why*. Using texts that I was not able to cover in the dissertation—such as Kunkel’s *Indecision*, Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985), Tao Lin’s novel *Taipei* (2013) and his memoir *Trip* (2018), Nico Walker’s novel *Cherry* (2018), Michael Pollan’s memoir and cultural history *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* (2018), and television series such as *The Wire* and *Maniac*—I would explore how the contemporary era of American politics has not left all social, moral, and political questions to the individual (as is

often claimed by scholars of neoliberalism) but has restricted the domain of the political and heightened the moral and political importance of consumption choices—a phenomenon that adds nuance to the ongoing scholarly discussion about neoliberalism while at the same time accepting the claim about the era as “post-historical” in the sense used by Walter Benn Michaels.

Foregrounding the “why” question would also allow me to put this work into more direct and extended conversation with theoretical treatments of drug use, by thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard, Avital Ronell, and Jacques Derrida.

This expanded investigation would also open up a timely conversation about the so-called “opioid crisis,” the reporting on which has featured many characteristics of drug panics, while at times showing more sympathy to the coded-white users. The opioid crisis—or, what some have more accurately labeled the overdose crisis—again has occasioned claims about the great power of the drug themselves while often failing to consider the question of demand. Why is it that the areas with the most overdoses were also impoverished? As Kunkel’s novel demonstrates and as I have argued throughout this dissertation, the tendency throughout the War on Drugs era has been to focus on the drug itself while—perhaps intentionally—failing to deal with the political questions related to resource distribution and whether or not communities have social hope. This project would like to open up these questions for further investigation by the scholarly community both inside and outside the humanities.

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