# "THE WHOLE WORLD COULD BREAK INTO A THOUSAND LITTLE PIECES": ANXIETIES OF INCOMPREHENSIBILITY AND COMMUNITY IN MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

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# ABSTRACT

This dissertation contributes towards a broader understanding of the anxious voice and experience, especially as this voice and experience emerges in the narrative fiction of modern America. In its examination of voice-centric novels of modern and contemporary American fiction, it gives credence and weight to the voice and lived experience of everyday anxiety by showing, despite its tendencies towards obstruction, its critical and personal dynamism. While the affect of anxiety is often understood as a "narrowing," "strangling constriction" that shuts down productive engagement with society, this dissertation argues that this perspective ignores how anxiety almost always emerges from a sense of loss of firm footing or connection in the world. Inspired by the philosophy of Stanley Cavell, I argue that as much as anxiety often marks a fissure or a loss of reason, it also marks or is born from a sense of fissure or loss of community. This is true, even when ironically, and tragically, anxiety emerges as and emerges out of an avoidance, withdrawal, or denial of responsibility and a connection to others. While anxiety may destabilize individuals and their speech, there remains an anxious voice, often one that reaches out as a plea to be heard and distresses in being incomprehensible, untranslatable, and thus rendering that individual abandoned and alone. If we allow ourselves to hear past the circumlocutions, compulsive chatter, and staggered gasps, we may find something both beautiful, piercing, and regenerating in the anxious experience and voice. We may, at the very least, help the anxious individual back to their place in the sensemaking community or discover how a community, in acknowledging its collective anxieties, may lead itself not to ruin but to productive rearticulation.

**To Rayna and my parents.**

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The chapters that follow seek to unpack the experience of anxiety and are themselves products of the anxious experience. Through the course of their writing, the author has moved and moved again through anxiety. Since I began the project over ten years ago, the world's understanding and acceptance of anxiety has changed. Thankfully stigma surrounding anxiety has lessened and those who suffer it do not feel as much of a need to hide it. This means, on the one hand, anxiety is no longer simply something to "get over," but has become a condition more often approached with great sympathy. It is more public and greater discussed, not merely something to be "managed," relegated by neoliberal institutions, such as the corporate university and pharmaceutical industry, as "a failure of productivity" (Cvetkovich 18). In fact, I can think of few people who have not admitted to suffering anxiety. Everyone understands it, and wherever, whenever, I have told someone what I am working on, no matter their education or background, they have cut me off to tell me a story of their own anxiety. We may not agree fully on what constitutes anxiety, yet there are connecting threads in the *fact* of anxious experience.

Yet anxiety, on the other hand, is also that condition that marks a particular crisis of faith, a feeling that drives the anxious individual to find firm footing. As Ann Cvetkovich explains of her own depression and dissertation struggles, I understand anxiety may be both the product and source of "intellectual blockages" arising from feelings of professional and political despair (21). Certainly, in our current day-to-day we may feel compelled to ask: Where shall we go? What can be done?

For myself while writing this dissertation, I could not have made it through my intellectual blockages, nor the crises of faith brought on by anxiety without the immense compassion and support of others. Without them I would not have been able to refocus this energy into something productive, meaningful, and at times beautiful. Indeed, through writing a dissertation about, among other subjects, the anxious feeling of lacking a sense-making community, I have found out exactly how large my community truly is. It is impossible in the space provided for me to account for everyone, and for that I hope I can be forgiven. So thank you:

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I would like to thank my parents, Barbara Bassett and Jon Gluckman, for your unwavering support: for fighting for me since day one; for getting indignant on my behalf; for putting up with panicked 3am phone calls; for your unconditional love and encouragement. Thank you, Mom, for your warmth and empathy. Thank you for encouraging a love of art and cultivating creativity. Thank you, Dad, for being my constant editor, and intellectual companion. Thank you for sharing your humor and love of literature and music with me. You two were the true beginnings of this journey, and I love you both.

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Mostly, I would like to express my undying gratitude to my wife Rayna Tarlow: Without you this would have been impossible. You have faced the brunt of my anxiety with compassion and love. You have made sure I have taken care of myself and you have kept me grounded. You have listened to me when I felt alone. Thank you for always being there for me, for believing in me when I thought all of this would crumble and affectionately, but firmly reminding me that there is more to life and more to me than this dissertation. You have always provided me strength and you have never let me go. I am excited to start our new chapter together and could not be luckier to face an anxious, yet cautiously hopeful future with my best friend and love of my life.

For all these words, I love you more than I can express.

-Stephen Bassett Gluckman

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ABSTRACT .......... ii

DEDICATION .......... iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .......... iv

ABBREVIATIONS .......... ix

CHAPTERS

1. INTRODUCTION: “HAVING THE NERVES:” LITERATURE, PHILOSOPHY AND THE EXPRESSION AND EXPERIENCE OF EVERYDAY ANXIETY .......... 1

2. “THEY DIDN’T KNOW AS HE KNEW”: DAVID SCHEARL’S IDIOSYNCRACY AND HIS ANXIOUS STRUCTURING OF THE DAY TO DAY IN *CALL IT SLEEP* .......... 66

3. “WHO IS HE WRITING TO?” OR “PLEASE BE PATIENT. ARE YOU THE ONE I CAN TELL MY WHOLE LIFE TO?”: THE ANXIETY OF ENTANGLEMENT AND ALIENATION IN *TRIPMASTER MONKEY* AND *ERASURE* .......... 141

4. “...I MEAN IF THE WATER’S BAD, THE HELL WITH IT: EVERYTHING ELSE IS BAD”: COMMUNAL COLLAPSE AND DEMOCRATIC ANXIETY IN *THE LOST SCRAPBOOK* AND *FLEE* .......... 219

REFERENCES .......... 307

# ABBREVIATIONS

**Blanchot:**

GO – *The Gaze of Orpheus*

WD - *The Writing of the Disaster*

**Cavell:**

AL - "Avoidance of Love"

CHU - *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*

CR - *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*

CT - *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*

NYU - *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein*

PH - *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*

QO - *The Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*

WU - "What's the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?"

**Dara:**

EC - *The Easy Chain*

F - *Flee*

LS - *The Lost Scrapbook*

**Everett:**

E - *Erasure*

DNA - "The Devolution of Nuclear Associability"

**Heidegger:**

BDT - "Building Dwelling Thinking"

BT - *Being and Time*

WIM - "What is Metaphysics?"

**Hume:**

EHU- *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

THN - *A Treatise on Human Nature*

**Kingston:**

TM - *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*

**Roth:**

CIS - *Call It Sleep*

MRS 2 - *Mercy of a Rude Stream: A Diving Rock on the Hudson.* Vol. 2

SL - *Shifting Landscape: A Composite, 1925-1987*

**Wittgenstein:**

CV – *Culture and Value*

LWPP2 - *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol. 2: The Inner and the Outer, 1949-1951.*

PI - *Philosophical Investigations*

PN - *Private Notebooks: 1914-1916*

RFM - *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*

TLP - *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

**Other:**

CA – *The Concept of Anxiety* by Søren Kierkegaard

MA - *Meaning of Anxiety* by Rollo May

RO - *The Revolution of the Ordinary* by Toril Moi

# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION: “HAVING THE NERVES:” LITERATURE, PHILOSOPHY AND THE EXPRESSION AND EXPERIENCE OF EVERYDAY ANXIETY

“I was, Stephen said with energy and growing fear” - Joyce, Ulysses 1.5.

“Few things hold the perceptions more thoroughly captive than anxiety about what we have got to say.” —George Eliot

““That is not what I meant at all / That is not it, at all.’” –T. S. Eliot

“Hey kid.”

A voice rises from rungs below a teen (“You”) of a high dive. They desire “to know” whether “your plans up here involve the whole day or what exactly is the story.” In “Forever Overhead,” David Foster Wallace’s[1] “You,” the teen, so prepared when grounded for the sublime high-dive, has stopped anxiously mid-rung. Seeing “the whole complicated thing,” from above, time had seemed not simply frozen but non-existent: “No time and no real sound but your blood squeaking in your head.” “If you wanted you could really stay here forever, vibrating inside so fast you float motionless in time, like a bee over something sweet.” Yet with a “Hey” that wrenches you back to reality. “There’s been time this whole time. You can't kill time with your heart.” Indeed, “At some point there has gotten to be more line behind you than in front of you.” And now you are a “blind” “rhythm that excludes thinking”—“like ants” marching ; suddenly a part “of a machine that moves only forward.” And there is now nowhere else but down, to complete the motion that’s brought you here, the final, qualitative leap into the air, towards below, towards ground, for better or worse. “You have grown into a new fragility.”

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[1] And we must wonder, anxiously, in these times, if Wallace is the best way to start things, with all we know about Wallace. See Hungerford, “On Not Reading DFW.”

“Hey kid are you okay?” (Wallace, “Forever” 5-16)

Wallace’s story illustrates the quintessential moment of anxiety. In it we find that the notions that led us towards this moment, this action, have been, if not faulty, perhaps not as fully formed or grounded as we believed, more sublimely airy than firmly grounded. Yet these actions are irrevocable. We are stuck between the onrushing past and towards an uncertain, dizzying future. Projected forward, we find ourselves precariously and disorientingly suspended in frictionless air. We are part of a machine, not in a paranoid conspiratorial manner, but in the necessary, unflinching progression that is the consequence of our inevitable acting, where we must make forward movements, when we desire to take no steps at all. In that moment, we seem without voice, yet desperate to re-articulate our position and find “rough ground” (PI §107).

***

The chapters that follow seek to unpack this experience of anxiety and are themselves products of the anxious experience. This dissertation contributes towards a broader understanding of the anxious voice and experience, especially as this voice and experience emerges in the narrative fiction of modern America. Much like work, such as Nick Salvato’s study of “obstructive” affects, *Obstruction,* this dissertation takes the “deceptively simple” starting point that anxiety, “almost always taken to be incompatible with and detrimentally obstructive to scholarly inquiry…may, if properly directed, be conducive to critical work and valuable, more broadly, for intellectual life” (1). In line with Salvato’s obstructions, I contend that anxiety too “need not…be felt and understood merely as detriments to intellection, especially to intellection’s cultivation in writing—that the obstructive may, rather, and rather paradoxically, form the basis for and sustain material manifestations of generative thinking" (1).[2] Moreover, in its examination of voice-centric novels of modern and contemporary American fiction, it gives credence and weight to the voice and lived experience of everyday anxiety, by showing, despite its tendencies towards obstruction, its critical and personal dynamism. While anxiety is often understood as an affect that shuts down productive engagement with society, this dissertation argues that this ignores how anxiety almost always emerges from a sense of loss of communal connection. In fact, inspired by Stanley Cavell, I argue that as much as anxiety often marks fissure or loss of reason, that anxiety also marks or emerges from a sense of fissure or loss of community. This is true, even when ironically, and tragically, anxiety emerges as and emerges out of an avoidance, withdrawal, or denial of responsibility and a connection to others. While anxiety may destabilize individuals and their speech, there remains an anxious voice, often one that reaches out as a plea to be heard and distresses in being incomprehensible, untranslatable, and thus alone. Through careful examination of the anxious voice and experience, the dissertation attempts to hold the characters as individuals, asking them, as Irvin Yalom does with his patients, to "look straight into the heart of your panic [and t]ell me what you see" (*Staring* 127). If we allow ourselves to hear past the circumlocutions, compulsive chatter, and staggered gasps, as we ethically ought to do, we may find something both beautiful, piercing, and regenerating in the anxious experience and voice. We may at the very least, try to see how we can help the anxious individual back to their place in the sensemaking community, or discover how a community, in its acknowledging its collective anxieties, may lead itself not to ruin but productive rearticulation.

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[2] And again, in agreement with Salvato, this dissertation is itself "offered as a kind of token, emblem, or proof" of anxiety's generative potential (1).

It is almost too common place to assert that contemporary experience is dominated by anxiety-, or dread-[3] inducing phenomena. “From the aesthetics theories of Romanticism and constructions of the sublime to the present day discourse surrounding hyper speed, ubiquitous computing and speculative design,” writes Zander Karskens, “dread is a notion that is often touched upon when analyzing the relationship between the contemporary subject and his/her tech-controlled surroundings” (Zelfde 2). To be sure, as Justine Murison highlights, “anxiety is knit into the very narratives that we tell about Western modernity” and “naming one’s era ‘the age of anxiety’ has been a ubiquitous practice since at least the eighteenth century” (Murison, “Anxiety” 13). Certainly, anxiety is acknowledged as a near-omnipresent condition. We may say, with Eva Brann, that anxiety is still “the exemplary mood of modernity” (Brann 319).

Nevertheless, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with their combination of rapid change, democratic instability, and technologies of world annihilation, anxiety has hit a particular height. “Living with the prospect of devastation, even annihilation, as we have for [at least] two generations, has shaped our entire culture,” proclaims Robret Wuthnow, writing of our often inadequate response to crisis and crisis culture, “We have created and live in a culture of peril” (Wuthnow 2). Whether we are angst-ridden over communist or terrorist infiltration, the next economic collapse, a new pandemic, the truth destabilizing, truth-erasing rise of misinformation ("fake news") and foreign manipulation, the end of democracy and the rise of fascism (from both the Left and the Right), or the final sudden death knell of the bomb or slow collapse of climate, we simply cannot deny that we live in a time of permanent upheaval and uncertainty. Here, reprieve from catastrophe only encourages anticipation of the next catastrophic event, a fact not lost on news outlets and politicians who play off such insecurities. Indeed, given the prevalence of anxiety throughout the Cold War and the continuing struggle of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), it comes as no surprise that an anxious rhetoric from politicians, and 24-hour news cycles and social media have constructed unique forms of affective manipulation. In such times, we are justified to follow W. H. Auden's classification of the twentieth century as "The Age of Anxiety" (1947) and extend it into the twenty-first.

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[3] While the contributors of *Dread: The Dizziness of Freedom* (2014) edited by Juha van’t Zelfde differentiate dread from anxiety, this seems to me to be a false, or at least unuseful move. Taking their title itself from Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Dread*, more often translated as *The Concept of Anxiety*, the dread and anxiety seem to be fairly interchangeable, or at least very closely related. This dissertation will use words such as “dread,” “anxiety,” and “angst” fairly interchangeably.

However, within our medicalized and psychologized age, where anxiety has only increasingly become more casually embraced and discussed, the increasing number of diagnoses of anxiety in adolescents and adults, is paralleled by the rise in prescriptions of antianxiety drugs in our century and adds a certain uniqueness to the "Age of Anxiety" title in the twenty-first century.[4] Recently, scholars such as Jason Schnittker have confirmed this title, writing that "[a]nxiety constitutes a significant part of the total mental suffering in the United States" and "if ever there were an age of anxiety, it seems to be now" (Schnittker 1). More specifically, he continues, "[a]s a category, anxiety disorders are the most common psychiatric disorders in the United States, exceeding mood disorders, impulse control disorders, and substance use disorders" (Schnittker 1). Some self-help and popular psychology books, such as Martha Beck's *Beyond Anxiety: Curiosity, Creativity, and Finding Your Life's Purpos*e, attempt to rework our understanding of anxiety as something potentially productive. Yet, one merely needs to look at, alongside the lucrative pharmaceutical industry, the prolific industry of antianxiety literature and "workbooks" that has exploded over the last decade to see that anxiety is most commonly understood as an obstruction to be overcome and eradicated. These books, which from even a cursory search on Amazon's bestseller lists include titles such as, Joseph Nguyen's *Don't Believe Everything You Think: Why Your Thinking Is The Beginning & End Of Suffering,* Judson Brewer's *Unwinding Anxiety: New Science Shows How to Break the Cycles of Worry and Fear to Heal Your Mind,* Barry McDonagh's *Dare: The New Way to End Anxiety and Stop Panic Attacks*, Artem Kudelia's *How to Get Over Social Anxiety: CBT Strategies for True Confidence and Deep Connection,* and even the *Anxiety Relief Coloring Book for Adults: Mindfulness Coloring to Soothe Anxiety,* all speak to the prevailing orientation to anxiety as simply obstruction. American society, built initially upon notions of optimism and opportunity, understands anxiety as something to be "managed," merely an affliction and "failuure of productivity" to be cured or eliminated, especially in our profoundly anxious, Trumpian age of "American Carnage" (Cvetkovich 18). I do not contend that these popular, self-help books or their objects are not worthwhile or ineffective—indeed, why would I myself go to therapy or take medication if I were not a believer in the management of anxiety, nor somebody who often wishes he was less so. Nevertheless, adopting that pervasive perspective of anxiety as simply obstruction decisively severs anxiety from productive engagement with reality.

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[4] See Andrea Tone's aptly titled *The Age of Anxiety: A History of America's Turbulent Affair with Tranquilizers* for an overarching history of the rise of antianxiety medication in American society.

As it seems like we will never be rid of anxiety, it is naïve to say that the fact that our world is anxious somehow assumes some pastoral, un-anxious realm to which we may return if we just were to see things right, or get our society in order. As Brann notes, in spite of its medicalization, anxiety "retains its sense of a humanly expectable affliction," and thus is an experience to be understood rather than simply denied (319). Rather, as theorists such as philosophers like Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger, as well as existential therapies in the vein of Rollo May and Irvin Yalom have argued, anxiety is a foundational state of being to be understood as "the very condition through which people relate to the world" (Salecl 15). It is the mode and mood through which we engage with life, even as it jars us from the immediacy of being. Anxiety also confirms our entanglement in the world and others. However, to say this does not mean we must glorify anxiety as some sort of affective savior. Instead, this dissertation seeks to unpack forms of the everyday, ordinary, or "common" experience of anxiety as both that discomforting and de-constructing state we wish to overcome, while also giving credence to the potential for fruitful reconstruction (of a self, a world, a view) that the experience and knowledge of anxiety provides. "Dread is an essential and potentially productive element of the human consciousness," contends Karskens, "and… a defining characteristic of the other condition humane" (Zelfde 2). While in our panic, anxiety may often lead us to despair, so too anxiety may signal and generate ecstatic and creative flutterings. This dissertation attempts to give credence to both aspects of anxiety without glorifying or diminishing the experience.

Therefore, my intention in writing this dissertation is not to argue for the presence of anxiety in American society. Others have accomplished this within the fields of philosophy and psychology, and indeed—all we need to do is look to see its presence permeating most aspects of twenty-first century life. Nor does this dissertation claim to psychologically diagnose anxiety in our society in any way that competes with or pretends to be a psychological study and method. Though this dissertation touches upon psychological study, it does not attach itself strictly to it nor claim to be a science itself. Instead, it is, if anything, closer to the therapeutic take on anxiety that aligns itself with the "everyday" form. I examine how authors have explored the experience of anxiety, even when acknowledged as uncomfortable or problematic, as a theoretically rich condition that can even counterintuitively emerge as a potentially constructive source. This means paying close attention to how writers portray and engage with the voice and experience of anxiety in an ethical, political, and aesthetic manner. However, it also contends that while anxiety may be deeply personal, it is rarely disconnected from the individual's relationship (or lack thereof), with the community of which they are, for better or worse, a member.

By examining the fiction of American authors, I present how anxiety voices itself and contributes to our nearly equal measures of dynamic and discomforting engagement with our reality, with each other, and with ourselves. While anxiety may arrive from a *feeling* of voicelessness in one's society or from that society's dismissal of the anxious voice as nonsensical or pathological, I argue that anxiety emerges as a common currency between individuals. The chapters that follow, particularly through engaging with the philosophy of Stanley Cavell, examine how anxiety emerges from a sense of being out of attunement with others while also not dismissing the anxious voice as senseless.

On the contrary, my dissertation uplifts the anxious experience as a dynamic one in individuals attempting to work through anxiety and alienation on their journey back to the community. In line with Cavell's philosophic project, this dissertation recovers the human voice and experience by carefully looking at how the anxious individual articulates their self, if even just to themself. While I acknowledge that we may feel "robbed of speech" by anxiety, as Heidegger contends, I deny that anxious speech and anxious experience are at root nonsensical or inarticulate (WIM 101). On the contrary, this perceived lack of communicative ability is not how many individuals experience their anxiety and could not be further from the case in anxious literature. This dissertation presents anxiety as either a means of communication itself or a state in which the anxious individual or society would require a form of communication. Further, the anxious individual's stuttering grasp at language while attempting to make sense of his or her experience may even be necessary for genuinely profound creation, signaling a common yet dynamic and underplayed relation to the world.

While much popular literature on anxiety has focused on anxiety simply as an obstruction, this dissertation joins the efforts of some psychotherapists and psychologists who have grasped its creative potential. Rollo May, in his survey of anxiety in the mid-twentieth century, noted how psychologists have often seen anxiety as an intrinsic part of the creative temperament. "The creative person, who ventures into many situations which expose him to shock," writes May, pulling from Goldstein, "is more often threatened by anxiety but, assuming the creativity is genuine, he is more able to overcome these threats constructively." The process of working through anxiety is, for May, an act of courage that leads to constructive and creative responses that those who have not suffered from it would not reach. Indeed, psychologists like Goldstein, and approvingly referenced by May, mark culture and creativity as products of "the joy of overcoming tasks and shocks" that generate and are generated by anxiety (May 60-61). Scholars such as James Rovira, in his work *Blake and Kierkegaard: Creation and Anxiety* (2010), have shown the intimate connection between aesthetic and philosophic creativity and anxious thought. More recently, and specifically, studies such as that by Kalina Moskaluk, Jordan Zlatev, and Joost van de Weijer (2022) have shown quantitatively that the experience of anxiety drives creative use of language, particularly through metaphor. As opposed to stress that calls forth "conventionalized" metaphors (such as "burned out," or "I just feel like I'm in a pressure cooker," and the like), "the experience of anxiety, either in its existential form of 'dizziness of freedom,' or diagnosed as an anxiety disorder, is less common, and thus more likely to require more innovative metaphors, such as those in the motto of the paper" (309). Alongside Kierkegaard's striking metaphor of "the dizziness of anxiety," participants in the study grasped at language in dynamic ways to describe the fuzzy yet visceral experience of anxiety, describing feelings of "floating away," or "clinging to stay inside my body" (318). Samir Chopra (2024), in his "Philosophic Guide," blends memoir and scholarship to provide a text to help us become less "anxious about being anxious" (13). Instead, Chopra argues, we should understand the condition as an essential, if uncomfortable, mode in living an active, engaged, and at core *human* life. These studies give credence to the dynamic nature of anxious experience that impulses to contain or emphases on mere overwhelmingness diminish.

Of course, anxiety is an uncomfortable state. Certainly, when one is struck by anxiety, we desire to do away with it as soon as possible. Anxiety is the self on trial, where the subject is told, by themself, to simultaneously give an account of their-self and then stand witness against that very account. The anxious moment is a defining, as much as dissolving, moment. “Peril is the mirror we hold up to ourselves,” asserts Wuthnow, “It forces us to ask what it means to be human” (2). It focuses our attention on the shortness and uncertainty of our lives, on how little grasp we may truly have upon ourselves. But also, in our feeling of vulnerability, anxiety heightens our sense of self, at times generating a desire to shed ourselves *of* ourselves, to note exist, to disappear. And yet stubbornly persist. In other words, anxiety lives precariously between the definable and its dissolution. However, the precarious position is not simply deconstructive, not simply annihilating, but is an utterly unique experience that leaves individuals profoundly changed when they reach the other side of the anxious abyss. Rollo May notes that anxiety’s discomfort is, in part, what leads to its constructive potential. He explains,

> Now creating, actualizing one’s possibilities, always involves destructive as well as constructive aspects. It always involves destroying the status quo, destroying old patterns within oneself, progressively destroying what one has clung to from childhood on, and creating new and original forms and ways of living. If you do not do this, you are refusing to grow, refusing to avail yourself of possibilities; you are shirking your responsibility to yourself. Hence refusal to actualize one’s possibilities brings guilt toward one’s self. But creating also means destroying the status quo of one’s environment, breaking the old forms; it means producing something new and original in human relations as well as in cultural forms (e.g., the creativity of the artist). Every experience of creativity has its potentiality of aggression or denial toward other persons in one’s environment or toward established patterns within one’s self. To put the matter figuratively, in every experience of creativity something in the past is killed so that something new in the present may be born. (MA 40)

For anything generative to be born, something that seemed solid, perhaps something we staked our lives on, must dissolve or be killed. By making the anxious individual hyper-aware of his or her being, anxiety creates a space for being through productive critique.

Within anxiety, we find our persistence is in our shattering. This is what is meant, as we will see, by David Schearl's secret knowledge in *Call It Sleep* that everything can be otherwise. While indeed, an aspect of anxiety is dismantling and disorienting, it is through this discomfort that creative and vital reconstruction can occur. Accordingly, my dissertation demonstrates that anxiety often leaves room for creation, not in spite of its nature of not-knowing, but as a product of this very ignorance and collapse of self- and sense-certainty.

That being said, this does not mean the dissertation takes an absolutely optimistic view of anxiety that ignores its constraints and awfulness. By providing in some sense phenomenologies of anxiety, or at least to provide detailed attention to the ways in which anxiety, sometimes problematically, expresses itself, the dissertation shows the areas where anxiety provides openings to new meanings and ways of being, even if the characters or voices expressing that anxiety fail to recognize these openings themselves. Here, it is important for the reader to pull meaning and form from anxious experience. At the very least, this dissertation offers and urges its readers to offer, not only to the characters of the novels examined but hopefully to real world anxious others, the same compassion and solidarity Yalom identifies, when he writes, "…Behind my explicit offer of presence, there was a strong implicit message: 'No matter how much terror you have, I will never shun or abandon you'" (*Staring* 130).

While these chapters examine works that span from the early twentieth century to our contemporary moment, they all emerge from the anxious moment of today and strive to illuminate patterns of anxiety manifested in our present moment. This introduction will first give a brief synopsis of the history and medical view of anxiety as "narrowing," “strangling constriction,” ultimately arguing that this understanding of anxiety is itself too narrow in its connotations of simple obstruction (Murision, *Politics* 7; Brann 319).. It will then provide a summary of the recent work in literary criticism on anxiety. However, as the main inspiration for this dissertation emerges from philosophy, the introduction will turn towards an overview of philosophic foundations of anxiety, particularly the work of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, before refocusing discussion on anxiety as present in the work of Stanley Cavell. I will then, while not claiming to put forth a theory of anxiety, recount some dynamics of anxiety the dissertation identifies. Finally, this introduction will provide a chapter overview of the dissertation.

## I. Theories and Forms of Anxiety

Though far from comprehensive, there are at least three major categories of anxiety with which this dissertation is in conversation. In order of prevalence in this dissertation, they are the Medical/Psychological (alongside the Historical usage); the Theoretical/Philosophical, or “Original,” to use Heidegger’s term; and the “Everyday,” or Ordinary. (There is also, adjacently and closest to the “Ordinary,” the “critical” anxiety discussed throughout the dissertation).

### A. *“A strangling constriction”: The Historical, Medical, Psychological Perspective of Anxiety (Disorder)*

Let us begin with the Psychological/Medical/Historical variety. Though I do not bind myself to this usage, it is useful to look at the way in which anxiety has been historically framed and recently medicalized. While anxiety has, of course, been around since forever, the symptoms associated with anxiety have not always been organized under that banner. Most closely related to our definition are the French word *anxieté*, denoting “worry, disquiet,” and before that the Latin anxietās for “worry, solicitude, extreme care, over-carefulness" (OED Online 2021, "anxiety," qtd. in Mursion "Anxiety" 14). Classical writings such as including those found in the Hippocratic Corpus and Cicero, identify a disorder that differentiated from sadness that caused "a feeling of choking or distress…the hysterical symptom of a ball rising in the throat,"[5] evoking senses of a "narrowing," and literally, a "strangling constriction" (Murision, *Politics* 7; Brann 319). However, the term "anxiety," unlike melancholia and depression, was not embraced as a medical term until the nineteenth century.

Instead, Murison notes, "other terms…used to diagnose disordered feelings of concern or worry, including several residual terms from humoral theory — "the vapors," hypochondria, spleen, sensibility, and panophobia (a panic terror), or simply just "having the nerves" (Mursion, "Anxiety" 14). Starting in the eighteenth century and working through the nineteenth century, anxiety, alongside its kin like nervousness and neurasthenia,"became associated with the fast-paced life of the urban West and with wealth, whiteness, and femininity" (14). Our modern understanding of anxiety as a diagnosable malady occurs with the work of Sigmund Freud and George Miller Beard, the latter's *Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion* (1880), providing a solidity to the diagnosis by connecting it explicitly with somatic elements deriving from the nervous system. By the end of the nineteenth century, "nervous physiology" characterized the self as an "energized yet susceptible body, poised at the vulnerable border between one's inner domains and the social landscape" (Murison, *Politics* 170).

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[5] Murison indicates that this imagery "partially explains the theory of the womb's wandering during the classical period" (Politics 7).

Throughout all of its manifestations, anxiety by definition and etymology, whether recognized as mentally and physically debilitating or as “narrowing constriction,” would seem to point towards the annihilation of voice and agency. “Whatever term it fell under, though, ” writes Murison, “anxiety was and continues to be a psychological disorder best known for its somatic traces — fidgeting, sleeplessness, exhaustion, indigestion, and muscle aches and pains” (“Anxiety” 14). In our modern psychologized society, psychological classifications and criticism, such as that found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (*DSM-5*), and much of psychoanalysis, risk coloring anxiety as merely an obstruction and contributing to the collapse of voice and agency. The *DSM-5* classifies anxiety as an “anticipation of future threat” as opposed to fear’s response to “real or perceived imminent threat” (*DSM-5* 189). The rhetoric of the *DSM-5* risks diminishing anxiety’s status by relegating it to the space of the imaginary or the whirlwind of delusion. Further, in its understandable focus “disorder,” the *DSM-5* views anxiety disorders as classified by “[e]xcessive anxiety and worry (apprehensive expectation), occurring more days than not for at least 6 months, about a number of events or activities (such as work or school performance).” Here, worry is “difficult to control,” and those suffering anxiety may find themselves “rest[less] or feeling keyed up or on edge,” irritable, physically tense, fatigued, and have difficulty concentrating with the mind “going blank.” (*DSM-5* 190).

The focus on the excessiveness and mayhem of anxiety, while certainty true, risks marking the anxious subject as a subject merely overwhelmed by anxiety, with anxiety being an irrational source of discomfort that denies access to life. Some popular psychologists, such as Jonathan Haidt, have classified, rather disdainfully, the current generation of teens as “The Anxious Generation,” perceiving them as weakened and more prone to mental illness and disengaged due to the rise of smartphones, social media, and overprotective parenting. In addition, much rhetorical work on anxiety focuses on speech impediments that may emerge from anxiety. To research the term anxiety in the leading databases on composition and rhetoric is to be met with a variety of writing concerning primarily individualistic understandings of anxiety, such as the anxiety to write or speak publicly. Reviewing the literature on rhetorical analysis of anxiety, Michael Hyde corroborated this finding, detailing that anxiety in these studies was “treated primarily as a barrier to communication, manifested in ‘reticence,’ ‘stage fright,’ ‘unwillingness -to-communicate,’ or ‘communication apprehension’” (Hyde, as qtd in Matheson 137).[6] It is perhaps because of its seeming tack towards silencing and diminution, that anxiety, unlike fear, does not merit the title of one of Philip Fisher’s “vehement passions” that spur productive action.

In part, this interpretation springs from the understanding of anxiety as both “objectless” and “anticipatory.” Coding anxiety under “dread,” van’t Zelfde explains that “[d]read is not fear of the present, but it is a fear of the future. Dread is not a fear of the actual, but it is a fear of the possible. Dread is a fear of what has not happened yet but may very well happen in the future. It is a legitimate everyday fear that people live with and have to deal with on a daily basis” (8-9).[7] Here, anxiety, as “pre-emptive fear,” becomes sublimed, unhappily, from the world. While it retains an earthly attachment to threat, its object, when and if it has one, is deferred to an uncertain future. Anxiety is ordinarily distinguished from "fear" by this very lack of immediacy and determinate. Fear, for most authors, denotes a direct object of concern. As Heidegger, who we will discuss more in depth below, explains, fear comes paired with a determinate object as we have "[f]ear in the face of something… a fear for something in particular" (WIM 100). Thus, fear is distinguished by a directness of occasion and object. Here is the saber-tooth tiger at our heels, the primitive response to an immediate threat. Similarly, Rollo May argues that the very determinateness of fear is also its saving grace. In fear, we are aware of ourselves as well as of the object," writes May, "and we can orient ourselves spatially with reference to the thing feared" (MA 56). Fear affords us the ability to find ourselves spatially and secure ourselves groundedly, even if we are running away from that which has sparked our fear. We have a direct object, and as such, our "attention is narrowed to the object, tension is mobilized for flight; you can flee from the object because it occupies a particular point spatially" (MA 56). So, while we may have tunnel vision towards the object of fear, we also have a solid point from which to recoil and a safe haven into which we can retreat.

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[6] What the *DSM-5* at times designates as “selective mutism” (190).

[7] Again, van’t Zelfde unproductively distinguishes “dread,” not only from “fear,” but from “anxiety.” She writes, “It is different from 'ordinary fear’ in that it lies beyond the immediate and it is different from anxiety in that it has an object” (9). As I hope to show, both hardlined definitions such as these prove problematic, and detach us from how anxiety is *commonly* understood in the everyday moment.

Nor is anxiety the same as paranoia. Though all paranoia *is* anxious, and we can speak of a paranoiac or paranoia-laced anxiety, anxiety does not have the same sense of conspiracy or foreclosure as paranoia. Anxiety, in contrast, is more open-ended, at once speculative but highly skeptical and uncertain. While there is overlap, cross-hatching between the two terms, they cannot be collapsed into each other. That said, paranoia cannot escape being an anxious condition. Everyday paranoia shares many of its traits with anxiety, as discussed in this dissertation. According to the *DSM-5*, for instance, "Paranoid personality disorder is a pervasive pattern of distrust and suspiciousness of others such that their motives are interpreted as malevolent," leading to the impairment of both psychic and social functioning (649). Certainly, anxiety, with its skeptical "knowledge" that everything could be otherwise, aligns itself with paranoia's "pattern[s]" of suspicion and distrust. Nevertheless, anxiety does not share, or does not *always* share, paranoia's "delusional beliefs" concerning persecution, threat, or conspiracy. It is in this stricter sense that paranoia, as critics like Steven Beletto and Steffen Hantke have noted, is most aligned with American authors like Thomas Pynchon, in whose novels full conspiracies or senses of being part of "a plot" are most manifest. As David Shapiro describes the lived experience of paranoia, in his work *Neurotic Styles,* "[it] becomes possible…for these people to live, subjectively, in the world of apparent reality as one might live in a foreign country, with people who, in their ignorance, do not see things clearly and are not even hospitable to those who do but with whom it is nevertheless both necessary and perfectly possible to deal" (Shapiro 67). Paranoia is a form of certainty and "rigid" behavior, a compulsive response to and construction of a closed off "reality." Pynchon, in his own words, helpfully defines paranoia "as the leading edge of awareness that everything is connected" (Pynchon 717).[8] Here there is sense there is "a progressive

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[8] One could argue as opposed to Anxiety's tendency towards "narration," that Paranoia is more of a neurosis of "plotting." This is perhaps best described by Tony Thwaites's depiction of *The Crying of Lot 49*'s Oedipa Maas's dilemma, though also the dilemma of many other Pynchon characters, as a near infinite regress of being entrapped in a plot. He suggests that her paranoia can be classified into four propositions: one, that there is plot; two Oedipa is fantasizing that there is a plot; three, there is a plot to make Oedipa fantasize that there is a plot; four Oedipa is fantasizing that there is a plot to make her fantasize that there is a plot. Stripped to its barest bones, the propositions read: one, there is plot; to there is a plot that there is a plot; three, there is a plot that there is a plot

*knotting into*" that emphasizes the inescapable nature of a hidden and systemic world (3). This is because the paranoiac's interest and focus does not lie in the "apparent" world as is, but "in the world behind the apparent world to which the apparent world only gives clues" (Shapiro 66). Compulsively searching out "hidden motives, underlying purposes, special meanings, and the like," the paranoiac's life becomes one of existing ever isolated and apart from the collective (67, 66). In essence, as his or her dogged search for signs is never sated, context fades away, leaving them aimless. Surrounded by an overabundance of virtually cabalistic signs and meaning, he remains always starving.

So, while the boundaries between anxiety and fear or paranoia are a bit hazy and permeable, making it hard to discuss one term without evoking the other, we may initially say that anxiety distinguishes itself by lacking an immediate, *determinate* object and thus is more open-ended. Anxiety, while felt immediately, does not necessarily denote that immediacy of fear. Nor, while prone to skepticism, does it denote the mysterious boundedness of paranoia. It is no such closed system in terms of past, present, or future. Instead, it explodes any confinement through its imaginative uncertainty. Particularly as opposed to fear, anxiety is traditionally a more general concept, more akin to an intense sense of foreboding. Whereas we face the object of fear head-on, at least before turning to flee for our life, anxiety "attacks us from the rear," and "from all sides at once" (Goldstein, qtd. MA 56; MA 56). While in paranoia there may be a general sense of entrapment, perhaps even definable to us, "[a]nxiety is a vague and unspecific

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that there is a plot; four, that there is a plot that there is a plot that there is a plot (and potentially onward in an infinite regress) (Thwaites 268-69).

apprehension," and "a person in severe anxiety is unable to say, or to know, what 'object' he is afraid of" (MA 55).

This being the case, writers across the disciplines understand anxiety as a worry about nothing. As a mood, it is "vaporish" (as defined in the eighteenth century), "without certainly assignable cause or distinctly discernible object, not quickly exhausted like a squall of passion nor relievingly expressive like an access of emotion" (Brann 318). Heidegger, though not quite in line with this "everyday" idea of anxiety, agrees with the sense of anxiety's more indeterminate nature. At its most abstract, anxiety is the sudden realization of the immateriality of it all, the nothingness that is at the heart. Indeed, it signals the moment when "our usual, habitual way of engaging with the world becomes unavailable" to us (Balaska 1552).[9] Strikingly, Heidegger, in his 1929 lecture "What is Metaphysics?" asserts that "anxiety reveals the nothing" (WIM 101). While I will discuss Heidegger in greater detail below, for now, it is worth noting that for Heidegger, anxiety is what interrupts our everyday floating through the world to expose the inessentiality of things that mark the condition of freedom. In this sense, anxiety is not of or for any direct object, but something harder to nail down, even antithetical to articulation. As Heidegger writes, "Anxiety is indeed anxiety in the face of…, but not in the face of this or that thing. Anxiety in the face of...is always anxiety for..., but not for this or that. The indeterminateness of that in the face of which and for which we become anxious is no mere lack of determination but rather the essential impossibility of determining it." In anxiety, "this indeterminateness comes to the fore" (WIM 100-01).

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[9] Maria Balaska will stress that importantly, that being is not simply annihilated or being is not "swallowed up" the "nothing" revealed by Heidegger's anxiety; it is the realm where being "emerges forth" (1551). Balaska will contend that "[a]nxiety is not a response to epistemic groundlessness or extreme skepticism but to the fragility and mystery of the presence of beings (their intelligibility)" (1554). While I do not disagree that anxiety accomplishes this refocusing, I still believe, as Stanley Cavell's work on skepticism highlights, that anxiety *can* find its origin in epistemic groundlessness, among other concerns.

More specifically, while the everyday experience of anxiety may not consciously point to a primordial "nothingness," it still maintains a certain abstract and unfocused nature that is the source of its discomfort. Anxiety, or dread, or angst, for most writers, points towards a future, often indeterminate threat. In fact, it is this very "objectlessness" that the anxious subject finds so awful, as "their inability to know what they are afraid of is precisely what makes the anxiety so painful and disconcerting" (MA 56). It is the sudden panic attack that arrives seemingly from nowhere that brings with it a high alertness and suspicion. Further, while fear itself may be fear of something particular, it may also be the beginning point of anxiety. As May notes, fear may "boi[l] down to apprehension of specific experiences which might produce the more devastating condition, namely anxiety" (MA 58). Here, fear about a particular situation, say, the failure of a dissertation defense or a test may spiral outward into catastrophic thinking and scenario building. Heidegger dismisses this "quite common anxiousness…which all too readily comes over us" as being "ultimately reducible to fearfulness," as opposed to his grander "fundamental mood" of anxiety (WIM 100). Nevertheless, the spiraling outward of catastrophic thinking in anxiety very much feels as if our world has been reduced to an annihilating nothing. So, while Heidegger insists that it is only fear where, in "striving to rescue himself from this particular thing, he becomes unsure of everything else and completely 'loses his head,'" to not say this also of anxiety feels quite odd. Rather, where, as Goldstein notes, "fear sharpens the senses," anxiety on the contrary, "paralyzes the senses and renders them unusable." Yet to say that "fear drives" [the individual] to action," where anxiety simply paralyzes, is also too limited a view, as we will see (qtd. MA 56).

In sum, even when sympathetically treated, anxiety is often cast as a constriction, an obstruction to agency and voice. Whether this is because of the anxious person's tendency towards obsessive spiraling, or their seeming failure to reground theirself, or the indeterminate nature of the affect or mood, anxiety is seen not so much to hold truth or potential as it is instead cast as their obstacles. However, thinking this way ignores the rich, if troubling, imaginative vistas that anxiety opens, and downplays the value of anxious experience and voice. Instead, as May gleans, when we are in an anxious state, though "the objective aspect of being in such a condition is disordered behavior," we should rather see "*[t]he subjective aspect* [as] *anxiety*." (MA 53, emphasis in original). This means there is an anxious subjectivity behind and beyond this "behavior" that is worth understanding rather than writing off as simply disordered. While, of course, any study of anxiety must touch on the objective aspects of anxiety's "disordered behavior," this dissertation is most concerned with the subjective aspect and experience. Modern literary criticism and philosophy have, however imperfectly, attempted to show the value of anxiety in its complexity.

### *B. The "basic condition of speech": Literary Theories of Anxiety*

Modern literary theory has often understood anxiety's connection to aesthetic production. However, while there have been studies of anxiety and literature, few of these studies have closely followed the ways in which anxiety is expressed by characters within the works themselves. Works devoted to anxious aesthetics tend to abstract anxiety either to the level of aesthetic theory, or psychoanalytic discourse. Most paradigmatic of anxious aesthetic theory is Ruth Ronen's *Aesthetics of Anxiety* (2009), for example, takes both tracks, viewing anxiety's place in art through the aesthetic theories of Aristotle, Kant, and Lacan and centering anxiety on audience reception of a work of art. This work "aims to go beyond the idea that there is anxiety in aesthetics," instead "aim[ing] to structurally place anxiety at the very heart of aesthetic experience" (Ronen 1). She links psychoanalytic theories of anxiety to Aristotle's theory of catharsis, where aesthetic pleasure arrives from the pleasing relief of dramatic tension, and the benumbing sublime of Kant, where thought of the infinite short circuits our cognitive abilities. For the latter, Ronen understands anxiety as connected to the feeling of displeasure that an individual feels in the face of the sublime, where the individual in their finitude is awestruck by the infinite and indefinite possibility.

This sublime is often, according to Ronen, captured when we engage with works of genius, works such as, for her, the later work of James Joyce. Such works leave us dumbstruck, as they take the role of Lacan's Other jouissance, which exceeds language and connects us to the death drive. "When the signifiers that come from the Other cannot be understood," writes Ronen, "the subject finds herself unregistered in the domain of the Other, which is why the opaque nature of the genius' creation is bound to leave the subject anxious" (135). Anxiety thus marks the "limit of the principle of pleasure," that aesthetically orients our desire towards that displeasurable condition (7). This is all to say that for Ronen, anxiety relates to aesthetics and generates anxiety in the viewer by placing them in an alienating, anxiety-inducing situation: a confrontation with the infinitely other. Anxious aesthetics builds upon the moments when a work overtakes our ability to comprehend, becoming completely other, and in turn, perhaps, making us feel othered as well.

While I do not argue against Kantian or psychoanalytic discussions of anxiety and the aesthetic, these studies do not account for the everyday, ordinary experience of anxiety that we experience diurnally and that the characters of some works clearly portray. Indeed, while the works I discuss may examine moments where anxiety ungrounds us, where we scramble for words, they do so in a quite ordinary manner. Though I agree that anxiety is a universal condition, Ronen's psychoanalytic and Kantian bent sublimes the feeling of anxiety (in its literal focus on the anxiety of the sublime) away from the rough ground of everyday life that interests me. Because my study of anxiety in literature is geared towards what we can say of the ordinary experience of anxiety, it will not engage directly with the studies of anxiety center themselves around the Freudian, Lacanian, Kristevian, or other psychoanalytic views of anxiety that are deeply entwined with issues of desire and libidinal economy. Such views contend that "even when an individual avoids, for whatever reason, active pursuit of the object of her desire, the energy of this desire is not lost, but rather is diverted. It manifests itself elsewhere, in a sublimated form in the best of circumstances and in a physical illness in the worst" (Willging 3). Rather, this dissertation will find a way in which narrative fiction provides us with the experience of anxiety, in hopes that doing so allows the anxious person, the anxious voice to be heard.

As opposed to purely aesthetic theory, practitioners of affect theory, with which this dissertation finds some intersections, have attempted to ground their studies by understanding affects like anxiety as politically dynamic. Sara Ahmed, for instance, sees anxiety as a political emotion, though one more often generated by exclusionary politics, rather than acting as a useful tool. In her discussion of fear and hate in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2004), Ahmed explores anxiety mostly as an nervousness about boundaries and boundary breaking. In first discussing hate as a form of boundary creation, of othering and maintaining distance, Ahmed shows how anxiety emerges out of a concern of those boundaries being permeable. Be it physically, emotionally, or ideologically, the proximity of the other signals the threat of a negation of one's own existence. While hate is not always involved "in the demarcation between me and not-me…some demarcations come into existence through hate, which is felt as coming from within and moving outwards towards others" (Ahmed, *Emotions* 51). Ultimately, Ahmed argues, anxiety is a reaction to the threat of losing oneself to the other. Anxiety thus is both a turning away from the other, and towards the self, a reinforcement of the self. In this sense, anxiety becomes the defining affect of the ongoing effort to concretize what is "me" versus "not me." While I discuss the political importance of anxiety, and particularly the anxiety of the threat of others (and our responsibility to them), my study of anxiety differs from Ahmed in terms of focusing on the particular voice of anxiety.

Picking up on the political thread, Sianne Ngai, in her work *Ugly Feelings* explores anxiety as one of her "dysphoric" feelings" and "sites of emotional negativity." In turn, anxiety is another feeling associated with "ambivalent situations of suspended agency" (1). As opposed to Ronen's emphasis on anxiety's connection to catharsis, Ngai understands anxiety as a "noncarthartic" affect that gives rise to a "noncarthartic aesthetic." This aesthetic is found in "art that produces and foregrounds a failure of emotional release (another form of suspended 'action') and does so as a kind of politics"

(9). Ngai's understanding of anxiety, as one of her noncathartic, ugly emotions, positions it as political. She writes, "the general state of obstructed agency with respect to other human actors or to the social as such—a dilemma I take as charged with political meaning regardless of whether the obstruction is actual or fantasized, or whether the agency obstructed is individual or collective" (3). The ambivalence of such emotions, contends Ngai, allow them to maintain political possibility, as it "enable[s] them to resist, on the one hand, their reduction to mere expressions of class ressentiment, and on the other, their counter-valorization as therapeutic 'solutions' to the problems they highlight and condense." Ngai seeks to recuperate anxiety, like these other "negative affects for their critical productivity…" (3).

However, while Ngai speaks powerfully of the feeling of anxiety as a temporal and spatial dislocation that manifests in feelings of aversion and projection, her study ultimately moves from the experiential examination to expose the political assumptions critiques of anxiety have hidden. Ngai asserts, "the projective configuration [that] anxiety assumes becomes inextricably bound up with the trajectory of a male analyst's quest for understanding or interpretation" (215). Which is to say that in terms of Ngai's political interests, of which I am not unsympathetic, her discussion of anxiety collapses into a critique of a gendered intellectual stance marked by anxiety. In her reading of each text, she argues that anxiety functions as a defining affect for a specific type of male intellectual, one who seeks to reinforce, revalidate, or reassert his masculine authority. Though I agree with Ngai that "negative affects" like anxiety may have political and critical potential and find value in many of her insights on the affective experience, her actual study of this particular affect collapses too fully into a suspicious ideological exposure.

More specifically, to the dissertation's focus, critics have argued that American Literature has consistently since at least the nineteenth century emerged out of anxious experience. Justine S. Murision, in *The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature,* mines the nineteenth century American archive to show how anxiety and nervousness, understood as resulting from the interplay of the body and its physical, social, and political environment, were reflected in the literature and thought of the time. The socially and intellectually turbulent American mid-century, fiction became a primary means through which thinkers explored "open body," a body and mind vulnerable to its surroundings (Murison, *Politics* 3). "By the 1830s and through the rest of the century, writers absorbed, expressed, and popularized the medical language of the nerves" writes Murison, "In turn, their narratives of nervousness swayed debates about the biological and cultural meanings of 'freedom" and "possession,' subjects to which all of the writers in this study return." Accordingly, this vulnerable "open body" was not simply biological, but reflected the political and national anxiety over the threat to a "free society." "Free society" itself "was understood to be nervous; that is, it was open, vulnerable, and fraught with the power to derail reform while also dependent upon an active, participatory body politic, a paradox not lost on political and social commentators before and after the Civil War" (1).

Writers such Amy Kaplan and Patricia Wald have each shown how anxiety contributed to the very creation of American literature either contributing to the closing out of voices in the name of "realism" or to the generation of texts by authors anxious about their position within a national story. As Amy Kaplan explains in *The Social Construction of American Realism*, much of American Realism strove to combat anxiety over ambiguity through further attempts at imposing narrativizing and ordering structures. American Realism, argues Kaplan, is founded anxiety over an emerging industrial world and a revaluation of values in the American psyche. In this sense, Realism becomes an ordering mechanism that attempts to place a common face on an increasingly complicated American reality and identity. Rather than quelling fears, such a response to ambiguity and difference arguably generates more anxiety and despair as individuals find themselves forced into essentialist ways-of-being. In this regard, anxiety is deeply tied to the problems of being -in-the-world. For how can our view be realistic, and therefore incorporated into Realism, if we do not have a firm grasp of reality? Yet this sense of reality, Kaplan points out, is always connected, even despite itself, to control mechanisms and, thus, the anxiety to maintain control. To maintain this control, what constitutes "real" must hide its anxiety and hide those mindsets and peoples that do not conform to definition. In *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form,* Patricia Wald argues that the form of narrative in American Literature has proven both useful and problematic for individual and national self-conceptions. In one sense, this is because the national narrative is itself incomplete in its scope and inconsistent in its application. The country's narrative of openness, collectively, and opportunity are both bolstered and threatened by its plurality. Indeed, when this plurality is coopted in a reductive form, where the individual's or groups' autonomy is reduced to a myth of exceptionalism that undergirds the national self-understanding, that plurality is in any way "accepted" by the national narrative.

We can certainly see the reductive bind highlighted by Kaplan and Wald at play in the literary theories at the close of the nineteenth Century. By 1891, William Dean Howells' particular brand and theories of Realism were beginning to take sway in America. These theories of Realism, as illustrated in Howells' *Criticism and Fiction*, urged the writer to turn from the corrupting forces of literary Romanticism and turn towards a style more "faithful to life" in its details and portrayal of human psychology. Such work would be more moral, and representative of the complexity of the American nation, claimed Howells. And yet, as argued by Wald, many authors find themselves in a troubling place where they find themselves "constituted" by the American narrative, while also undermined by that very narrative. Further, these authors find themselves to be Freudian uncanny presences in America, familiar yet unacceptable to its narrative logic, while at once finding America the uncanny other and progenitor of their self-understanding. Wald explains that through the anxiety produced by these restrictions tied to the problem of constitution, many American writers attempt to constitute themselves through their own authorship.

Accordingly, the American author, far from accepting any tradition except the tradition of the promise of autonomy and freedom, finds that autonomy and freedom threatened in their very act of artistic production. Tony Tanner identifies this as the problem of American literature and why American literature is particularly anxious. We can identify in modern American writing, argues Tanner, an overwhelming paradoxical fear of external control, of falling into patterns, alongside an equally unbearable fear of absolute formlessness and freedom. The American author consistently writes through a simultaneous desire to write their own narrative--to buck the constraints of communal narrative--while also being understood and accepted into national life. Confronted with unbearable "jelliness" of disorder, on the one hand, and potential unfreedom of patterning form, on the other, American authors consistently express and fall into despair (Tanner 19). However, in Tanner's terms, it is precisely this anxiety that leads to the foregrounding of language, a constant reinvention of language, that provides a unique and creative wellspring for the American narrative imagination.

Thus, there is something anxious about most narrative creation by voices that are not embraced into the fold. Peter M. Logan and Jennifer Willging, though speaking of other national literature, have each linked the act of narration to anxiety and nervousness to literary production. Logan, in his work *Nerves and Narratives: A Cultural History of Hysteria in 19th-Century British Prose* (1997), examines how anxiety ridden, or nervous narrator and narratives, while opening up a space for productive social critique, also created profound challenge of reliability in the realist novel. The realist novel that depended upon nervous narrators "have to negotiate two contradictory problems, one in which hysteria implicitly undermines the authority to speak, the other in which it becomes the basic condition of speech" (Logan 3). On the one hand, these narratives critique the social conditions that produce the nervous "illness" of their narrator. On the other hand, while it "condemns the social conditions that produced it, that same illness also constructs the narrating voice." In other words, "Without it, there would be no narrative, for the illness enables—in fact, compels—the narrative act." Logan asserts that this paradox found in the "literary genre of nervous narration" in turn "promotes, in its formal structure, the same disorder it cautions against" (46-47). This paradox led to the creative dynamism of nervous narratives, contends Logan, since as there is "no firm ground on which to base narrative authority within such a dynamic, novelists attacking sensibility must devise extraordinary strategies to develop some alternate foundation for their criticism, distancing the nervous speaker's narrative from the disease it criticizes" (47). Nervous narration thus becomes a key, if conflicted, means of not only critiquing a nervous society, but of expressing a realistic psychology, as troubling times produced troubled minds.

Jennifer Willging continues this idea of nervous narration as a source of creative generation. She explores anxiety as both that feeling that generates narration, and also the subject of narrative anxiety. In *Telling Anxiety: Anxious Narration in the Work of Marguerite Duras, Annie Ernaux, Nathalie Sarraute, and Anne Hébert* (2007), Willging argues "that narrating is an activity that the narrators considered here take up because they believe it will both fulfill a desire and alleviate an anxiety" (4). She seeks to examine the "traces left by the desire-anxiety dyad," where the former generates the latter, the closure of latter comes at the fulfillment of the former. "[W]hile I do not assume that these authors are all as anxiety-ridden as their narrators," explains Willging, "I do ascribe to them an interest in, as well as a certain experience of, the mental states at issue." She continues, "Yet I am interested in the traces or signs of these states in each of these narratives regardless of whether they were left there deliberately or unconsciously, whether they are obvious or covert, and whether they are fictional or real; they are all pertinent to my object of study, which is the confluence of anxiety, desire, and narration" (5). Willging thus sees her purpose of her study as threefold. First, she "mine[s] the content and narrative structure of each text" to "determine what kind of anxieties and desires left their mark on it." Second, "uncover ways in which these forces appear to have affected the narration of the narrative, and how, in turn, the (anxious) narration produced might affect the reader's reception of that narrative." The former concern itself without anxiety is present in the texts at hand, while the latter seeks to uncover the ways through which audience reception is marked by this anxiety. Lastly, the third goal is that Willging seeks to "glean from these texts, by comparing the anxieties and desires inscribed in each of them with those in the others, some insight into the role that anxiety played (as theme, impetus, hindrance, or something else) in the literary production." That is to say, is there a connection between the anxiety found within the text to the construction of that text. Yet, among the concerns that sprout off from these goals, another particularly strong one emerges. "If indeed these authors seem to be not just interested in but also personally affected by anxiety," writes Willging, "how have they harnessed the energy of that anxiety in order to convey better their vision of reality to their readers?" (23-24). In this sense, Willging understands, alongside Logan, that the anxious condition, while threatening language and narration, prods writers to dynamic ways to express both themselves and their condition, not reachable in a placid mood.

Willging does an excellent job identifying how anxiety arises in our relationship to language. If "telling and being heard fulfill the human desire to communicate, to be believed, to be taken seriously, or at least to be the centre of attention" then narration is an essential aspect of the alleviating of anxiety. Nevertheless, when "the very act of telling is itself somehow distressing, or when the narrator fears that the finished narrative will bring about an undesirable consequence," narration can provoke anxiety and anxiety "hinders rather than drives forward the narration" (Willging 4). For Willging, Beckett exemplifies this tension, seeing him as "suffer[ing] from a chronic anxiety that arises especially from his inability to believe that language can be made to ‘mean’ in the absurd and indifferent world that human disasters on the scale of the two world wars and the Holocaust have proved ours to be” (12). However, for her authors, “any anxieties they or their narrator's experience while writing or narrating stem less from radical doubts about language’s capacity to gesture towards the world than, first, from doubts about their own ability to make language do so, and second, from an apprehension of the responsibility that writing about the world entails” (14). She continues, “it is a double-edged anxiety produced first by the recognition of the difficulty of attempting to speak about or reveal some kind of reality in language, and second, by the recognition of the very possibility of such revelation” (14).

Willging’s study foregrounds language, at times at the loss of the experience or reason for anxiety. Ultimately, her questions rest upon an admittedly anxious concern with language’s ability to convey reality, even as she does not deny its ability. She is concerned with,

> To what extent, they ask, does language distort or falsify that which it is meant to represent? How well can non-linguistic perceptions, sensations, or memories be ‘translated’ into language? Or is language always already implicated in the processes of perceiving, feeling, and remembering? Although these authors’ answers to such questions are sometimes ambivalent, the fact that they pose them suggests that for them, there exists something that is not language but that can be indicated by language, even if only with a great deal of difficulty and imprecision. (Willging 17)

This is not to say such questions are unimportant. However, it seems to me that much of what is “not language but than can be indicated by language” in the anxious state is the individual expressing that language. Willging’s study differs from mine in that in her focus on narrative and the relation of the experience, the ordinary experience of anxiety can play second fiddle.

### *C. Groundless Grounds: Philosophical Forms of Anxiety*

Hence, however useful these aesthetic, affective, and political interpretations of anxiety may be, my dissertation differs from them in its attempt to ground its understanding of anxiety in ordinary experience, the human voice, and the philosophies that emerge from them. Philosophy has always given pride of place to anxiety. In fact, it is this subjective experience that has led to philosophy's great explorations of anxiety as an objective condition. Blaise Pascal famously counted anxiety as one of the three main aspects of the human condition alongside boredom and inconstancy. Both Kierkegaard and Heidegger understood anxiety to be the condition through which we actively engage with the world. One could argue that Hegel's entire phenomenology is a series of consciousness's anxious moments as it tries to move towards stability, while Descartes's skeptical dualism, of which we all our tragic inheritors, is both born from and progenitor of anxiety in the modern subject.

In fact, for each of these thinkers, anxiety is not what paralyzes us, except perhaps momentarily, but is the beginning of action itself, and recognition that action must occur. Whether one is trying to rid oneself of it, or explore its potential, much action according to both Western and Eastern philosophy finds anxiety its beginning, not its end. As Brann notes, anxiety's "uncircumventable sense of nothingness borne by a persistent mood about nothing in particular is surely more humanly significant than a pass-ing flare-up of emotion. And so mood is now recognized, in the sense of being admitted as a revealing human fact-revealing both of human sub-jectivity and of man's situation in the world" (Brann 342). However, while fundamental, anxiety in all of these cases is understood as that which disorients and ungrounds us. Something that connects both philosophical and everyday conceptions of anxiety is the sense of breakdown. Anxiety constitutes the moment when we begin to feel that the condition we are inhabiting has become catastrophic. Again, observe the student who does not simply fear the test, but whose fear expands outward to an anxious projecting of consequence. The world does seem to dissolve and our stable picture of being with it. Comay and Ruda, in their discussion of Hegel's conception of self-consciousness, see this anxiety as the genesis of philosophical thought as it spurs us towards trying to make sense of the world when it no longer makes sense. "Thinking begins with the catastrophic scenario of a world in which every stable achievement has been systematically dismantled," they assert, "All that is solid has melted into air." Introspective thinking begins when we no longer know how to be, or when how to be is no longer a feasible option. They continue, "When I am anxious, the whole world slips away and I am left with … nothing. Nothing but myself, that is—and of course (the) Nothing" (Comay and Ruda 26).

It is against this nothing, that for Kierkegaard (and later Heidegger) human freedom is made possible. Kierkegaard's influential, and often frustrating text, *The Concept of Anxiety*, provides perhaps the most famous conception of anxiety as "the dizziness of freedom." Kierkegaard frames his "psychological" study of anxiety as a treatise on original, hereditary sin, particularly concerned with the freedom of the action sin and the qualitative change in the face of that action. Most powerfully, Kierkegaard, or at least his pseudonym, Vigilius Haufniensis, writes,

> Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down. Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its

> own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs in this dizziness. (CA 61)

Anxiety, for Kierkegaard, is the moment when we realize we must act, or have the desire to act, but with knowledge we have no essential foundation to work upon. Indeed, if anxiety is "dizziness of freedom," it is so because "freedom's actuality" is "the possibil-ity of possibility" (CA 42). As Brann explains, freedom, for Kierkegaard, "which is potenti-ality or possibility, is actualizing itself as an ability. Freedom's possibility is not the choosing of good or evil but rather the possibility of being able, the mere intimation of our capability for being bad (or not)" (Brann 345). Theologically, this "possibility of possibility" that is our free will, puts us in the anxious position of our actions repeating the original sin of Adam. However, more existentially speaking, anxiety emerges from the moment we necessarily attempt to ground our finite natures and reasons in finite reasoning and being against the abyss of the infinite, or groundless. As such, we are dizzy when we look into the abyss and yet we are dizzy because we are making a *choice* to look into the abyss, even as we succumb to that temptation. Though we are inherently free in theory to make choices without external necessity, this freedom is contingent, shaped by the structures of existence and our social entanglements that force us to enact our freedom.

Accordingly, this feeling of dizziness is anxiety but this anxiety is also a mindset of the looking eye, the position and fact, of the limited individual confronting the groundlessness of its reasonings and being. Practically we may conceive this "universal" or infinite aspect as that which is larger than us—a society, a world. Yet, anxiety is the dizziness of the free act *because* we have acted and *because* we are responsible (for the dizziness as well). In our dizziness, we try to steady ourselves *in* ourselves, our finiteness, yet this proves unstable in the knowledge of the infinity of possibility we have just been confronted with. Thus, “in that very moment everything is changed, and freedom, when it again rises, sees that it is guilty” because of our action. “Between these two moments,” of falling into the abyss, and arising from it, “lies the leap,” between two states of being, and “he who becomes guilty in anxiety becomes as ambiguously guilty as it is possible to become.” Anxiety’s selfishness comes both from the sense of self-preservation it provides, and the fact that we must succumb to it. Thus, “[i]n anxiety there is the selfish infinity of possibility, which does not tempt like a choice but ensnaringly disquiets with its sweet anxiousness” (CA 61). This “sweet anxiousness,” like the pungency of Venus fly trap, ensnares and disquiets, taking us in, grounding us in groundlessness, while making that very grounding and our existence uncanny.

In as much as anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, it is also a realization of the nothingness that is possibility. “Nothing,” is “the anxious possibility of being able.” Anxiety, for Kierkegaard, is accordingly “entangled freedom.” It is an awareness of a “nothing” that holds a claim over us, where action must be taken, but that what action is taken is not essential. We are free to act, but only because we are entangled in our world. Thus, anxiety becomes an intermediary state between possibility and actuality. As Kiekergaard writes, “anxiety is neither a category of necessity nor a category of freedom; it is entangled freedom, where freedom is not free in itself but entangled, not by necessity, but in itself” (CA 49). And so we project a thousand pictures to contain possibility, a thousand strategies to confront contingency. We already begin to act, as soon as we find that our acting has no stable ground. It disquietly ensnares us, we are entangled in our freedom. By the time the world bottoms out, and our lives laid bare into nothing, we have also already made a choice, a leap.

This entangled freedom was picked up and expanded by Heidegger's philosophy. However, Heidegger's philosophy takes anxiety to its grandest point, as the fundamental, foundational mood of Being. Though anxiety whether, "from the perspec-tive of creaturely finitude (Pascal), of psychological sinfulness (Kierkegaard), of psychoanalytical pathology (Freud), of a historical condition (Auden)" can be "a revealing, troubling, affective outcome," it is not, as it is in Heidegger, "the ultimate source of all disclosure of human existence" (Brann 350). Indeed as Ngai explains, "[c]ontrary to the widespread understanding of feeling, in which states of mind are in fact inner phenomena disclosed by their extension outward into the world, for Heidegger 'Being-in-the-world,' a function of consignment to 'thrownness' or externalization, is precisely what states of mind like anxiety disclose." This helps understand Heidegger's famous assertion in "What is Metaphysics?" that "anxiety reveals the Nothing." "With the fundamental mood of anxiety," he proclaims, "we have arrived at that occurrence in human existence in which the nothing is revealed and from which it must be interrogated" (WIM 101). At face value, this may seem to recapitulate the familiar formulation, that anxiety has no direct object, "that it differs from fear in that the danger that prompts it is only anticipated; it is not, or not yet, real" (Willging 3). To a certain extent, this is true. In *Being and Time,* Heidegger speaks of anxiety as confronting a "nothing" and "nowhere." He asserts, "anxiety does not 'see' any definite 'here' or 'yonder' from which it comes. That in the face of which one has anxiety is characterized by the fact that what threatens is Nowhere. Anxiety ‘does not know’ what that in the face of which it is anxious is” (BT 231).

However, for Heidegger, anxiety becomes a *foundational* part of our being, even as it shakes our foundations. For Heidegger, especially in the later “What is Metaphysics?”, anxiety is what steals the ground from us. “We ‘hover’ in anxiety,” asserts Heidegger, “More precisely, anxiety leaves us hanging because it induces the slipping away of beings as a whole.” We are suspended, projected into the air and in turn projecting as we try ground ourselves and experience again. Yet, it is not simply the world that recedes, Heidegger argues, but also “we ourselves—we humans who are in being-in the midst of beings slip away from ourselves. Unsure of ourselves, we exist as “pure Da-sein,” since “at bottom…it is not as though ‘you’ or ‘I’ feel ill at ease; rather, it is this way for some ‘one.’” It is both this receding of the world, and with it identity, as well as the necessary falling back on our purely individuated state when confronting the nothingness, that makes up the anxiety’s “altogether unsettling experience of this hovering where there is nothing to hold onto” (WIM 101).

Indeed, for Heidegger, in anxiety we come to face ourselves for the first time. We are no longer simply absorbed in the world, in our day-to-day existing. In the earlier *Being and Time* particularly, anxiety is that which wrenches us from absorption in the world, where, as Comay and Ruda note, the world slips away in the breakdown of our matter-of-fact being-in-the-world, where the world no longer feels “at hand.” No longer, what Heidegger calls “falling,” that is simply moving through the world, our anxiety screeches to a halt, our unthinking movement, our falling. In anxiety Dasein becomes individuated, arresting Dasein’s “falling into the ‘they’ and the ‘world’ of its concern,” of its flight “in the face of itself, its “turn[ing] away from itself” (BT 230). Here, the world becomes uncanny, “umheimlich,” or literally “unhomey.” Not at home, we find ourselves scrambling, for what continually feels like the first time, to find home again. Anxiety exposes our presence in the “region” of the nowhere. As Brann explains, anxiety directs us to the gaping “openness of the world for Dasein's being spatially within it.” “What is revealed in anxiety” Brann continues, “is a refractory inner-worldly territory of nothing and nowhere. Anxiety is of the world as such. What oppresses and constricts in anxiety…is not simply the sum of all that is present, but its very possibility” (Brann 360). And it is this possibility, that constitutes our being-in-the-world, of being able to make it our home, and our fundamental homelessness in our knowledge of our ungroundedness.

Because anxiety is not definite, it is in anxiety that Dasein is thrown back on itself, individualizes Dasein, as a being of possibility. Previously, we participated in the act of covering ourselves up, in our absorption in the world, that is, in simply moving forward, fleeing from a knowledge of our vulnerability and being. However, in anxiety, in the sudden receding of the world and our individuation, our absorption suddenly breaks. In the moment of anxiety we realize ourselves as individuated, as a being that grasps our being, and does not simply “be.” We feel our freedom, in the moment, Wittman Ah Sing’s lonely, “bad freedom,” for the first time (TM 67). The consequence of this is that we fall out of the homeliness of the world, becoming instead dislocated, homeless, arriving instead in a world of uncanniness. Anxiety is thus a kind of movement, out of the privation of our simple movement and existence into a realization of a public world in which we are entangled. While we may, as we will see, then try to scurry back into our privacy through avoidance, our anxiety reveals us and reveals we can never truly do so. In anxiety, what Da-sein "fears" is Da-sein itself, that is, the possibility of possibility.

However, there is a certain elitism in both Heidegger and Kierkegaard's sense of anxiety. The mood of anxiety, though general and fundamental, is a mood that for both Heidegger and Kierkegaard one can fail at. Indeed, most people, it appears, have not "learned to be anx-ious in the right way" (CA 155). That is, anxiety remains for the unelected mass a mere mood, rather than one that exposes and discloses the very nature of our being or spurs contemplated change in attitude or action. On the one hand, for Heidegger, this higher quality, more prestigious anxiety, "original anxiety," "can awaken in existence at any moment" and needs "no unusual event to rouse it." "Its sway is as thoroughgoing as its possible occasionings are trivial," writes Heidegger, "It is always ready, though it only seldom springs, and we are snatched away and left hanging" (WIM 106). On the other hand, Heidegger is scornfully adamant that this mood not be confused with "the quite common anxiousness, ultimately reducible to fearfulness, which all too readily comes over us" (100). So while anxiety may have been a predominant heroic mood of protagonists in ancient tragedy, Brann remarks, what might, in Heidegger and Kierkegaard, "seem like an attempt to return to humanity in general some of the grand significance of a mood that was once engrossed by kings and heroes" turns out to be an act of segregation of those capable of high feeling from the rabble (Brann 348).

This "deep" sense of anxiety, while useful, can be both over grandiose and at once too narrow. If "probably predominantly…anxiety is just ordinary anxiety," then these, "royal, tragic, theologico-psychological, existential explanations may…be too deep for so unstrung an affect" (Brann 348). Here the work of Ordinary Language Philosophy (OLP) comes to the fore, engaging an "ordinary" affect to show its "extraordinary" nature. Ordinary Language Philosophy, by treating our words and concepts in the way we use them ordinarily, clears confusion by bringing them down to earth from their metaphysically lofty heights. Thus, it allows us to look at ordinary, common anxiety not as something unworthy, but as something quite remarkable in its everydayness, at times, even productive and beautiful. Beyond, in respect to affect, any dichotomy between the "extraordinary," "exceptional" mood that "attracts our interest" against "ordinary" mood that "must arouse our sympathy," Ordinary Language Philosophy particularly through the work of Cavell, shows how what arouses our sympathy may also be exceptional and interesting; in turn it illustrates how there is "nothing more extraordinary than the ordinary," and the extraordinary is nothing without the ordinary (Brann 349; Eldridge and Rhie 6). And if anxiety exposes the uncanniness of the world, or makes the world uncanny, then Cavell's understanding that "nothing is more uncanny than the human" underscores the importance of everyday experience in understanding the significance of anxiety. As Cavell wrote of his own project, "I might describe my philosophical task as one of outlining the necessity, and the lack of necessity, in the sense of the human as inherently strange, say unstable, its quotidian as forever fantastic" (QO 154).

Taking after Cavell, this dissertation tries to understand how common anxiety is a rich experience. In doing so, it also illustrates that the modern philosophy that seems to disdain its commonality may both arise and is confirmed, though in an earthly manner, by that ordinary anxious experience. In particular, beyond often turning to the sense of nothingness, groundlessness, and "entangled freedom" of Kierkegaard and Heidegger's assessments, it shares Cavell's understanding of anxiety as closely related to forms of skepticism. In this sense, anxiety is deeply connected to problems of knowledge. As Cavell argues, skepticism is irrefutable in the sense that its logic presupposes a picture of our relation to the world, knowledge that is impenetrable when argued along those lines. In skepticism, we find that we can argue on the basis of knowledge such ideas as that the world does not exist, or that those around us are automatons. Cavell asserts that while these statements cannot be fully refuted by philosophical logic or debates of facts, they ultimately cannot live up to actual experience. The problem thus becomes not if skepticism is defensible, correct or incorrect, but rather *why* we are tempted towards this ultimately odd outlook.

In part Cavell argues that such temptations towards skepticism is itself generated by certain anxieties. We may be tempted to the skepticism of reaching others due to our anxieties of exposure, or refutation by others. If, as Heidegger asserts, "anxiety reveals the nothing," that is, the groundlessness of things and ways of being, we find that our having a correct stance towards others and the world is not innately secure. Two truths that anxiety divulges are that first, things could always be otherwise, that there is nothing making them be this way, and second, what seemed most familiar could be the most uncanny. In our anxious moments, "maybe language (and understanding, and knowledge) rests upon very shaky foundations— a thin net over an abyss" (CR 178). Like Kierkegaard's abyss, or Heidegger's nothing, we find ourselves in a dizzying freefall. And while we always hit the ground eventually, on impact we are also reminded that this ground too may crumble.

However, we live this fall, not just bodily, but as we live our lives, in language, or in our capacity to convey to others our lives and communality in language. This feeling of linguistic and ontological abyss reveals, as Toril Moi glosses, that "when we lose our sense of the meaning of words, we lose our sense of reality" (RO 6). So while in a sense we may not seriously be able to question, be skeptical of the reality of the world or others, anxiety can show how our picture of the world and others can fail us. In anxiety, the world, things, perhaps people, as Heidegger says, all recede from us, yet face us as alien and distant, if strangely clear. In our panic, the world is both laid bare and ceases to make sense, shatters, and throws in our face how wrong our pictures are or stance toward[10]s it really was. Alternatively, anxiety can emerge when we feel as if we do not make sense to the world and community, when our claims to commonality are rebuffed, and we are made to see they are merely idiosyncrasy. We may after the fact, as we anxiously try to mitigate this sense of exposure and reduce its future possibility, fall back on a position of distrust towards the world and others.

Anxiety and despair, for Cavell, are generators of philosophy, not simply because they emerge from a break in our mental equipment, but because there's something very ordinary, yet very tragic in the way in which we in our modern day view our lives. Skepticism, the boogeyman of philosophy, but also, perhaps, its most pure manifestation, is not simply willfully obtuse, but is a flare up of our ordinary misgivings about our lives. Skepticism is strong, even irrefutable, not because it is correct, per se, but because it cannot be refuted within its own terms, or as long as we are held captive by the picture that justifies it. Yet this justification is not simply intellectual, but emotional. As Moi explains, the skeptic is not simply speaking of extraordinary experiences where the world may not exist, but instead “reminds us of something most people have experienced,” that is when we no longer feel attuned to the world or others, “namely situations in which we feel powerless to know the thoughts and feelings of another human beings” (RO 206). “Such experiences arise because human beings are separate,” concludes Moi, “There is no solution to the problem of human separation” (206). However, this sense of separateness, does not simply mean we feel we cannot understand others, but also that they cannot understand us, that we, socially speaking, may as well not exist. Anxiety is an indeterminate feeling, a feeling of indeterminateness. Yet is also the feeling we have when we feel indeterminate, without reason, incomprehensible. Where anxiety and incomprehensibility meet is in the feeling of being outside the pale of the community, when we speak for no one and no one speaks for us. Or worse, we may be misunderstood and thus condemned outside of the community, in shame and violence.

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[10] See Wittgenstein, PI §115: "A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably."

We may even, in this anxiety, desire to not speak at all, or to be without speech. “The possibility of expression, whether linguistic or bodily, defines subjectivity. The myth of the private…evolves into the myth of inexpressiveness,” writes Sandra Laugier, paraphrasing Cavell, adding that this myth “reveals itself as the anxiety of expression—an anxiety tied to the natural and fateful movement from the inner self to outward expression, coupled with the fear of exposure.” In our anxiety over being found out of attunement, of rejection and the exposure of our vulnerability and distance, we may prefer to make inarticulate sound over meaningful expression (even as we yearn to be understood). As Laugier explains, we act “[a]s if the passage outward were precisely a loss of control of what I mean, and therefore, as if, ultimately, an inexpressive sound were preferable to a meaningful expression” (Laugier). In this sense, Cavell finds agreement with Heidegger's assertion that "anxiety robs us of speech." However, Heidegger sees this because "beings as a whole slip away, so that just the nothing crowds round, in the face of anxiety all utterance of the 'is' falls silent." This is to say, that both our ability to say something definite, or to make meaning out of the everyday, is annihilated in the face of "nothing" anxiety reveals. "That in the malaise of anxiety we often try to shatter the vacant stillness with compulsive talk," writes Heidegger, "only proves the pres-ence of the nothing" (WIM 101). In opposition, Cavell, though not discrediting the sense of uncanny or staleness our words can take on, does not believe that we are "robbed" of speech, or that the every day, compulsive chatter that we fall into when anxious is meaningless. On the contrary, Cavell's philosophy would suggest that in our fatality to expression, such chattering is the creative attempt to re-find ground and community.

There is a tragic beauty in the "compulsive" chatter of anxious speech. When we speak, we are always appealing to others, attempting to find connections that would confirm and orient us and our experience. In this way, subjectivity becomes voice, and "the problem of expression [shifts] to the question of the adequacy between subject and voice" (Laugier). Yet because I am always voicing to someone (or at least in the language I share with others), the problem thus becomes a more anxious one of the problem of "we," or rather a question of if there is a "we" in which we are a part.[11] As such, the problem becomes not simply a matter of accessing unpredictable others, but "the difficulty (and anxiety) of accessing one's own inner life," and communicating it to another. Our anxious idea that we have "no access to the other has in fact to do with this core anxiety, that of our access to our own sensations and thoughts—being unknown" (Laugier). In our anxious spiraling, the appeal found in our speaking, the question of "Can you see what I see?" may very well feel as if it has taken on an anxiously existential weight. For, as Moi writes, "If they can't, and we wish to go on talking to them," though we may check our criteria, our reasoning for our claim, and find where our confusion lies, we may also "discover that no further conversation is possible, that we have become unintelligible, at least to these specific others." It is then that "the abyss gapes open at our feet." (RO 224-25). It is against this potential to miss the mark, to not be understood, or to have our words twisted that we would anxiously will ourselves silent. As Laugier asserts, "The idea of inexpressiveness turns out to be the very anxiety of expression, the anxiety of the… fatality of the passage from inner to outer, anxiety of exposure" (Laugier). We may, in that moment, become anxious that "the passage outward were precisely a loss of control of what I mean." Then we get to "the point where one would like just to emit an inarticulate sound," as if "an inexpressive sound were preferable to a meaningful expression" (CR 351; Laugier). So our anxiety becomes not that what we say

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[11] The anxious importance of "we" and its usage in critical and philosophical texts is highlighted in all its vulnerability by Toril Moi. "I just said 'we.' writes Moi, "The word has a bad reputation, for it is often taken to be inherently 'exclusionary.'" Here "he usual rejoinder is to reject the "we" as normative, as an attempt to tell others what they must say." However, instead of exclusionary, "we," explains Moi, at least in OLP, is an appeal to community. "[T]his 'we' is neither an order nor an empirical claim," Moi explains, "It is, rather, an invitation to the reader to test something for herself, to see if she can see

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what I see. If she can't, we can try to figure out why. The claims of ordinary language philosophy are invitations to a conversation, invitations to do philosophy together" (18). I hope my use of "we" throughout this dissertation is also considered an appeal or invitation to the reader.

is meaningless or nonsensical, but the terror of our "condemnation" to "signification," the "fatality of expression" (Laugier).

## II. So, What do I Say About Anxiety?

While not claiming to be a theory, I identify a few main traits of anxiety. They include the (temporal) tendency to catastrophize (or project); the (communal) sense of the world ceasing to make sense coupled with the feeling of our own ceasing to make sense to the world in our individuation; and (spatial) feelings of suspension in our world and groundlessness of our understanding of the world. As psychotherapist Irvin Yalom identifies, this anxiety that is an anxiety of groundlessness, "is a dizzying sensation. Nothing is as it seemed. The very ground beneath one seems to open up" (Yalom, *Existential*, 221). This may all take place in an anxious cycle of shattering where we lose and must regain our world by passing through the anxious moment. Likewise, these tendencies crosshatch over each other, making it difficult to separate where one part ends and another begins. Nor does each aspect occur on each occasion. Nevertheless, in researching lived anxious experience these aspects are all strikingly present in some capacity.

To begin, as psychologists and philosophers tend to agree, anxiety has no object, or rather its object is "Nothing," or anticipatory. Anxiety is either of that which has not yet occurred, or the deep feeling that there is some inessential, false, or tenuous about grounds upon which we have based our actions. This nothingness, however, is not meaningless per se (though it may be about meaninglessness), but is itself a very real, foundational aspect. It is an awareness, at the very least of what Lee Braver would call the "groundlessness of our grounds." Braver, in his work on Wittgenstein and Heidegger expresses that this anxious groundlessness, is what sabotages all attempts at a comprehensive and firm theoretical grounding. This is true for reason as much convention. He writes, “We cannot argue for such an encompassing sense of what is and how to think, since such reasoning already presupposes certain answers to these questions.” That is to say, even in asking the question, we have made assumptions that we do not recognize that automatically undo any non-human, or “solid” grounding we would like for our ways of being and thinking. Braver explains that this fact is not in reality devastating; “that this lack of justification does not rob thinking of its legitimacy; rather, it makes certain factors and structures ‘groundless grounds.’” These structures, what I would call soft-constructions, are not false, but essential if wobbly. “While the grounds of all thinking lack the kind of foundation philosophers have long dreamt of, and thus are groundless,” asserts Braver, “they still function,” indeed must function, “as grounds for finite creatures like us” (Braver 11). All of this being said, knowledge of this inevitability does nothing, at least for the modern subject since Descartes and Hume, to quell our anxiety that is companion and mother to our pining for certainty. The desire for, what Cavell calls, “modes of defense,” “defenses against the philosophical defeat of claiming to possess some privileged access to or measure of truth” is an anxious impulse. It is this very impulse that leads us in our anxiety for any kind of certainty, in our myth or wish that one may know everything, or else… that one may know nothing,” towards either arrogance or skepticism (CR ix).

Accordingly, I agree with scholars like Ahmed who understand anxiety as not simply a state but a movement, or "*an approach to objects.*"[12] In these moments, we feel projected, suspended in the air and falling. The feeling that the world has bottomed out, either in our sense of being outside of a community, our catastrophizing anticipatory imagination, or in the sudden short circuiting of our rational capacities that tends to follow both, creates not simply a mood, but an orientation and mode of interacting with our world. Beyond a potential hesitancy to engage with the anxious object or situation, anxiety almost immediately searches for its own dissolution through a quest for certainty. However, if anxiety produces a quest for certainty in the face of groundless nothingness, or the void, it is always out of an acute awareness of the instability of its claims and picture of the world. Anxiety becomes most acute in the breakdown of our picture of our world, our reason, or our sense of belonging. As both Heidegger and Wittgenstein show, we become aware of our humanness of our capacities when something goes awry. In our uncertainty, finding our way of thinking about the world fictitious, we may spin out fictions of our own as we project and catastrophize our future.

The world, in these moments, ceases to make sense, or bottoms out. At these moments we feel the world, our society as alien to us and us and alien to them. We become skeptical of our world, our neighbors, and ourselves, as we have nothing solid to base our claims or confidence on. Feeling out of step, or to use David Derezotes term in his discussion of religious conflict, "out of relationship," with the world and others, we feel a profound sense of alienation in the form of dislocation and homelessness (Derezotes 30). Not at home in the world, we feel as if we are untranslatable, outside any grammar that would make us make sense to the world. However, this sense of grammar is not simply linguistic, but existential: it is our anxious feeling of being out of a sense-making whole in our community, our world.[13] Our response to this feeling can work in many ways. We may attempt to speak, stammering to make ourselves understood through the very language and logic that has proven to be broken. This may lead to wild, often beautiful, if uncanny forms of speech. Yet often, in our discomfort, we may choose avoidance, withdrawing into ourselves. In doing so, we take ourselves out of circulation in our anxiety, painting connection to others and the world as an insurmountable intellectual difficulty. This may, in our anxiety over our ability to understand and connect to the world and others, deny a part of their reality. Worse, we may see both the world and others as threats to our being.

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[12] That is to say, as opposed to "with fear, *being produced by an object's approach*" (Ahmed 66).

Nevertheless, this anxious withdrawal is never really possible, a fact that merely accentuates anxiety for us. For we do not make sense outside of what Wittgenstein would call a "form of life." Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations*, introduces the concept of a "form of life" as an intrinsic part of our being human. Speaking of the "innumerable" manifestations of intelligible and imaginable languages we could create (ones consisting of just orders, for instance), Wittgenstein states that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (§19) For Wittgenstein, and later expanded by Stanley Cavell and Toril Moi, the concept of a "form of life" found in language marks the nature of a fundamental agreement between humans, not only conventionally but existentially. To his imagined interlocutor asking "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?" Wittgenstein replies, "It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life" (§241). To agree *in* a "form of life" is both a simple and an immensely complex concept. It is perhaps best understood by Wittgenstein's example of a joke. We often laugh when someone is excluded from a joke, when they become the butt of it, standing outside the circle of shared amusement. Yet, a difference in humor does not merely signify a superficial or cultural variation; it can expose a profound divide between people. Wittgenstein captures this idea when he asks, "What is it like for people not to have the same sense of humour?" He explains, "they do not react properly to each other. It's as though there were a custom amongst certain people for one person to throw another a ball which he is supposed to catch and throw back; but some people, instead of throwing it back, put it in their pocket" (CV 83). Humor is accordingly not just automatic, but embedded into our practices. A joke must be accepted as a joke, must exist in an almost unconscious grammar of a joke for us to recognize it as such and laugh. It is, to a certain extent, a ritual, but one we practice not simply without knowing, but also without the option *not* to. Wittgenstein points not just to cultural disparity but to a deeper divergence in what he terms “forms of life.” As such, joke telling indicates one of many practices that determines, not simply if we are “in on” the joke, but within a sense-making community.

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[13] I take "Grammar" here, not simply linguistically, but in Cavell's interpretation as something existential and philosophical. Cavell interprets the "grammatical investigations" Wittgenstein urges as the means by which we dissolve the philosophical question or confusion. However, as the "philosophical question" or "confusion" is *always,* for Cavell, a question or confusion that bars us from connection to the world and others (or makes us believe that we have been barred from the world and others), speaking outside of grammar is speaking outside of communal life. And as it is only in the lived syntax of communal life that we make sense, to feel outside the grammar is to feel anxiously nonsensical or incomprehensible, not just in our words, but in our being. Thus, to find our way back to communal grammar becomes the therapeutic task of philosophy. Or as Cavell will elegantly phrase it, philosophy's job is to "coax the mind down from self-assertion —subjective assertion and private definition—and lead it back, through the community, home" (MWM 43).

Yet, while there is certainly an idea of convention built into the concept of a “form of life,” it goes far beyond this. If we interpret this through Jürgen Habermas, humor and jokes are integral components of our lifeworld, forming “the correlate of processes of reaching understanding” and constituting the “background convictions” that undergird social cohesion (Habermas.70). However, as Toril Moi cautions, reducing these “forms of life” to mere conventions renders them a “shadow of itself” (RO 54). Wittgenstein’s concept instead touches upon a deeper sense of convection. It is the “conventionality of human nature itself,” echoing Pascal’s assertion that “Custom is our nature” (Pascal §89). A “form of life,” then is not made up of simply “background convictions,” cordoned off into isolated actions or practices, but are embedded into a cultural, linguistic, and therefore, existential weave that forms a backdrop meaning and understanding. It is what gives meaning to our practices, expression, and experiences within a community. As Amanda Boncompagni summarizes, “Forms of life are ‘the given,’” as in that which “tells us something about the nature and limits of philosophy [and therefore language, and therefore communal life] itself" and “the philosophical temptation to go beyond this concept and explain it is something we should be wary of” (Boncompagni 57). A “form of life” does not merely instill habits but shapes the very limits of our thoughts and actions. To think outside of its frameworks is both nonsensical and impossible. Moi warns that this shared behavior is not inherently normative or oppressive; rather, if our practices diverge too far, the very possibility of understanding breaks down due to a lack of attunement (RO 50, 61).[14] A “form of life” provides us the very grammar both to speak and through which we find belonging and understanding.

So, while we may feel as if we are outside a “form of life,” we can never truly be so. For even negatives, such as a sense of doubt and alienation, depend upon the very “form of life” that we feel denied from. Though we may feel like we do not make sense, that we cannot speak, these are merely expressions of an anxiety of exposure. For, until we are dead, we must act and communicate. The myth of inexpression, and as Sandra Laugier and Cavell would say, is based upon an anxiety over the “fatality” of expression. So while on the one hand, we may feel as if we lack community, and therefore sense, we on the other hand can only with extreme difficulty fully extricate ourselves from that very community. It is perhaps this that creates our most heightened anxiety, our entangledness. For Kierkegaard, anxiety is marked by “entangled freedom.” We realize that there is nothing that dictates how we must act, yet we still must act by virtue of being in the world. The same is true within society. No matter how much we reject society, or society rejects us, we nevertheless must act freely within it, as we are entangled within it. To be a part of, yet apart from is a hallmark feeling of anxiety.

In feeling this way, entangled, yet ungrounded, inside yet outside, and all together uncertain, we find that we anxiously do not know “how to go on.” As Cavell says, something that marks our capacity as natives in our world, our language, is our ability to project forward confidently, to use words and formulas, to act without guidance in different scenarios. We know there is a difference in the word “feed” when we say we feed the elephants versus when we say we feed the meter. Nevertheless, when the world bottoms out, when it ceases to make sense and we feel we cease to make sense to it, we find ourselves lost on our cognitive map. In this wilderness, in our panic, we find we do not know how to go forward, that our idiosyncrasy or naivety has left us without native knowledge of how to proceed. It is here we spiral, projecting wildly towards the future, but without hope of hitting a target. We are in free fall unable to find a foothold to stop ourselves. So even as we try to withdraw, or act through avoidance, or deny interdependence and interaction with others, we yet find we must act, must speak, must try to go on, even when we find ourselves only able to stumble and stammer forward without hope of hitting the mark or finding our way out of the bottle or maze.

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[14] Moi writes of a certain “conversion,” a common experience in OLP, writing “once I grasped what Wittgenstein wanted from this concept, I began to wonder what the routine invocations of ‘social construction’ in literary studies actually explain” (RO 54).

It is an intolerable and literally unmaintainable condition. We must go on, whether we want to or not. Our anxiety is not simply that we do not know how to act, but that we must act. As previously noted by Rollo May, such acting is often a move towards a self-actualization that in its constructive impulse, also must de-construct, in spite of our desires, the pattern in which we previously found ourselves. The destruction of pattern that leads as much to denial as to creation is what finally marks the anxious dialectic and creative potential of anxiety. Indeed, in spite of being the destruction of “pattern,” anxiety seems to produce its own non-essential, dialectical pattern, or spiral-cycle of construction, de-construction, reconstruction. We always begin with some kind of structure, some picture of the world. Yet this structure and picture will inevitably break down, de-construct, and with it our sense- and self-certainty. It is here we hit our limit of our anxiety, where we do not know how to go on, when we are thrust up against the secret knowledge of David Schearl that things could always be otherwise. In the anxiety of the characters of the novels I examine and in the courageous or repugnant acts of my fellow citizens, I see and hear the clamoring for ground and community that seems firm and makes sense–in which *we* make sense. We find a desire to be human in a world where we increasingly do not know how. In angst-ridden and often angry moments, it feels as though the “thin net over the abyss” that connected people to each other and the world has snapped.

This has perhaps always been the “familiar anxiety,” the anxiety *of* the familiar at the heart of American democracy (Ferguson 4). It is certainly one that emerges throughout the literature of the United States. Specifically to American Literature, the United States is an anxious country, built upon the uneasy union of disparate, conflicting parts. We are a large country with perhaps too many different landscapes, too many different potential forms of life, too many different competing rules. Politically, it is the symbol of democratic hope and instability; it is the manifestation of democratic anxiety, not simply because it threatens to fail, but because it often succeeds. It is itself an idiosyncratic particular, one that claims to have no tradition, yet panics and obsesses about its own claim to existence and future. Indeed for such a country, constant internal and external threat, as well as anticipated catastrophe becomes the calloused side of its sense of childish hope and opportunity.

For its authors, a dominating question emerges of what holds all of this together, what type of country, one that promises, however dubiously it delivers, equal weight to multiculturalism, independence, and freedom, that can bond all its citizenry, while subjecting its citizens to bondage. Anxieties of inclusion and exclusion constantly tear at/in American literature. How can many States fit into the grammar of a whole Nation? How can different ethnic groups find their place in the grammar of nation while retaining their individuality? How in our destabilizing neoliberal society can we find firm footing enough to stake our lives? How can we trust our neighbors in the democratic process? That is to say, how can anyone lay claim to another, if such claims are consistently thought of as merely constraints? The American writers examined in this dissertation recognize that the source of the country's welcoming promise, is at once the source of its hardened cruelty. The American writer is thus constantly aware of their country's constructedness, its fictitiousness, the groundlessness of its grounds. And so aware, they too must project a future to lay some form of stability, or at least understanding of such an anxious enigma of a country. The United States is always a nation threatening to tear itself apart, "to break into a thousand little pieces," as *Call It Sleep*'s David Schearl knows too well. It is no wonder that its greatest literature seems to question and probe not simply the anxious condition of this potential shattering but how those pieces may be creatively held together in some dynamic binding consciousness of a "form of life."

### III. Chapter Overview

Chapter two examines the phenomenology of anxiety in Henry Roth'*s Call It Sleep* (1934). Through exploring the day-to-day experience of a Jewish American child, David Schearl, Roth develops a dynamic pattern of experience emerging from an anxiety over being incomprehensible to one's community. David's experience as not only intercultural and interlinguistic but predominantly as a child, places him in an anxiously in-between position in both the world and knowledge. In Roth's novel, David's idiosyncratic nature ensures that every attempt to assimilate is met with near constant rebuke, leaving him dislocated and disoriented. In following his constant attempts at community and his rebuttal, the chapter identifies an anxious dialectic in the specific way in which David confronts and tries to structure an ever-de-constructing world. David's acute awareness of the multiplicity of rules and structures around him exacerbates his anxiety as he struggles to mold himself to contradictory expectations. Ultimately, such attempts leave David stranded in a world that ceases to make sense, generating a sense of protective, anxious skepticism towards a mutable existence. David, internalizes a form of anxious skepticism that generates an anxious sense of monstrosity in himself. This rebuff leaves David with the anxious knowledge that the world could always be otherwise, and he is without a proper home within it. He emerges from his travails in a Cavellian skepticism. He mistrusts the world's structures and feels an absolute outsider or monstrousness. This chapter specifically explores questions such as: In *Call It Sleep*, how do we respond ethically and effectively to anxious, idiosyncratic particularity? What, as seen through David, is the relation of idiosyncrasy to anxiety? How does David's experience of anxiety, emerging from our sense of irreconcilability with his world or community, lead to a form of Cavellian skepticism? And finally, does David's experience show how the experience of anxiety may guide us, perhaps creatively, back to the world?

Chapter three, picks up on this theme of anxious homelessness, exploring how anxiety is manifest in the marginalized experience of raced individuals. By following the stories of Wittman Ah Sing in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* and Thelonious "Monk" Ellison in Percival Everett's *Erasure*, this chapter examines how the racist appropriations and expectations of American culture that generate anxiety in individuals who seek to place themselves within the American community, but beyond its constricting racial framework. This chapter, akin to the first, focuses on the anxious feeling of being outside of a "form of life" in which one can interact and feel secure in themselves. Specifically, it looks at the anxious position of raced[15] individuals who, in trying to assert their independence of racial concepts, at once find that the urge towards such independence places them outside their national and local community. In this anxious position, they find themselves, caught between performance and authenticity, aggression and aloofness, but always unable to simply be. It becomes unclear who they speak for and who speaks for them. They are exiles from any community that provides reason. In this anxious exile, they face a tragic disbelief in their worthiness of love or acknowledgment. Drawing on Cavell's concepts of divorce and remarriage, the chapter concludes how each protagonist makes tentative returns to their communities through acknowledgment and vulnerability. In doing so, their stories show that a path toward reconstruction of identity and reconnection to community requires a movement through anxiety. It asks three interrelated questions: First, as shown by each novel, how do racial constraints and expectations generate anxiety for raced individuals and hinder their sense of expression with and with*in* their communities? That is, if they do not trust our society to ethically and authentically speak for them, how can they authentically speak for their society? This leads to a detachment that leaves them isolated. Second, how do the anxieties of raced individuals over this reciprocity manifest in self-splitting, exacerbating tension between individuality and communal belonging? And finally, how do they dubiously convince themselves, in their anxiety, of their inability to connect or express themselves fruitfully to others?

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[15] I use "raced individuals" here to highlight the fact that both Wittman and Monk have an ambiguous relationship to race in their lives, often conceptualizing and resenting it as an external constraint thrust upon them that distorts their self-image. This is in contrast to the child David, who while "raced" as Jewish-American, does not understand enough about his world to truly understand that some aspects of his feelings of outsiderness derive from cultural difference.

Chapter four examines how pseudonymic author Evan Dara's novels illustrate how anxiety manifests in American democracy as avoidance, denial, and separation. Both *The Lost Scrapbook* and *Flee* depict societies that anxiously deny interconnectedness and retreat into isolating self-interest. These societies emblemize the precariousness and anxiety-ridden nature of democracy and the social contract, showing how our ties to each other can be undone. Two forms of contradicting but entwined anxious avoidance emerge in these novels. Both give an illusion of absolute independence. The subliming of systems that take responsibility off the individual and the fetishization of independence that removes individuals from intercourse, become the tensions with which individuals contend. Anxiously trying to avoid their responsibilities to each other, individuals choose forms of inaction or self-diminution by aligning themselves with sublimed economic or evolutionary systems. In hiding behind economic or evolutionary scientism, they in turn deny their power to affect anybody, and avoid their responsibility. In an ironic correlation, citizens also assert their absolute individualism over and against society and community. This betrays an anxiety of interdependence that also leads to the violence of what Cavell calls "soul-blindness." Dara's novels show that people, unable to respond to one another's humanity, operate in a climate where reliance on others is perceived as a threat. Finally, overwhelming disorientation occurs when anxious attempts at denying interdependence fail, and the world dissolves into panic. In this way, Dara's narratives capture the tragic outcomes of Cavell's "avoidance of love." Throughout, the chapter specifically attacks the questions: How does anxiety change our relations with each other and with democratic society? How does anxiety relate to interpersonal skepticism and avoidance? And though anxiety may be the heart of democratic fragility, can it also point towards the beginnings of a renewal based upon a shared understanding of anxiety?

## IV. Critical Anxieties

I will conclude with a comment on critical anxiety and anxious criticism. A famously anxious Wittgenstein begins his own dissertation, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* a book meant to clear up all confusions and perhaps end philosophy entirely, with an admission that he will most likely not be understood. "Perhaps this book," states Wittgenstein, "will be understood only by someone who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it—or at least similar thoughts" (TLP 3). It is a curious beginning, one seeming at odds with his task. Yet, to me, it also makes a book accused of inhuman austerity, one of the most human texts ever written. For, despite its pretensions, I believe we can hear in his opening, a pining for community, and the shared hope or wish that our voice is not simply bouncing around in a well, but is retrieved and given company.

The anxiety of not being understood, of our work's worth, of having to be responsible for our words is one common across the critical field. Indeed, anxiety is depressingly present throughout academia and the humanities, and English studies in general. Within academic studies, it is hardly surprising that anxiety proliferates. Yet this feeling is not simply anxiety over personal success or failure, but of not knowing where we may find a community in which our passion connects us rather than alienates us. For in many ways there is at once no greater forum, no greater community one can find than academia for those who love literature and humanities, and yet it is also not clear that this is a meadow to which many of us are permitted to return. No wonder the question of "flourishing" in literary studies, as in Heather Love and Jame F. English's recently edited volume, feels so dire.

And so, if modern art provided us with the anxious object, then often literary criticism presents the anxious critic. We are in a time of great uncertainty about the merit or value of the humanities. At least since the Sokal hoax's exposure of dubious theory and compounded by contemporary attacks on the higher education (indeed, education in general), the humanities have anxiously struggled to have faith in itself. We may fear, as Wittgenstein did, that no ideas will never "enter [our] mind again," that "[w]ith all the concepts central to [our] work, [we] now feel completely 'unfamiliar.'" We may feel we "see nothing at all!!!" (Wittgnestein, PN 37, 21.8.14, as formatted). Indeed, Ann Cvetkovich asserts "Academia breeds particular forms of panic and anxiety leading to what gets called depression." This feeling manifests as a "not knowing how to go on" and a potential silencing constriction: "the fear that we have nothing to say, or that you can't say what you want to say, or that you have something to say but it's not important enough or smart enough" (18). Such insecurities and anxieties, though they often go unspoken, I would like to say, drive at least some of the impulse towards connecting the humanities to more solid stuff of other disciplines. Whatever their merits, the proliferation of "harder" humanities, such as the shift towards cognitive science and the digital humanities, speaks to this crisis of faith. Perhaps this anxiety responsible for the constant push to new theories and jargon, for better or worse. Yet often, it seems like these structures, in spite of themselves, risk diminishing the good of the human. Even worthy subjects such as

Posthumanism glance slantingly at the human of the humanities. It feels as if we have lost faith in the human voice.

Instead, we may fall into a form of skepticism, a refusal of responsibility. This is in part why the current, if still fledgling, embrace of Ordinary Language Philosophy in the vein of Austin, Wittgenstein, and Cavell is so important. The practice of reading, writing, and teaching that emerges from Ordinary Language Philosophy not only encourages a retrieval of both the human aspect or voice of the works we study, but also a revitalization of our own voice and position through this study. Partly for this reason, each chapter begins with a discussion of "critical anxiety." In different ways, critics of each novel discussed in this dissertation perform acts of criticism that, to me, express an anxiety about taking responsibility for their interpretations. I ask why and how this is the case. Often this anxiety develops from a "craving for generality" and "dream of completeness," where we may be cudgeled into silence, these tactics to close down the text, are also tactics to remove ourselves from criticism and misstep. Indeed, under this anxiety, we may even feel our love of our work not only unhelpful but toxifying as "we may become contaminated by contempt for our own work" (RO 99).[16]

Instead, Moi suggests, we should look at ourselves as, partly, the protagonists of these novels, as much as we are the primary members of the adventure of the text. This means re-picturing reading as "a practice of acknowledgment," "[placing] ourselves in a position in which to learn from the text." This does not mean dominating the characters within the text, replacing them with our own face, but rather that we allow ourselves to be open to, and excited for, the "adventure" of the text, that is "an exploration of the unknown." always marked by uncertainty (RO 5-6). This "requires us to emerge from our shell and open ourselves up to the experience offered by the text. It requires us to take our own experience seriously, and to trust it. It requires us to mobilize our powers of identification and empathy when called for: not as final resting places, but as one dimension of the work of understanding the text's claim on us" (RO 221). I agree with Moi that we need to recognize and move through this anxiety in our work as critics. This dissertation too has been an adventure, one of understanding anxiety both personally and socially, of finding one's own voice through confrontation with the "narrowing," "strangling constriction" that may silence us. I too am responsible for the words I have put down, and I too shudder at the exposure to criticism, the experience of defending my claims. I would like to say that it is the anxiety of finding that perhaps there is no "we" that we are in fact a part of.

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[16] One should also look at the influential critiques of the "hermeneutics of suspicion" in Eve Sedgwick's "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (2002) and Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (2015), as well as critiques of critique such as Amanda Anderson's *The Way We Argue Now* (2006).

Nevertheless, I believe each chapter of this dissertation to recognize some aspect of an anxiety or anxious existence experienced by anxious individuals. However, it is true that some of those who experience anxiety may experience it otherwise, and for that reason I make no hypothesis. At least I make none that I don't expect will be contradicted by the experience of others, just as my own experience of anxiety has contradicted the claims of other theorists. And yet we can never know how strong our claim to others is, how far our signal extends and our voice carries, if we do not make that first anxious stutter. As Cavell makes clear, "I have nothing more to go on than my conviction that I make sense." Cavell continues, "It may prove to be the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me, from all others, from myself. That will not be the same as a discovery that I am dogmatic or egomaniacal. The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason" (20).

So perhaps, as Wittgenstein conceded, "Perhaps this…will be understood only by someone who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it, or similar thoughts [or experiences]." Which is to say, for the claims and reading that follow I can do nothing but take full responsibility. Yet as Wittgenstein concludes, of the *Tractatus*, "Its purpose would be achieved if it gave pleasure to one person who read and understood it" (TLP 3). It is my hope too that at least one reader may recognize their anxious experience in what I have to say, just as I have found anxious companionship in the works I examine here.

# CHAPTER 2

# “THEY DIDN’T KNOW AS HE KNEW”: DAVID SCHEARL’S IDIOSYNCRASY AND HIS ANXIOUS STRUCTURING OF THE DAY TO DAY *IN CALL IT SLEEP*

## Introduction: “[B]ut when will you know?”

“I really believe… that you think of nothing,” teases the infant David Schearl’s mother, Genya, when, once again, faced with his blank-blinking silence in Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep* (1934). “…Aren’t you just a pair of eyes and ears!” she continues, “You see, you hear, you remember, but when will you know?” (CIS 173). The accusation and question are both merited. Much of David’s entire quest throughout Roth’s novel orbits the question of what exactly David is, what he knows, and what language is afforded him to find voice and understanding in an anxiety-inducing, alien world. As our vehicle through which we as readers experience the novel and David’s world, David acts as a filter, a medium—an unknowing “pair of eyes and ears” for us. David, in his childish “refractory matter,” leads us through his half-formed world as it rocks uneasily between memory and immediate sensory stimuli (Tuan 28). Through David, the world arrives to us, and our sense of its order depends primarily upon his nervous, ever-collapsing, soft-constructions—those cognitive structures that he erects to make sense of his world, destined to break down in their very constructedness.

Accordingly, David’s mediation of the world for both himself and us is far from effortlessly coherent, as it is often dazzlingly obtuse in its tendency towards fragmentation. David’s “whirling vision” refracts the world it attempts to parse, his attempts at organizing shatter and are shattered by the world (CIS 20). We receive only the refraction of the Hegelian ray of truth–not the ray itself (Hegel §73). David, far from the master of his domain, finds himself rebutted by the world, no matter how ardently he attempts to understand and take part in this world. David, at all points, appears to be and to see, *too* idiosyncratically. His attempts at assimilation and connection leave him only more ostracized. Uncertain and unsteady, David is a nervous, anxious consciousness of innocence, dread, and tragic skepticism.

Yet, while we receive the world of *Call It Sleep* through David, to insinuate that he amounts to nothing more than a receptacle of the world is to ignore David's angst-ridden attempts to structure and respond to the dizzyingly complex and often hostile environment of the turn-of-the-century Lower East Side. Though one can argue David falls victim to his world, Roth emphasizes, for better or worse, David's active and unique consciousness alongside his idiosyncratic engagement with and construction of that world. On the one hand, David's condition mirrors the "fundamental ambiguity" of the Jewish-American position (Weiss 228). David's anxiety, shares Jewish-American anxieties over occupying a "liminal zone" within an overwhelmingly Christian and toothsomely unbound America (Biale et al. 5). David, as a second-generation immigrant, discovers himself in a pushme-pullyou state of being, as he is torn between the two poles of his "outsider" status and his intimate entanglement, or Kierkegaardian "entangled freedom" in the American scene (CA 49). Having only ever unconsciously lived in his country and culture of origin, David struggles to negotiate—usually with tragic results—being a stranger in the strange land of America, his home. David's anxious desire to both find hospitality in this new world and to extricate himself from its hostility, provokes a pattern of repulsion and attraction in David, that positionally and symbolically mimics the dilemma of his fellow second-generation Jewish immigrants. David and his kin are forced to struggle with an inherited identity of traditions and the relatively conventionless plurality of the new land.

Conversely, an unformed[17] David is too young to act as an *informed* vessel through which we explore this liminality. Yet, this is why he is perfect for the role. Accordingly, it is sounder to see such Jewish-American anxieties over positionality and identity, not as finding their symbol in David, but rather as working *through* David, as part of the *experience* of David's day-to-day. For though David may on *some* level be representative of this collective tension and "form of life" found in such collective anxieties, his pervasive idiosyncrasy separates him even from his fellow immigrants and playmates and complicates this more collective interpretation. He is unable to synchronize, in speech or being, his particular "form of life," and is denied a space within whatever community he strives to enter. The repudiation of David by his world reasserts his alienating particularity and his overwhelmingly anxious conception of that world.[18] For if even in the loving gaze of his mother David appears cryptic, much of the time, to his community, he is truly incomprehensible. At his best, others use David for their whims. Otherwise rejected by the communities in which he desperately attempts to participate, David has no stable ground to establish a stable sense of his already thrashing world. David can ground himself only in soft-constructions that crumble as he builds them, that pull each other, and him, apart as he strives to pull them, and himself, together.

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[17] Or not yet *fully* formed.

[18] We might then say that David's anxiety bears a *family resemblance* (Wittgenstein, PI §67, §68)*,* to a particular conception of Jewish anxiety, but does not ultimately, or at least flatly symbolize *that* anxiety, or represent *that* anxious family. I say this not to extract David from the community, but to emphasize his alienness *within* it.

The lived experience of David, and therefore our own in reading Roth's novel, is a nervous cycling–until cycle turns to a tail spinning spiral–through construction, de-construction,[19] and reconstruction.

This anxious cycle-spiral construction, de-construction, reconstruction resists attempts to reduce David to a symbol or Roth's novel to a parable. If anything, the novel reveals the dubiousness and inherent violence of such stenciling within social life. This is why it is so odd that most criticism of *Call It Sleep* ignores this integral resistance. Structuring itself around *Bildungsroman* (Diamant 338), the text teases the expectation of a linear and progressive development that leaves readers with a sense of completion by bearing witness and acting as a companion to the consummation of *something* within the protagonist. However, where similar modernist *Bildungs-, or Kunstlerroman*, such as Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, while challenging the genre, still end with epiphany and the matured fullness of character (however short lived), Roth's novel and David himself problematize any attempts to find comfort and wholeness in universality and identity. Counter to the usual logic of *Bildungsromans*, in which experience concludes in synthesis, whether as some calcified truth or potent fullness, David can never truly assimilate or integrate his experience, leaving both himself and the reader with chaotic polyphony or flimsy scaffolding.[20]

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[19] I write it like this in order to dissuade the confusion that we are discussing the literary theory of "Deconstruction."

[20] Conversely, Patricia Chu, in discussing the Asian-American *bildungsroman* suggests that "youth's nonlinear path to maturity may seem to resemble the form of the failed *bildungsroman* critics have ascribed to earlier narratives, allegorizing the impossibility of assimilation" (Chu 2000). This assessment seems closer to the structure of David's narrative.

However, if we cling to David and our attachment to him (and his tragedy), then we must understand David's arc through David's eyes as best as possible. This is not without its own struggle. By what rails do we secure ourselves to navigate the volatile and quivering world of David's psyche; how by a light so refracted can a purposeful sense of order, of *anything* emerge from such infantile darkness? For readers, David's oddity and ambiguity provoke these anxious questions. David's inescapable particularity at once posits David as incomprehensible to the world at large while showing him to be a dynamic, creative force whose unique, lasting power arises from his idiosyncrasies as he conceives the world. David's anxious search for community and certainty reflects the tragic birth of Cavellian skepticism that nearly destroys David. Nevertheless, Roth's novel suggests, if *we* choose to pluck him from the lidded murk, we can find potential in the nervous yearning of David's refracted ray and the way by which David confronts this skepticism.

Guided by Stanley Cavell's reflections on skepticism and responsiveness, this chapter aims to provide a phenomenology of David's anxious experience, while examining how anxiety descends into skepticism towards the world and others when the world ceases to make sense. In turn, it points to the feeling of our own monstrosity, when we feel nonsensical to the world and locked out of the community. Alongside the dissertation's fundamental questions regarding anxiety, this chapter specifically explores questions such as: In *Call It Sleep,* how in the face of such anxious and anxiety inducing individuals do respond ethically and effectively to particularity? What, as seen through David, is the relation of idiosyncrasy to anxiety? How does David's experience of anxiety, particularly as an immigrant *child,* emerging from our sense of irreconcilability with his world or community, lead to a form of Cavellian skepticism? And finally, does David’s experience show how the experience of anxiety may guide us, perhaps creatively, back to the world?

The chapter first illustrates the critical anxiety found in the critical reception of Roth’s novel. Critics attempt to fix David to some definitive meaning, one that mirrors the same conflict and disorientation fracturing David within his narrative. In section two, I explore the anxiety and complications that cause critics to spurn treating David as a person, instead treating him as merely a symbol. This refusal reflects the internal tension David faces when seeking a place in his community. Next, in section three, I examine how David confronts and tries to structure a threatening and ever de-constructing world. Roth’s cognitive aesthetic of David’s experience employs an anxious pattern of construction, de-construction, and re-construction in response to the contradictory and dizzying expectations thrust upon David. His attempts to navigate and mold himself to the multiplicity of rules and structures around him exacerbates David’s anxiety and leaves him fractured and stranded. In turn this generates a sense of protective, anxious skepticism towards a mutable existence. Section four, an interlude of sorts, shows how rare moments of peace and clarity offer the chance for creative reconstruction in the brief respite from his chaos. These moments, however, are short-lived, and section five illustrates how David, finding himself at odds with his world, internalizes a form of anxious skepticism that not only puts him at a distance from the world, but generates an anxious sense of monstrosity in himself. Finally, the chapter concludes by turning its attention to the novel's ambiguous conclusion, asking how we should treat and what we can learn from David’s exhaustion and fragmented sense of self. David’s anxious journey leads to a reluctant acceptance that underscores the continuous struggle for identity and belonging in an often-unyielding world.

By the end of Roth's novel, David's anxious exhaustion becomes our own. Roth's aesthetic patterning provides a phenomenology of anxiety. Here emerges a general pattern of anxious experience while movingly working this pattern through the particularity of an intercultural child's attempts to navigate an uncertain world. In doing so Roth makes us experience David's disorienting anxiety and opens up questions of our ethical responsibility towards such anxious individuals. It becomes a matter of responsiveness, of asking both how we, in our anxiety, can respond to the world when our senses fail, and to others in their own anxiety. How can we respond to anxiety, our own or in others, so as not to lead to wreckage? Far from anxiety being a moment doomed to despair, we may find that anxiety illuminates the potent, if exhausting, truth that we must re-face the world each day by rebuilding our constructions, however soft, in a constant act of creation.

## I. "Wreckage Picked Up": *Call it Sleep,* its Critics, and the Anxiety of Ambiguity

On February 9th of 1965, Bernard Weinraub reported in his article "Wreckage Picked Up" for *The New York Times*, "lights zigzagged across the water" off the coast of Jones Beach as the Coast Guard searched for, and slowly salvaged the wreckage of a plane that crashed in the waters. Of what was "plucked from the waters" included a "pair of trousers, a dress, a crushed seat belt and a torn paperback novel titled 'Call It Sleep'" (Weinraub 29). That Henry Roth's novel should have survived the crash, recovered from the wreckage, and worn by the tumult, seems to encapsulate the very stricken nature of the novel's journey into the Western canon and the experience of its infant protagonist.

The critical anxiety found in the reception of *Call It Sleep* has fittingly reflected the tension of David's anxious struggle to be, consistently dividing critics in their anxious fixation on what the novel's nature is and what it should be. Published in 1934, Roth's novel garnered moderately favorable, though overall critical reviews. Many, chiefly gentile critics, on political grounds, "chided him for not seeing the situation in terms of social justice" and not containing a "proletarian message" (Leslie 7).[21] A majority of the others who read the novel almost wholly ignored its stylistic complexities, cordoning it off as yet another classic immigrant tale. "One approaches this novel without much hope," resigned H. W. Boyton in his 1935 review, flatly titled "The Story of a Ghetto Childhood," "How many of these documents have sprung from that sultry soil?" (Boynton BR7). Boynton continues, "Is the squalor of fact too much for them, so that they are unable to bring that enemy into necessary balance with the effort of its desperate challenger Man?" (Boynton BR7). John Chamberlain, reviewing the novel in his article "Books of the Time" for the *New York Times* the same year, similarly dismissed the book as suffering the "limitations" of a "story of the 'melting pot,'" too tied up with the concerns of an ethnic class to elicit the necessary compassion and attention required of its implicitly non-ethnic readers. Critics, of course, rendered this not as a failing of the reader, but as an error on the part of Roth. Far from seeing the difference found in *Call It Slee*p as a challenge or lesson in otherness, the novel drew criticism, seemingly, for not keeping the "non-ethnic" reader enough in mind. "The reader must be able to feel the scope of the racial bitterness involved," continues Chamberlain, "to get the full measure of dramatic enjoyment from 'Call It Sleep'" (Chamberlain 13). Such critiques foreclose on any possibility of seeing Roth or his novel as genuinely American, casting the work as bogged down by foreign particularities and, therefore, without universal value.

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[21] Ironic, as Roth identified with the Communist party at this point. On another note, by focusing on David qua David we may also see how the uncompromising socio-economic conditions (particularly for immigrant populations) of America and its brand of Capitalism destabilize, break, and alienate individuals from their communities in the act of their attempts at participation.

This being said, even *Call It Sleep*'s dissenters saw a glimmer of "American" universality and value in its narrative. Even Chamberlain, unlike Boynton, by the end of his piece, vaguely gestures towards the potential universality of the novel. He claims that despite its "parochialisms," Roth presents a "story of a sensitive young man, any time, any place" that does "for the East Side Jew what James T. Farrell [did] for the Chicago Irish in the Lonigan trilogy." Chamberlain concludes that while the ethnic nature of the book may mar this desired universality, its "indebtedness to Joyce" and the "often… great beauty" of the language allows "Mr. Roth [to] achieve much more than 'color,' a fact that makes his book a living, if over-extended, narrative instead of a dated dud" (Chamberlain 13). Others were more unabashedly positive about the novel at its publication. For instance, early ads by Ballou Publishing dating from February 1935 displayed praise for Roth's novel as "an exceptional book" from Kenneth Burke (Display Ad61 BR18). Novelists like Dorothy Richardson praised *Call It Sleep* as "one of those rare books which go on breathing after one has put them down." "A work of art," continues her quote in the ad, "a book to treasure and read again and again… far beyond praise" (Display Ad77 BR23). Despite such praise, the reduction by nearly all early critics of the novel to the "parochial" continued to undergird and arguably impede thoughtful discussion and widespread reception of Roth and his work.

However, while predominantly white American critics debated the novel's alienating ethnicity or potential universality, the Jewish community embraced *Call It Sleep* and Henry Roth as one of its own, if ambivalently. Philadelphia's *The Jewish Exponent* frequently discussed the book throughout the paper's publication. By June 1935, Rabbi Lipis of Emanu El Synagogue was reviewing the novel for "the Sisterhood['s]" closing luncheon ("Services" 12), while Harold Strauss identified it as one of "two of the most important novels of the year by Jews" that "concerned themselves with Jewish affairs" (Strauss 21). Strauss, who could only identify seventy-five books by Jewish writers (many by foreign), saw *Call It Sleep* as "a novel of great beauty and importance" and as a godsend against a seeming "end of the Jewish literary tradition." "If this fine novel is a sample of what American Jews of a new generation can do," waxes Strauss, "the figures I have given above will soon change" (Strauss 21). Nevertheless, there was still unease. In a notably hesitant response to the novel, Fannie Goldstein, in her 1936 article "The Jew in Contemporary Fiction," selected the novel as an example of the literature of "an introspective and Jewish adjustment nature" while lauding the novel for its "vigor, power, [and] fine imagination." However, Goldstein, in her following sentence, is quick to note that while the book is "interesting in a fashion," it "fails either to uplift or to convince the reader of the mission of the hts (sic) chief protagonist" (Goldstein 1). Such debates about the novel's status as Jewish or Anti-Jewish, ethnic or universal will follow the novel into the twenty-first century. Indeed, the debate itself seems representative of cultural anxiety in the United States.

Horace Gregory, in 1935 had decried that Roth's novel "will be remembered when other books are forgotten" (Display Ad61 BR18). In the short term, Gregory could not have been more wrong. Whether because of the Depression era pinch on cash or its supposedly all too ethnic nature, *Call It Sleep* fell out of print and was rarely discussed until its rediscovery in 1956. That year, Alfred Kazin and Leslie Fiedler both cited the novel in a symposium on unjustly neglected books of the past twenty-five years, while Walter Rideout dubbed it one of the best novels of the 1930s (Charmetzky 413). J. Donald Adams, reporting on his reading of American Scholar's twenty-fifth-anniversary issue for the *New York Times*, where Fiedler and Kazin restated their claims, quoted Fiedler's assertion of the theme as "the coming of moral consciousness of a Jewish-American boy in New York" and Kazin's description of the novel as "the deepest and most authentic, certainly the most unforgettable" (Adams 253). *Call It Sleep* regained momentum, and the debate followed similar terms of ethnic particularity against a supposed "American" universality as before. "This is the finest book about new Americans I have ever read. I mean that," wrote Dorothy Parker in 1961 for Esquire, "…I don't know any book that says so much and tells so much and shows you so much about those who came here…I beg of you to read about these people" (Display Ad399 440). Harry Golden, less enthusiastically, wrote that while "*Call It Sleep* may not be the American novel for all time… it certainly is a novel far superior to its own time (and so the present time as well)" (Display Ad399 440). However, it was not until the paperback was reissued in 1964 and reviewed by Irving Howe in an unprecedented, for a paperback, front-page review of the New York Times Book Review that Roth's novel gained the following desired by Roth's champions (Charmetzky 413). Howe praised the novel as "one of the few genuinely distinguished novels written by a 20th Century American" that "faded out of sight" under the "thousands of cluttering novels" (Howe BR1). By

December, it had already made it into its fifth printing and stayed as the number-one bestseller in paperback fiction for months to come (Ad Display120 12). By 1965, the process of canonization had commenced.

Unfortunately, belated canonization also signaled a decline in public interest in Roth's work. This sinking, in part, was significantly contributed to by his (in total) sixty-year silence. "All right already," writes Robert Lasson reviewing Wallace Markfield's Teitlebaum's Window, "We have gotten it wholesale…. We have progressed from Roth I (*Call It Sleep*) to Roth II…." (Lasson 3). Much like the Chamberlain in the 30s, a weariness surfaces in *Call It Sleep's* critics in the 70s—not only with Roth—but this time with the entire "progression" of Jewish-American literature. Yet the fact that Lasson feels a need to identify, parenthetically, *Roth I* while assuming our knowledge of who *Roth II* is (Philip, of course) suggests just how far this "progression" had occurred. Henry Roth was once again, creatively speaking, ghettoized back to the Lower East Side, much as critics claimed that Philip Roth's work underscored the foreignness of his predecessors. A muted Henry Roth receded into the background anew, especially as Philip Roth stepped further into his role as a public intellectual. Throughout the seventies and eighties, Henry Roth was once again buried, despite his occasional resurgence with the publication of the collection *Shifting Landscape*, a "composite" of under- and unknown works, and finally, the sudden appearance briefly preceding his death, of his quartet, *Mercy of Rude Stream.* By the dawn of the twenty-first century, Henry Roth faded far from the public eye and conversation, plunging deep into the private academic sector.

Perhaps due to this widespread neglect, contemporary critics emphasized *Call It Sleep*'s position less in terms of genre or types of literature, instead focusing on the novel's aesthetics, principally its symbolic structure and innovative use of language. Through the 1990s, this trend continued, solidifying *Call It Sleep* in the canon. In fact, for the first time, public and critical opinion allowed the novel to stand alone without justification. With the publication, on the heels of Roth's death, of *New Essays on Call It Sleep* (1996), a greater focus on Roth's modernism emerged. In a high point of this turn, Werner Sollors sought in the novel a potential form of Ethnic-Modernism that might square the circle of particularity against universality that plagued Roth's novel from the beginning. In 2005, the book gained a place on *TIME* magazine's list of the hundred best books since 1923 with little argument.

However, one question of categorization, hinted at before but never stated so explicitly, emerged from such critics as Ezra Cappell: Is Roth's text actually Jewish? Can we, in fact, call it Anti-Jewish? *Call It Sleep,* once considered too ethnic to be popular or rewarding, now comes under fire for what some see to be its very lack of contribution to Jewish literary culture. Regardless of whether the reader deems this paucity to be the case, if we *are* "to discuss *Call It Sleep* as an ethnic novel," cautions Wirth-Neshar, we can do so constructively only "if we discard the notion that ethnicity provides an essential and stable identity in confrontation with a monolithic mainstream culture." On the contrary, Wirth-Neshar continues, following Werner Sollors, "ethnicity itself may be a type of invention" (Wirth-Neshar 10). Accordingly, the life of Roth's *Call It Sleep* proves a life of continuous dialectical tension between genre and type, "ethnic" and "American," particular and universal, noise and silence, loss and recovery. Thus, a novel centered on anxiety and skepticism that accompanies idiosyncrasy, a novel that probes the loss of community, or our inability to reconcile ourselves with one, becomes the anxious object of critics who desire to fix the novel and David to their tastes.

## II. “Christ, it’s a kid!”: David’s Particularity and Cognitive Agency

Nevertheless, between the debates about the novel’s ethnicity, about its particularity or universality, its genre or anti-genre, its religion or atheism, we lose something crucial. What has happened to David? This is not to say that David has disappeared from the critical dialogue—he is still, of course, the protagonist and medium through which the book presents itself to us. However, critics frequently used David as an anchor for their arguments of what the novel is and never taken as his own person. Alternatively, when taken as his own person, David is often received as little more than a double of Roth himself in an unfinished narrative of artistic development. This claim, while not altogether far-fetched, depends highly on how we read the end of Roth’s novel and our willingness to project for ourselves the narrative arc of an abandoned series of successive novels.

In either scenario, whether we lose David in the fray of novelistic definition, or claim him as allegory or unfinished artist,[22] we do not end up reading David on *David’s terms.* They appear to repeat a strange move Stanley Cavell identifies in “The Avoidance of Love,” where critics shift their attention to a study of words and patterns over and above character, threatening to perform a bad faith gesture of forgetting the speaking, or thinking character entirely" (AL 39). Critics, like those of *Call it Sleep,* tend to, "by some philosophy or other," "shun direct contact with characters [and assume] that characters are not people, [and] that what can be known about people cannot be known about characters" (AL 40). In fact, by failing to attend to character by, as Toril Moi suggests, forgetting "our (public and shared) way of dealing with fictional characters" and "the plain and ordinary ways we deal with characters," critics perform a "conjuring trick" of sorts, that poofs away the human foundation of the words written (Moi, *Character* 51, 58).[23] For as Cavell asserts, "[h]ow could any serious critic ever have forgotten that to care about a specific character is to care about the utterly specific words he says when and as he says them; or that we care about the utterly specific words of a play because certain men and women are having to give voice to them?" (AL 41). Under the sway of such a picture that separates meaning from character, or people, such criticism views "attention to character," like the attention I argue should be given to David, "[as] a distraction from the only, or the final, evidence there is for a reading of a literary work, namely the words themselves" (AL 41). Seemingly there is a critical anxiety of coming too close to the ungrounded moorings of character, and David, anxiously unmoored himself, perhaps deprives us even further of the tranquilizing solid ground we seek. As this section explores, David's anxiously idiosyncratic nature makes him a troubling particularity in terms of finding a framework that fits him comfortably. This is especially seen in his struggle to find a non-alienating or negating relation to society.

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[22] And do we *really* see this? What, besides imagination, leads us to even think that David *wants* to be an artist? In what sense, as Wirth-Neshar asserts, does David’s anxiously-imaginative constructions and conglomerations constitute “a turning point in his movement away from his parents and toward his development as an artist” (Wirth-Neshar 9).

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[23] And that frankly from the outside of the literary critical profession this can seem ludicrous.

Indeed, to see anxiety's meaning in *Call It Sleep*, we *must* pay attention to David as an idiosyncratic particular. Citing Wong, Ninh asserts that the act of depersonalization found in "the injunction in literary criticism to... 'remove the focus from the personalities and idiosyncrasies of the characters to a larger arena' in order to achieve a socially meaningful analysis—has led critics to excise feeling" (47, quoting from Wong 39). When feeling is so tied up in a character, as in the case with David and his anxiety, the excising of feeling leads to the excising of the character. Thus, by not taking David on his own terms, we anxiously strike David dumb and negate the meaning of his anxiety. In so doing, David remains invisible and fractured, opaque and coerced. He is, in essence, like the fate of Roth's novel itself. Is David this? Or is he that? Does he matter? Or is he superfluous? Is he an agent, or mere medium? Through what lens must we read David? Yet these questions, while certainly significant, subject David to the same caustic and tragic fate of confusion, pressure, and anxiety that all but annihilates him in *Call It Sleep.*

Most attempts by contemporary critics to explain the "function" of David and reduce his ambiguity in turn reduce his agency by conjuring various, as Roth would call them, "constricting forces" that determine his actions (SL 13).[24] Numerous critics predominantly use myth and Freud to combat these questions. Karen Lawrence describes the trajectory of the novel as one confronting Freud's family romance and Oedipal drive. Lawrence describes David's electric shock at the novel's conclusion as "the final phallic gesture that, paradoxically leads to David's penetration by power" giving the novel's pattern a "strange completion" (Lawrence 112). "The electric shock of the family drama that the reader experiences in the early sections of the novel is climatically subsumed," continues Lawrence, "The psychosexual is revealed as a part of a larger circuit of power that animates the familial drama" (Lawrence 112). Likewise, Leslie Fiedler, even as he points out certain ways in which Roth complicates Freud's theorem, argues that to understand "the archetypal subtext" of Roth's narrative, it is imperative to understand Freud's reimagining Oedipal myth. "David seems finally," asserts Fiedler, "a textbook case of the 'Oedipus Complex'" (Fiedler 25). David's throwing the zinc ladle on the active third rail of the trolley system may invoke Freudian, even Lacanian visions of the phallic Oedipal struggle. The crowd's cry of "Christ, it's a kid!" (CIS 420) indeed fits a symbolism of both Christ's redemptive sacrifice as well as the, also thwarted, sacrifice of Issac ("one only kid" [Roth 233]).[25] And yet when David thinks of his actions, especially of the light from the crack that bursts from the electrified third rail of the trolly system that nearly kills him at the conclusion, he thinks of none of these allegories but instead vaguely imagines the cleansing power of God's burning coal to Isaiah's lips or thinks in his panic of nothing at all.

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[24] See below.

A curious split then emerges in the narrative between the novel's character trajectory and symbolic trajectory. Instead of one reinforcing and grafting off of the other, as is often the case in the *Bildungsroman*, in *Call It Sleep* an ethical and textual issue then occurs: How are we to engage with David's journey in a manner which does not sweep aside his singularity nor trap us in some private language that further ostracizes and isolates him? David's integrity as David is incessantly threatened by the world he attempts to navigate. Engulfed by the conflicting and crosshatching cultural realities of his life-world, David's anxious struggle to *be* manifests as surviving the dominance of external, constricting symbolic structures (both within *his* society and in *our* own temptation) against his own idiosyncratic way of being and seeing the world. Such a split or resistance of the symbolic hegemony reflects Roth's own aesthetic and ethical stance and preference of the time.

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[25] As Wirth-Neshar points out, the passage from Isaiah Roth cites is read in Christian hermeneutics as a prophecy of the coming of Christ, just as the Chad Godya song, with its link to the sacrificial lamb and the Passover seder, signifies both Jewish and Christian traditions" (9)

In a critical overview predating *Call It Sleep* surveying the plays of Lynn Riggs, Roth underscores a nearly Manichean struggle of individual versus universal definitions of self. "[A]n artist [like] Lynn Riggs," explains Roth, "does not think in abstractions, but in terms of human life. He expresses his ideas in a struggle between the emotions of human beings" (*SL* 13). Such works "are all developed neither entirely for picturing nor for attacking local or more universal social institutions, but as symbolic of restrictive and leveling forces in life against which the individual bent upon self-development must contend" (*SL* 12). While in one sense, Roth's assessment reiterates a perennial tension in art (and, again, particularly the *Bildungsroman* and *Kunstlerroman* novel) of the individual against society, Roth asserts that art reflects not only this tension but arises as a natural product of this tension. Further, such art, Roth insists, resists both formally and philosophically the leveling, over-determining impulses of modern American society. In an equivocal explanation of the central theme of Riggs's works, Roth writes,

> Before I mention the central theme of the work of Lynn Riggs, it must be made clear that I do so merely for orientation: the life in his plays is too inexplicable, too ramified, *too fully alive to be reducible to rigid definition*. The issues that appear in Mr. Riggs's plays *are not the result of rational thought*, but are to him an *inevitable arrangement of life itself*. This inevitable arrangement, or central theme, expressing it generally, is the

> conflict between the impulses of the individual and the constricting forces around him, whether they be the demands of other individuals or the organized demands of society. More specifically, it is the *struggle life makes to maintain the integrity of life, the right to live by the laws governing its own natural and free impulses and by no other standards*. The struggle between this individuality and the external demand of uniformity becomes, when formulated, almost a moral one: the good, which is the genuine expression of natural feeling—inherent idealism, gentleness, and lyricism of what is fundamentally innocent—resisting what, though it is understandable and pitiful, is nevertheless evil—the expedient, the empty or warped convention, the petrified morality. Tragedy results either when the latter overcomes the former or when the former attempts to adjust itself to the latter. (SL 13, emphasis added)

If anything "universal" is found in such works of art, it is a marked resistance to any delimiting or absorption of the individual (and the work itself) by such socially and conventionally legislated universals. In Riggs's drama, the work of art simultaneously reflects and resists the attempts at abstraction, instead letting the drama and logic of particular lives guide its path and dictate the drama's internal logic. Against "warped convention" and "petrified morality," the works as Riggs's own emphasize the "free," "natural," even "innocent" patterns and processes of the individual. The "inevitable arrangement of life" is not, as Roth interprets it, that which binds, but is the very conflict that propels life, or *a* life forward. This conflict, which the "inevitable arrangement" comprises, according to Roth, is the dialectical friction between "the impulses of the individual and the constricting forces around him." To "maintain the integrity of life" against the deadening "demands to uniformity," individuals must consistently place their particular mode of being over and against any reduction to "rigid definition." The work of art must not be a prescribed act, but must aid this resistance of the individual by forming itself on these natural, "irreducible rhythms" of life's exuberance.

But even while underscoring the importance and even moral imperative of placing the individual above and against an omnivorous society, Roth, in *Call It Sleep,* runs up against a linguistic and theoretical frustration. For if the self-moving motor of the "inevitable arrangement of life" is both generated and is part and parcel with the moral conflict of *a* particular against *the* tyrannical universal, then we have already entered into the stomach of the whale which we were pursuing. In other words, to say, "life is" and its "inevitable arrangement" is (if anything at all) a conflict of individual against "warped convention," automatically marks "unnatural" convention as the constant touchstone of "natural" individualism. Convention, not defining, but a large part of a Wittgensteinian "form of life" becomes a defining feature of the individual, no matter how "warped" it may be. As Toril Moi explains of Wittgenstein's §241 on "forms of life," to even "play the language-games of disagreement, opposition, objection, and so on," I must "share your language, share your judgments about what counts as a disagreement." But if we do *not* share these general contours of thought and behavior, then my reply is in fact more "devastating," as "I can neither tell you how abominable your opinions are nor subject your views to meticulous ideological critique" (RO 61). We rely on a "grammar," agreed upon uses developed unconsciously throughout our coexistence, in order to function *together,* ironically, even in dissent. Moi continues, "To share a language is to make the same judgments concerning grammar, criteria, and language-games. We can only mark our differences, realize our disagreements, puzzlement, confusion—against the background of a shared understanding" (RO 61). Yet Moi, as would Wittgenstein, pushes back against an understanding of "commonality" or "shared behavior" as *necessarily* oppressive. Such concepts are not pejoratively "normative," nor is such agreement guaranteed. However, “if we really don’t share any practices, we will find it difficult, even impossible, to understand why these strangers do what they do. Our judgments are not in ‘attunement’” (RO 50).[26] If we only become individuals in overcoming this binding, it is a feat that *cannot* be satisfied without falling out of attunement with our fellows. We in essence are struggling against social constriction by which we are ever already bound even in our withdrawal.

Perhaps this is why in his own work–or at least in *Call It Sleep*–Roth’s protagonist dwindles rather than triumphs. For how could we imagine the life of David as pointing to some overcoming or constructive synthesis? To assert so only works if we choose to raise the symbolic structures’ “inevitable arrangements” to a position of defining life over life itself. We must forget the individual as an individual if we are to *make* something of them. And yet what do we make of them but a symbol for the eternal struggle—only occasionally triumphed over—with the constrictions of the symbolic and social order upon which, even in our rebellion we depend? The point being, that on the one hand, the individual needs society, needs this order, to hold a meaning, much like a sentence, only makes sense if we agree upon the grammar. And yet, on the other hand, if society overtakes the individual, they lose the particularity and capacity for creative action that gives them life, being sublimed into some general symbol rather than a meaningful particular. For the writer, casting a character caught between the two poles, is an anxious position not unlike that of his characters.

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[26] In Wittgenstein’s words, “If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments. This seems to abolish logic, but does not do so.” He explains, “It is one thing to describe methods of measurement, and another to obtain and state results of measurement. But what we call ‘measuring’ is partly determined by a certain constancy in results of measurement.” (*PI* §242).

And if we read David plainly, it is only by us the reader and our own need for closure that a desire to overcome such constrictions is forced upon him. It is not clear that David even (consciously at least) *wants* to escape this arrangement. Certainly, David agonizes to escape the agony that society rains down upon him. But David does not, perhaps cannot, make the slippage between cause and effect. On the contrary, David desperately runs towards society at every turn; he throws himself at it. For it is not David who repudiates society, but society that repudiates David. Under such conditions, how could life maintain *any* integrity? No matter how "warped" is convention, David constantly tries to *conform* to its mold. David's innate inability to conform, even in attempting to, ironically underscores his tragic integrity. Tragic because it is an integrity that comes not from dominance over the social, but one that emerges in the social's dominating and rejection of *him*.

David is always outside his society while simultaneously restricted within. He is muddied, in touch with the "evil" of contamination by "warped convention," while never quite being allowed in as a successful participant within this convention. In his attempts to draw closer, the world recedes; at all points he is without "native tongue" and without community. This foreclosure on a "native language"—a "form of life"—twines into his experience (PI §7). Certainly, this is true as an immigrant stuck in between two languages, two worlds. However, if David's story centered around this conflict alone, his story would still be an anxious one. Roth's novel would not be such a fundamentally, to its bass string, anxious work. For David's lack of native tongue is *foundational,* reaching beyond ethnic and religious difference towards a starker alienation from *any* society he wishes to make his own. He is an outcast in language and therefore, in society. He has nearly no one that he can meet, or who can (or will) meet him on his linguistic plane. This is not simply the danger of isolation, but as Cavell warns, that without "mutual acceptance" the hazard of such disfluency on a linguistic plane directly signals an inability and prohibition to share in a "form of life" (CR 28). Without community, says Cavell, we are without reason and accordingly, without an intelligible voice (CR 20). We find ourselves voiceless, without any community to claim and lay claim. We are not simply out of sync, but incommunicable, voiceless to others. Indeed, as Cavell asserts, "The fear of being incomprehensible is akin to the fear of being untranslatable" (CR xi).

There is a serious risk then, not of the corruption of *being translated incorrectly,* but rather of being *untranslatable*, and thus alone. But this ethical speaking for and *being* spoken for, that defines the claim of community, *is* the horizon, the background of *all* intelligibility, without which figure and voice find no contour nor comfort. Mutual incomprehensibility between individuals and their *lebenwald* replaces good-faith acts of reciprocal translation that make up our interactions with each other, without which we become incomprehensible to ourselves.[27] Thus, Lisa Naiomi Mulman comes close to the issue when she writes that "ultimately, David's quest," as both incomplete child and intercultural, inter-linguistic immigrant, "is to translate a real identity out of a morass of patently false and painful options" (9). Yet, while this is in some sense true, David nevertheless does not appear to be trying to carve out an identity as much as embrace one. In fact, his embrace is forever thwarted by his community's rebuffs. So far from striving for and becoming a shining example of self-reliance and independence of thought, such qualities are tragically thrust upon David against his desires.

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[27] Paradoxically, or at least agonizingly, since we can only try to, and fail to translate ourselves, with a native tongue not our own.

David's naïve innocence and general ignorance of the background social, political, and symbolic structures that scaffold the external and critical world of experience places him in an ambiguous position for both external critics of the novel and his own community within the novel. David encapsulates a distrustful interpretation of childhood, "not so much the positive foundation of maturity as formlessness and chaos;" adulthood in turn being the result of a reining in of the child's "refractory matter" through education's "imposition of an ideal form, by education" (Tuan 28). Though miming the stream-of-conscious style of his fellow modernists, *Call It Sleep* renders David's experience as far less assimilated and restructured, instead concluding in either chaotic polyphony, or a flimsy scaffolding. In other words, we do not experience a developed psyche, one whose social genetic code already has firmer markings, contours, and reference points. The perspective we achieve from Roth's novel is that of a *particular* consciousness still very much in development and whose finished "product" we will never see. His innocence hobbles the rectitude of outside attempts to apply such well-wrought scaffoldings to David and/or his construction of meaning and reality. Alternatively, his innocence can tempt us to dismiss both David and his soft-constructions as incomprehensible in their infantile stammering.

In taking David as not simply a character in terms of a symbolic structure, but a presence—a person—we *respond* to, then in all ethicality we must respond in a manner that maintains David not as (merely) a literary construct, but as a singularity. Indeed, as much as David wants his community’s embrace, we cannot also forget that his anxieties towards his own reflection or the lack thereof and his “losing his self-image,” as Sollors notes, also speaks to his fear of being swallowed whole (Sollors 142). Thus, we must try to see David qua David if we are to understand anything that David and consequently the novel can teach us. In doing so, we do not lose any broader understanding of the novel or its meaning; instead, we highlight a further complexity of everyday experience and our response to it. Whereas David is not resurrected in the novel, in our engaged response to David, one could say we as readers come the closest to revitalizing him. At the very least, in our nuanced attention, we can carve out room for a psychology, voice, and way of being frequently discounted and from which we may learn. And to begin, we should examine both the sources and experience of David’s everyday anxiety while paying close attention to the ways in which David processes and develops from his responses to them.

## III. “Whirling vision”: David’s Nervous World Construction and Anxiety’s Dialectic

To do justice to David and the novel, we need to understand the significance and processes through which David makes the world, however temporarily, intelligible. David's profound anxiety in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* is marked by the continuous cycle of construction, de-construction, and re-construction of his understanding of the world. His struggle to comprehend and belong in an environment that feels both mysterious and hostile highlights a deep sense of alienation and groundlessness, reflecting the relentless instability that defines his anxious existence. For David, the world provides uncertain asylum; an intimate unknown that proves as alien as it is foundational. His past is a mystery, as his old world homeland, by the time the novel truly begins, already exists for him only in the “nostalgic mournfulness” of “fragment[ed],” “fathomless,” and forgotten past (CIS 23). In *Call It Sleep,* with the exception of a fleeting, third person, image of an infant arriving in America, we meet David mid-confrontation with his domestic, day to day world's paradoxically uncanny nature. Standing by the sink in the apartment, parched, but too short to reach the faucet, David is forced to recognize (apparently yet again) "that this world had been created without thought of him" (CIS 17). Nourishment arrives only with difficulty. The lesson, of the world's nearly hostile apathy and his unfitness for this world, is one that repeats itself throughout the novel in various planes and intensities. While not a moment of full blown panic, it is an anxious moment that drives home for David the anxious position that Heidegger understands as the condition of being "thrown" into a world. The breakdown of his smoothly flowing through the world but the fact of inadequacy, provides the anxious moment where David begins to question his world. So while "the entire phenomenon of anxiety shows Dasein as factically existing Being-in-the- world," here being-in-the-world, accordingly also becomes a form of being that is at odds with the background that sustains that being (BT 235). It is a moment that comes for David not as a wave, but as a trickle.

More significantly, however, David suffers the sowing of the skeptic's anxious conviction, as Cavell understood it, of being alienated from, locked out of the world—generally and of others. The world, both outside and, more unsettling still, at home, conceals itself from David, becoming a riddle and a mystery. "Where did the water come from that lurked so secretly in the curve of the brass?" ponders David, "Where did it go, gurgling in the drain? What a strange world must be hidden behind the walls of a house! But he was thirsty" (CIS 17). There is something behind appearances—an entire world even—that “lurk[s] so secretly” as an unsettling unknown for David.[28] David’s reality is grounded in uncertainty, in groundlessness, uprooted from our sense of belonging from which we can never truly detach. For David himself, this uncertainty, this “groundless” existence, alienating relationship to the world is underscored and compounded by his precarious grip on both present and past.[29] Nostalgia for “a home,” a “lost” past, a community, a world that grounds, humanizes, and protects its residents; David has no *real* footing in this nostalgia for a world lost, nor in his day-to-day life in this “Golden Land” (CIS 9).

David, of course, is not alone in this alienation. America, as Luter describes early in the novel, is a “turmoil” (CIS 33), where survival and making one’s way depends upon, as Albert notes, one’s abilities of disguising oneself. “I *think*,” reflects David’s father of the explicitly unmodern Old World, “when you come out of a house and step on the bare earth among the fields you’re the same man you were when you were inside the house” (CIS 31). Yet in America, “when you step out on pavements, you’re someone else,” he continues, “You can feel your face change” (CIS 31-32). America demands a certain amount of self-alienation and performance. The pastoral naturalism of the Old World, for all its tiresome tilling, provides stable ground, unchanging and well-trodden. However, plucked from such familiarity, planted into a mercurial and unforgiving modernity and rush of American city life, individuals must manufacture protective exoskeletons. A mask[30] is necessary if one is to navigate the freeing, yet frightening turbulence of this New World, regardless of one's intention to assimilate or resist.

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[28] As Sollors notes, this searching for the meaning that lies beyond the surface repeats itself when he attempts to decipher the meaning behind the picture of a cornfield his mother purchases. This is made more bewildering for him as he does know what corn is, its memory lost with that of his land of birth (Sollors 149).

[29] See Chapter 4 for Lee Braver’s conception of “groundless grounds.”

Genya, in contrast, meets this challenge by intentionally shrinking her world, reducing it to the contours and landmarks of her neighborhood. "Within this pale is my America," she informs Luter, "and if I ventured further I should be lost" (CIS 33). Nonetheless, David arguably experiences this American "turmoil" more acutely than these adults. In these waters, David repeatedly drowns, lost beyond his pale, lost within his contortions to refuge within. Though each individual may flail within such unknown waters, David finds nearly the entirety of *his* world not only uncharted, but hostile. David finds himself impossibly small in the shadow of the looming world. As with his inability to reach the faucet, David experiences his urban and domestic world as going consistently over his head in both its violent "bignesses" and terrifying mystery. His father particularly and most consistently evokes dread of both in David. Against his wrath-wracked father, David laments his impotence:

> He unbutton his shirt, removed it, slid out of his underwear just as his father was wrestling into his, and glancing at his own slender, puny arms, glanced up in time to see the last flicker of long sinews before the naked arm was sheathed. How long would it be, he wondered, before those knots appeared above his own elbow and those tough taut braids on his own forearm. He wished it were soon, wished it were today, this minute. Strong, how strong his father was, stronger than he'd ever be. A twinge of envy and despair ran through him. He'd never have those tendons, those muscles that even beneath the thick undershirt, bulged and flattened between shoulder and armpit, No, he'd never be that strong, and yet he had to be, he had to be. He didn't know why, but he had to be! (CIS 177)

David's father continually becomes a symbol of the violence and hardness of the world, his society, and the violence and hardness it demands of its inhabitants. At the same time, his father underscores for David his own vulnerability and his unfitness to withstand the world's tyranny. What we see in David's description of his father is also the ideal of strength to stand firmly in the world. While we as readers may understand, particularly by the end of the novel, that the projected strength of Albert is more neurotic withdrawal and menace, for David he represents a power to navigate an alien land that he himself lacks. It is a strength that for David, represents an ability to live within the world at ease.

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[30] Of course, Luter is also duplicitous.

Roth's depiction of David's psychology proves consistent with William James' constructivist and pragmatic understanding of the child's experience in the world. William James, in his chapter on discrimination and comparison in the first volume of his *Principles of Psychology,* describes the process of discerning and understanding our world as a constantly flowing act of totalizing and replacement. Experience is manifested, for James, out of the combination of association and dissociation that work together in a fluid dialectic of creation, destruction, and renewal. "Our original sensible totals are," explains James, "on the one hand, subdivided by discriminative attention, and, on the other, united with other totals, — either through the agency of our own movements, carrying our senses from one part of space to another, or because new objects come successively and replace those by which we were at first impressed." The successive torrents of experience do not allow for pause, but demand a constant act of discriminating and separating out parts of that experience, followed quickly by its reunification into a coherent totality. Presented with "concreted objects, vaguely continuous with the rest of the world which envelops them in space and time," by experience, we cannot penetrate an understanding of our world until we execute a process of dividing these objects into "inward elements and parts." "These objects," continues James, "we break asunder and reunite. We must treat them in both ways for our knowledge of them to grow; and it is hard to say, on the whole, which way preponderates" (James 487).[31]

For James, this process is so natural that it fools us into thinking that all the individual parts we have fused together have always been so unified. Yet, while on the one hand a nod to our creative capacities, such totalizing is itself a construction and illusion, arbitrary and even uninformed. While an individual must, and does perhaps beyond that "must," break the world he has created to understand it, his mind is constantly set on the false gestalt that the way life is, is the way he has put that life together from the stream of experience. His natural state is to be overpowered by his or her experience, floundering in the riptide of sensations. In his most famous passage on the subject, James concludes, "The baby, assailed by eyes, ears, nose, skin, and entrails at once, feels it all as one great blooming, buzzing confusion; and to the very end of life, our location of all things in one space is due to the fact that the original extents or bignesses of all the sensations which came to our notice at once, coalesced together into one and the same space" (James 488). What James proposes then, is that our capacities for discrimination and comparison that we apply to make sense of the chaotic, fractured world, are *creative* acts of synthesis and interpretation. James suggests our understanding, and most strikingly, a child's understanding of the world, surfaces as an act of creation and a critical act of sense-making.

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[31] While this connects David, if we are at least to believe James, to a more universal process, the experience of such a process can be more or less visceral depending on the individual and their status. For the anxious and infantile David, such a process is fraught, and exposes the anxious nature of the process.

David’s experience and reasoning sticks remarkably close to James’s constructivist rendering; yet David’s seeming incoherence and idiosyncrasy makes this pattern of breakdown and assimilation all the more harrowing, with a distant glimmer of its creative potential. Reading *Call It Sleep* can be exhausting. The novel leaves the reader battered and worn through its anxious cadence of breakdown and reconstruction in David’s attempts to make sense of his world. A flood of sensations and competing rules torment David nearly without respite. For what is David if not in a constant state of this “blooming, buzzing, confusion”—amid the tumult of “wordless” affect that “floods the system like a kind of wash,” yet “prim[es] action… before or beyond” his “coalescing” (Ninh 47, 51). The *process* we experience in reading the novel is the constructing maneuvers of David’s fresh, plastic, idiosyncratic mind as he attempts to make order and security out of chaos. Such attempts are made with the *sole* desire for security and community making them profoundly naive and devastating in their failures. David’s innocence provides the opportunity and privilege of watching David construct the world. If David *is* corrupt, or unreliable, or more calcified than I assume, then we may very well simply see David as yet another example of our desired paradigms. The contours drawn, we can easily lock David into comprehensive symbolic structures—say, the “Family Romance.” But David’s “unformed nature” marks the novel at every moment (Tuan 24).

David’s world, in its newness and complexity, is innately an uncanny world that prompts both anxiety and anxious curiosity to understand while demonstrating itself to be, at best, unknowable to him and, more realistically, arbitrary. Early in the novel, David must negotiate alone the annihilating darkness of his tenement’s liminal stairwell. “Behind him,” writes Roth, “like an eyelid shutting, the soft closing of the door winked out the light" (CIS 20). Here, sight is the first to be eliminated, depriving him of the sense that gives form and concreteness to the world. Darkness overcomes him like the closing of an eye, both his own and also any protective gaze that may watch over and affirm his existence and security. This is further exasperated as David loses, in a rare moment of silence in the novel, his sense of hearing by the carpeted stairs. "He wished there were no carpet covering them," continues Roth, "How could you hear the sound of your own feet in the dark if a carpet muffled every step you took? And if you couldn't hear the sound of your own feet and couldn't see anything either, how could you be sure you were actually there and not dreaming?" (CIS 20). Deprived of his ability to recognize his own movements, the reality of the world slips from David's grasp. The stairwell, in its muffled darkness, has literally become a sphere, a landscape of non-sense, "of isolation and of disorientation." Floundering "in the absence of sharp visual details and with the ability to move curtailed," notes Tuan of the child's dread of darkness, "the mind is free to conjure up images, including those of burglars and monsters, upon the slenderest perceptual clues" (Tuan 15). The world's eclipse in total darkness threatens, at least for David, the total voiding of the self. Isolated in such darkness, the mind, disoriented without a point of reference, turns outwards in its anxiously imaginative construction of danger. His mind's rapid movement may cycle through anxious, dread inducing monsters to project onto the vast dark. Even home assures no shelter from such demons.

Yet escaping the stairwell's "curtail[ing]" darkness into the light does not (at least initially) clarify his sight and orientation but shatters it and his recognition of the world as well. David passes through the stairwell's shadow slowly, until the last stair from which he propels himself into the light of the street. "Flying through the doorway was like butting a wave," reflects David. "A dazzling breaker of sunlight burst over his head, swamped him in a reeling blur of brilliance, and then receded…." (CIS 20). The light that saves him from the morbid darkness gives way to an overpowering sensation of light that, instead of giving sight, blinds him as if a newborn entering the world. When the light subsides, he recognizes the structuring, familiar elements of his narrow world, the "row of frame houses" that frame his experience among the "pitted gutter," "yawning ashcan," "flotsam on the shore, his street" (CIS 20). The world here is still taking shape. The phenomenological tide has brought David only so far in his recovery. Familiarity, strangeness, structure, and debris still collide and struggle for attention and authority over David's impressions as his eyes adjust to the light. Standing at the last step of the stoop, "blinking and almost shaken," David awaits the return of form, for "his whirling vision" to steady (CIS 20).

Roth's intensely detailed paragraph on David's experience of sensory loss and recovery ends in a moment of slow recognition and reconstruction. "For the first time," David detects a boy across the street, "whom an instant later he recognized" (CIS 20). David encounters Yussie, the first of many of his non-friendly friends, who holds a scalped alarm clock. Its outer shell removed, "the brassy, geometric vitals" of the exposed clock "ticked when prodded, whirred and jingled falteringly" (CIS 20). "It still c'n go," Yussie "gravely enlighten[s]" David as the latter sits enraptured by "the shining cogs that moved without moving their hearts of light" (CIS 20-21). "So wod makes id?" asks David. This question, and David's unquenchable curiosity, relates back to David's earlier concern over the sink in his apartment. David's curiosity about both the sink and the clock point to an obsession with what lies behind appearances. Here David begins to take James' "original sensible totals" (the sink, the clock) and process them into something understandable. He, and literally with Yussie, begin to "break asunder" these objects in order to identify and separate them into "inward elements and parts" to finally "reunite" them in a form that relates back to the self. Staring at the bowels of the clock, Yussie answers David:

> -"Kentcha see? Id's coz id's a machine."
> -"Oh!"
> -"It wakes op mine fodder in de mawning."
> -"It wakes op mine fodder too."
> -"It tells yuh w'en yuh sh'd eat an' wen yuh have duh go huh sleep. It shows yuh w'en, but I tooked it off."
> -"I god a calenduh opstai's." David informed him.
> -"Puh! Who ain' god a calenduh?" (CIS 21)

Here Yussie and David have advanced through James' entire process of differentiation, comparison, and reunification. They have taken the mysterious, opaque totality, and to the best of their childish abilities, literally destroyed it in order to reform it into some coherent totality in their world.

Unfortunately, while David and Yussie seem to share this moment and psychology, David is still rendered outside the fold, his nervous reconstructions of meaning and perception, alien to those around him. Indeed, even this scene of seeming comradery ultimately ends with Yussie's rejection of David's attempt at connection ("I god a calenduh") with utter dismissal and destain ("Puh! Who ain' god a calenduh?"). David's anxious idiosyncrasy, his defining quality, complicates his tragic attempts to assimilate even into his own crowd. In attempting to take on a common structure of his community, David is consistently thrown back upon himself in rejection or is taken in only by the duplicity of its members and codes. Indeed, for David, annihilation comes not from being swallowed up by the flattening forces of convention and life's "inevitable arrangement." On the contrary, to David's dismay, such arrangements do not prove inevitable, and he himself proves stubbornly undigested. This becomes evident almost any time David tries or refuses to play. Throughout the novel, "friends" of David are not really friends, often revealing themselves as deceptive, opportunistic, and hypocritical. Most are not friends of choice but by proximity, being merely the closest children around. The connection is one of necessity and inevitability, and yet entirely arbitrary, all of which is underscored in their utter cruelty to David, cruelty we are never shown directed towards the other children. As Genya laments to Luter, "there are children in the house…but he seems to make friends with none" (CIS 41).

This is to say that David's sense of community and, along with it, his sense of the stability of his reason, of his world, is always precarious and always vulnerable to repudiation. David strives to be representative of and to find representation in a community that continually rebuffs him. Nevertheless, he shares the same "house," by necessity, trapped in the same bottle as those who prod him away. He is more often than not ostracized without hope of ameliorating his ostracization, depending upon the acceptance by that which consistently refuses. Such "repudiation" does not simply end in isolation but "bespeaks" an unsettlingly intimate alienation. Both the repudiation and sense of alienation are themselves, as Andrew Norris glosses Cavell, "claim[s] to what is *common*… appealing to both a sharing that attracts us and an ordinary that uncannily resists or even repels us" (Norris 2). On what grounds could the alienated stake their meaning? How does one exist without torment when that which rejects us is that which we are without the option to leave? The ground is in constant upheaval, and survival depends upon constant, endless ping-ponging. All is an unassimilable “blooming, buzzing confusion.”

Indeed, the further David tries to play games, the further we understand he is merely the victim of them. In fact, in early scenes, it is unclear to others whether David is even aware of play. Luter comments on his “strange[ness]” compared to the more outgoing and communal play of common children, while David’s awkwardness sparks Yussie’s sister Annie to ask, “doncha know any games?” (CIS 41, 51). Though David stammers out a few, anxious examples, these seem only to set him up to be trapped yet again. David, trying obediently, if reluctantly, to “play” with Yussie and Annie, is innocently coerced by his Annie to play “bad,” a game of sexual exploration where she explains to him how babies are made by putting his fingers on her “knish” while offering to touch his “petzel” (CIS 53). David, feeling he had “crossed some awful threshold” (CIS 53), is driven to hysterics by the thought. For David, play, which should relax and fulfill, takes on a negative and deceptive valence. Far from childishness or naive innocence, “play” becomes wound up in an alien pseudo-adulthood, the mere “schmalz” that will tempt him into ever more terrifying “rat traps” (CIS 49).

Acts of play thus challenge and violate David’s already tenuous grasp on the world and his space within it. His own apartment proves far from safe from outsiders as further emphasized when Yussie, against David’s will, comes over to play and refuses to leave. “W’yncha get a bow ’n’ arrer?” asks Yussie.

> -Lemme alone!
> -I’m gonna shootchuc again den, he dropped to the floor. Bing! Dot one went right inside. Yuh dead!
> -Go ‘way!
> -I don’ wanna go ‘way, he had become cross. I’m gonna shootcha all I wan’. Yuh a cowid. (CIS 81-2)

Yussie will not leave David's space, insisting on his right and will to make David do as he pleases in his trespass and violation. The game is a coercive, sanctioned communal experience, the rules of which demand ways of playing that do not embrace David but *use* him. Otherwise, he will be shot until he is "dead." When Yussie hits David in the leg with his "hatchet," a clothes hanger, the pain causes David in one of two identifiable moments of rebellion to kick Yussie in the face. His action sends dread through David, as the game of fighting turns from imaginary to real. David's father, as if on cue, opens the door and upon hearing Yussie's explanation of the story, beats David near to death with the clothes hanger, Yussie's hatchet. Violation of his home and person–whether it be as direct as Yussie's casual cruelty, or as deceptive as Annie's, and later Leo's, sexually charged games, or as vaguely ominous as the lust-limned specter of Luter entering into his home and his mother's space–shadow David's attempts at entering the community.

While play with Yussie violates his *personal* space, when David attempts to play by the rules of others, to participate *publicly* in a "form of life," he finds no better outcome, instead continually meeting further indignity and alienation. The next day, "foller de leader," a game "David liked" in part because of its seemingly straightforward rules, proves fraught for David, whose easily distracted and anxious state continuously drives him away from the game's demands (CIS 88). Instead of allowing him to join in the festivities, the attempt at group play makes David stick out more than before. David's squeamish and anxious nature does not allow him to "foller de leader" when an adult authority figure gets involved, such as the barber exiting the shop they all must shout in. While all of his "friends" follow the order to yell into the barber shop, David's sense of competing rules does not allow him to when the owner stares him down. Though in one way, this is simply self-preservation, David's hesitancy also derives from the fact that his sense of "right" conflicts with rules of the game. David's position shows, as Cavell notes, how social, moral rules cannot function in the same manner as rules of a game.

In this sense, David's refusal to shout into the barber shop, illustrates how "no rule or principle could function in a moral context the way regulatory or defining rules function in games" that "[i]t is as essential to the form of life called morality that rules so conceived be absent as it is essential to the form of life we call playing a game that they be present" (CR 307). However, it is also that David is aware of two sets of competing rules, that of adults and that of children, both of which will punish him for insubordination. So David is anxiously caught between choosing between the "must" and "ought" that defines moral life for Cavell (309). Yet, no matter how "resolved" he is to do better upon being chastised for failing to follow, David becomes distracted by the sight of Luter entering his house to potentially "play" "that game" that Annie forced him to play in the closet (CIS 88). "He ain' even follerin'" cry the children. Play, instead of escape, underscores the cruelty and duplicity of David's day-to-day. On the one hand, play gestures towards the soft construction of the world, the ambiguity of free play. On the other hand, the inability to *play* correctly, is an ability to *follow* rules; failing to follow concludes in knowledge of the hardness of that failure's consequences. Torn by rules of law, play, community, and person, to say the least, David is drawn and quartered not for his rebellion but for his attempts to conform, however idiosyncratic his attempts.[32]

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[32] Indeed, Cavell will argue that the rationality of morality is not found so much in reasoning, but in figuring out where we are and where we stand. "Its rationality" writes Cavell, "lies in following the methods which lead to a knowledge of our own position, of where we stand; in short, to a knowledge and definition of ourselves" (CR 312).

In essence, while games are bound to their rules, else they would not be games, there is also the truth that they are endlessly malleable in the hands of children, at least those who are tyrannical leaders over their small groups. This paradoxical strictness, yet improvisational aspect of “games” and “play” affords David’s world to endlessly, and nearly invariably, flip the script and isolate David. In failing to follow the leader, David’s disruption provides an opening for Yussie to “give us a game” (CIS 89). The “game” Yussie chooses is heckling David for getting beaten by his father before challenging him, with other children’s help to a fight. Chased into his own rat trap, David, in “blind,” cornered fury, fight or flight “thrusts” at the figure of a child, his “savage impact" knocking Yussie to the ground, in his mind, nearly killing him. “His head struck first,” writes Roth, “a muffled distant jar like a blast deep underground. His arms flopped down beside him, his eyes snapped shut, he lay motionless… David gasped in horror and fled towards his house” (CIS 91). His “flesh flow[ing] with terror” in his flight, David–predictably–gets lost, the familiar block transformed into a threatening unknown. Isolated and disoriented in the city, David finds himself adrift, “rebuffed” by a landscape threatening to swallow him up or wreck him absolutely:

> “Mama!” his voice trailed off in anguished abandonment. And as if they had been waiting for a signal, the streets through his tearblurred sight began stealthily to wheel. He could feel them turning under his feet, though never a house changed place–backward to forward, side to side–a sly, inexorable carousel. “Mama! Mama!” he whimpered, running blindly through a street now bleak and vast as a nightmare. (CIS 97)

Outside in these “bleak,” tear-refracted streets, David might as well be back in his building’s pitch-dark stairwell. Senses provide no direction nor orientation but indeed

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Obviously, as we will see, for the frazzled and battered David, finding any sense of definition or position is a near impossible task.

seem to betray him further. The world shatters and revolts. “Play,” instead of the equalizing, carefree action of freedom and free-time, leads David to potential victimization. Going forward, free-play signifies lurking danger, violation, and restrictive hierarchy. In one of Roth’s most beautiful passages, David reflects upon the cruelty of play and community. “Time was despair, despair beyond tears…” laments David,

> He understood it now, understood it all, irrevocably, indelibly. Desolation had fused into a touchstone, a crystalline, bitter, blurred reagent that would never be blunted, never dissolved. Trust nothing. Trust nothing. Trust nothing. Wherever you look, never believe. Whatever anything was or did or said, it pretended. Never believe. If you played hide’n’-go-seek, it was something else, something sinister. If you played follow the leader, the world turned upside down and an evil face passed through it. Don’t play; never believe….Never believe. Never play. Never believe. Not anything. Everything shifted. Everything changed even words. Words, you said. Wanna, you said. I wanna. Yea. I wanna. What? You know what. They were something else, something horrible! Trust nothing. Even sidewalks, even streets, houses, you looked at them. You knew where you were and they turned. You watched them and they turned. That way. Slow, cunning. Trust noth—” (CIS 102-3)

David suffers anxiety’s “dizzying sensation,” where “[n]othing is as it seemed,” when “[t]he very ground beneath one seems to open up” (Yalom, *Existential* 221). This streaming, panicked epiphany of instability is a hallmark trait of David’s anxiety. The act that has promised a reconciliation with other members of his direct and peripheral community have instead created a nightmarish world where nothing is what it should be. Play becomes a symbol not of coming together, or creative enjoyment, or freedom, but of isolation, coercion, and captivity. “Playing” for David is consistently threatened by and made problematic by his idiosyncrasy. Instead of David being able to join the act of play and take part in a “form of life,” he himself consistently kept outside the community, forever uninitiated. Play makes the world lack certitude. The rules of games make clear his unclarity of the rules of his community and the world's indifference to his own needs and vision.

That said, while David seems cursed to remain an outsider in his own community, the tragedy does not stem from his inability to comprehend. It is not David's ignorance of the rules or his inability to follow them that marks him as alien. Rather, David, due to his nervous comprehension of life's ambiguity and arbitrary nature, is intensely aware of the multitude of often contradictory rules meant to structure such chaos. The world's clockwork seems comfortingly stable, but at once constricting; and in a world of Yussies this clockwork is always threatened to be hammered to bits. David is nearly annihilated by his attempts to simultaneously follow these many rules and mold himself in the image of so many structures. The problem is not that David does not understand his community and world; instead, his community and world refuse to understand and welcome him. And yet David has no choice but to anxiously try and put the springs and cogs of his shattered sense of the world back together, with no guarantee of success.

Without the grounding of his community, the world's inherent groundlessness inevitably fosters a skeptical outlook, fueled by the anxiety of trying to find solidity or, at least, a reprieve from unknowing. David is thus initiated into a skepticism emerging from societal and (accordingly) epistemological alienation that, as we will see later, is strangely akin to the skeptical philosophy of David Hume. For when "desolation fuse[s] into a touchstone" and "everything turn[s]," then what "can we look for from this confusion of groundless and extraordinary opinions but error and falshood? And how can we justify to ourselves any belief we repose in them" (THN 1.4.2.144)? Accordingly, as Rollo May identifies, "[a]nxiety around diffuseness," around groundlessness, that springs from such skepticism, “can in turn contribute to the kind of quest for certainty” (MA 10).[33] For David, this anxiety transforms into a relentless quest, as he grapples with the crumbling of the soft-constructions he builds, disrupted by the arbitrariness of his society. Indeed, his anxious skepticism becomes “a malady, which can never be radically cur’d, but must return upon us every moment, however we may chace it away, and sometimes may seem entirely free from it” (THN 1.4.2, 144).[34] This fosters a totalizing skepticism toward the world’s foundations; and so the skeptic “lose[s] the world”--making him doubt everything around him (QO 172). More tragically, this skepticism turns inward, as he increasingly views himself as a sickly inarticulate and untranslatable, grotesque monstrosity within his world. David's anxiety becomes both the source and the product of his skepticism, creating a vicious cycle of doubt and self-alienation.

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[33] Eva Brann, describes Hume’s skeptic philosophy in terms of the reduction of complex certainties to the “groundlessness” that marks and generates anxiety. She writes, that Hume’s dictum of that things, be them connections, morals, individuality, or otherwise are “Nothing but," that is not necessary certainties, “is the ever-present marker of Hume's reductionism from the complex to the ungrounded; it is the expres-sion of the anti-metaphysics that drove him to despair and then energized him” (Brann 324). Learning to cope with this anxiety inducing truth is a hallmark of the philosophy of both Wittgenstein and Heidegger as understood by Lee Braver.

[34] Cavell, writing about this scene in Hume, points out that the philosopher has recourse to the distraction of society and friends. He writes,

> But the scene Hume thereupon portrays for us is one in which he returns from the isolation of his philosophical study into the company of his friends, where he finds welcome distraction from the sickening news his philosophical powers have uncovered. Incurable malady, as a metaphor for some grievous human condition, suggests an imaginable alternative, yet one not open to us. It would seem to have to be an alternative to the grievousness of the condition of being hu-man. (QO 172-73)

However, in terms of David who is often without society (even while he paradoxically lives within in), this alternate route seems particularly closed off, and distraction presents a rare balm.

## IV. “Realities warm and palpable”: Moments of Peace and Reconstruction Amidst David's Anxiety

Before exploring David’s self conception of monstrosity, it is useful to touch on some moments of contentment, to examine how after the disaster of anxiety comes the moment of reconstruction. In the midst of David's tumultuous world, moments of peace serve as rare and illuminating counterpoints to his pervasive anxiety. These fleeting instances, where David finds himself nestled securely into the bosom of his world, in a comforting embrace of light and calm, offer a profound contrast to the chaotic and often hostile environment that surrounds him. Exploring these moments reveals the near total and fracturing nature of his anxiety, showing it as a pervasive force that is momentarily held at bay by these rare pockets of tranquility. In these serene interludes, David experiences not only temporary relief but also opportunities for reconstruction, where his fragmented sense of self begins to piece together, allowing for brief glimpses of stability and clarity within his tumultuous existence. Against the agony of social repudiation and isolation amid chaos, moments of David at peace are luminous counterpoints in understanding the darkened world of David’s anxious experience.

A boy almost entirely wrapped up in his own head and anxieties, surrounded by the cacophony of the city, scenes of relaxation, calm, and confidence are always, while pleasant, somewhat shocking. They even take David by surprise. Throughout the novel, we witness David as tormented, frail, “born” out of the union of an all-embracing, loving mother and a neurotic father of wrath. Pulled between his Mother’s anchoring devotion, “the one upright pillar of this ruin” (CIS 387), and his father’s fragmenting rage, David draws no stability in his world from himself. This is what makes the few scenes in *Call It Sleep,* where David miraculously finds some form of peace and fulfillment, so rich and rewarding as it is perhaps possible to see exactly what David seeks and how it manifests within the din and anxiety of his life.

> Minutes passed while he stared. The brilliance was hypnotic. He could not take his eyes away. His spirit yielded, melted into light. In the molten sheen memories and objects overlapped. Smokestacks fused to palings flickering in silence by. Pale laths grew grey, turned dusky, contracted and in the swimming dimness, he saw sparse teeth that gnawed upon a lip; and ladders on the ground turned into hasty fingers pressing on a thigh and again smokestacks. Straight in air they stood a moment, only to fall on silvered cardboard coruscating brilliance. And he heard the rubbing on a wash-board and the splashing suds, smelled again the acrid soap and a voice speaking words that opened like the bands of a burnished silver accordion—Brighter than day... Brighter... Sin melted into light… (CIS 247-48)

This sheen of light refracted and reflected in white-capped rippling of the river, to David is “fire on the water” and the presence of God in the water, himself “whiter” than white, “brighter than day” (CIS 247). David both relaxes in its presence and in his dazzled, stupefaction finds a moment of not only orientation, but imaginative construction. New vistas of understanding and clarity emerge as new networks weave through each other, connecting their circuitry in ways earlier beyond imagination. His surroundings at once become fixed in their familiarity, while “in the molten sheen memories and objects over[lap].” The “swimming dimness,” here is not antithesis to light, but is rather a companion of sorts, a necessary factor in David’s “hypnotic” imaginings. David begins to be aware of some kind of cleansing and all-embracing force. This force is not one that shatters the world–though perhaps it could–but holds the world close to itself as an anchoring mother that gives respite and assurance. The stalwart smokestacks may “fuse" to “palings flickering in silence by” or “fall on silvered cardboard coruscating brilliance,” but they do not do so in violence but in more optimistic cycling through construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction.

The world metamorphosizes but does not threaten to “turn”' as the streets do in panic, but instead strums upon mind whimsically in assurance of its attunement with its surroundings. It stretches and contracts yawningly, like a “voice speaking words that opened like the bands of a burnished silver accordion” and with David for once may find refuge in the newly expanded margin. Later, David will reflect, “What was it he had seen? He couldn’t tell now. It was as though he had seen it in another world, a world that once left could not be recalled. All that he knew about it was that it had been complete and dazzling” (CIS 249). Here, in the cleansing, sudsy sheen of God’s waterborne fire, David can relax into his world, find orientation and space, as not only spirit, but sin “melt” into its “brighter than day” brightness.

In these moments of peace, in the near-pastoral luminescence of David's world, he can relax into the rhythms of both his and the world’s assured and grounded self-explanation. At his best, David can rest easy and confidently in the flow of his day-to-day. “He knew his world now,” explains Roth,

> With a kind of meditative assurance, he singled out the elements of the ever-present din—the far voices, the near, the bells of a junk wagon, the sing-song cry of the I-Cash-clothes-man, waving his truncheon-newspaper, the sloshing jangle of the keys on the huge ring on the back of the tinker. There was more blue in the air of afternoons now; the air was brisker fixing houses in a cold, sunless, brittle light. He looked up. They were both gone—the two cages on the first floor fire-escape. A parrot and a canary. Awk! awk! the first cried. Eee—tee—tee—tweet! the other. (CIS 174)

While, of course, the very lull itself that cuts through the cacophony of the tenements is oasis enough, what is striking in such passages is not simply David’s confidence or attunement, but a playfulness built upon discernment. No longer chaos, David can now navigate the blooming, buzzing confusion of his world, confident in his abilities to isolate and rebuild elements that comprise the living rush. No longer do “Even sidewalks, even streets, houses,” “turn” with “slow, cunning” as you watched them, but are fixed, *grounded* in both their physicality and David’s psyche. David is *oriented* and no longer lost among brick-and-mortar wilderness.

David’s anxiety becomes an impulse towards a moment of creative reconstruction as a means of grounding himself in the world.

In a blind panic, after seeing light burst from the third rail of the trolly track, David rushes, breaks into *cheder* to read Isaiah 7, with its story of the cleansing, burning coal. Here is an attempt to relate the chaotic experience of the world to the grounding narrative, a way of putting a pin in all the anxiously spiraling narratives and projections. After being found sneaking into his cheder and consequently being scolded by the Rabbi, David is overcome by self-conscious and uncontrollable laughter. Trying to read for the Rabbi, his laughter overwhelms him. “The ripples of laughter swelled to the breakers,” writes Roth of David’s battle for self-control. “Immense hilarity battered against his throat and sides. Faster!” (CIS 258). Laughter here takes on a force of its own, a force that rails against understanding, and demands to be let free into the open. Interestingly, while it emerges from the reading of Isaiah, the laughter works against the religious structures of the lesson and the Rabbi’s authority. Laughter is a disruptive force from this view, one that challenges hierarchies and focus. Yet the more Roth describes David’s battle with the violent hilarity trying to escape, the more that laughter takes on the guise of something akin to exorcism and release. The physical reaction to the laughter inside him is dramatic. “The surges of laughter, plunging within him, were so overwhelming he could feel himself grow faint restraining them," continues Roth, "Cold sweat was on his brow. He felt he would burst soon if [he] couldn't give outlet to his swollen mirth. Almost sickened by restraint, he finished the page, looked up imploringly" (CIS 258). The more the laugher is restrained, the bundled energy overtaking him held back, the physically sicker David feels.

David seems simultaneously pregnant with hilarity, sickened by hilarity, and upon its release, cleansed by hilarity. At the dismissal of the Rabbi, David finds his relief, "so vast it was sobering" (CIS 258). "Racing laughter to the door," David, for the first time in the novel, appears somewhat free, without anxiety, and unmitigatedly, if undefinably, happy. Through the release of laughter, David exercises, if temporarily, the constricting anxieties that structure his life, giving birth to a new, relieved self that appears to cleanse him of his "sins" and difficulties through utter bliss. Truly, it is written as a religious experience. "Slowly, by gasps, giggles chuckles, giggles again, the paroxysm relented," describes Roth, "On buckling knees he pushed himself erect, stood swaying. Sudden tears, as void of bitterness as of cause, deep as they were random, funneled his sleeve" (CIS 259). Exhaustion overtakes him. "While seated in the park he hard felt nothing but a lethargy, a dull vacancy, hollow as it was leaden" (CIS 260). And yet, this is not the near death of exhaustion of the novel's conclusion, though it resembles it in some respects, but a calm of thoughtless relaxation that precedes the euphoric uplift of breakthrough. "But now as he walked homeward his spirit uncurled again, expanded," writes Roth,

> All laughter was gone from him and all the tears with it, and now only a deep untroubled gentleness was left, a wordless faith, a fixity, mellow and benign. With every step he took his body seemed to grow less his own, his limbs so light and rare, his legs drifted over the pavement with a tranquil, feathery ease. Even the swing of his arm by his side set up ichorous eddies along his bosom as though a hand were caressing him. (CIS 260)

The exhaustion of his laughter and his tears has left within him a sense of "fixity" and design. With emotion sapped, gentleness takes over, "mellow and benign," lending a sense of salvation and even pastoral calm to the scene. For perhaps the first and only time in the novel, David enters a realm of "wordless faith" so at odds with the cacophony of his surroundings and usual psychology. He no longer questions, he no longer *is* a question, but buoyed by a feeling of divine guidance and protection, becomes "lighter" against the gravity of the world, together with it instead of utter isolation. Following the epigraph's demand, he "ask[s] no questions" and his world indeed becomes "the Golden Land" (CIS 9). His spirit lifts as it begins to take flight, transforming, metaphorically, into a bird. "The cool, limber April air was suddenly winy to his nostrils, teasing the breast into swelling," writes Roth, "The sunlight on his face laved his cheeks with so soft a touch it lifted the threat into its bounty, lifted it, and —

> E-e-e! Twee-twee-twee. Tweet! Tweet! Cheep! Cheep! Eet! R-rawk!"
> (CIS 260).

David has taken flight, no longer weighed down by the city, but bolstered by some invisible and uncertain confidence that life is solid and he is free.

The entirety of his worldview changes. Darkness is conquered by light, and David, for the first time in the entire novel, is able to face the dark of his stairwell with confidence and bravery. "Used to be darker," muses David as he reaches home, "Funny. Gee! Look! Look! Is a light! In the corner where baby-carriages—No. Looks like like though. On the stairs too. Ain't really there. Inside my head. Better is inside. Can carry it. Funny! Ain't so dark anyway. Ain't even scared. Remember how I was? Way long ago? Scared" (CIS 261). The darkness has lifted from the neither-here-nor-there liminality of the stairwell. With that lifting, David not only has a newfound relationship of confidence in the world, but one in which he is the arbitrator of structure through the light he "carr[ies]" in him. He is cleansed of the chaos within him, if for a moment, he feels himself the illuminator of his world, dividing light from the dark to structure a world finally of his own and of his own making. For David this is a sign of growth, of reaching some level of the seeming strength of his father. "Used to run up the bing-bang-biff. Hee! Hee! Funny I was. I'm big now," thinks David in glee, "Can go up alone. Can go up slow, slow, slow as I like. Can even stand here and don't even care. Even here between the windows, even if nobody's in the toilet, even if nobody in the whole house. Don't even care. I'm big now, that's why" (CIS 261). David, whose journey began in the first pages of the novel proper too short to reach the sink for water, with awareness "that this world had been created without thought of him" (CIS 17), now finds himself "big" enough for the world. He may now, he considers, be an active player in shaping the world around him, in navigating it without fear. True, he has soiled himself, yet he muses that he will receive new underwear for Passover "like the other kids" already (CIS 261). David has, for the moment, passed through the desert of his fears into the promised land of his confidence. The section ends at the foot of his door with a gleeful sigh.

Likewise, entering the novel's fourth and final section, "The Rail," begins a continuation of this sense of calm in pastoral terms. The section opens on a day "when the sun busters a fallen wing with a show of soaring, a day of heat and light" (CIS 262). An all-illuminating brightness, that removes the stain of darkness from the world shines across the Lower East Side. Roth writes, "tranquilly the months passed. Summer had come and the advanced grade and the glowing incalculable and unlimned vista of the school vacation—that had remained unlimned" (CIS 262). The world of summer lies majestically unilluminated and uncontoured, infinite in its possibilities. While once such unknowns were a sense of chaos for David, with his new sense of “greater security” (CIS 263), he walks freely in the streets with a feeling of both solidity in himself and continuity with his world. “For him,” Roth explains, “the mere passing of time was a joy. His body was aware of a lyric indolence, a golden lolling within itself. He felt secure at home and in the street—that was all the activity he asked” (CIS 262). David’s existence flows with the movement of a world seeming to finally recognize him. The world has taken on the simplicity of a pastoral poem. David, in his security, feels himself as part of the lyric of the world. His streets, the grit and the filth of his world, are made beautiful by his psyche.

Yet for David, neither shade nor warmth, dark nor light provides lasting resilience. Light thought illuminating proves merely dazzling or blinding, the freedom of birds constrained by cages. The world’s workings recede again into their walls. The stairwell once again becomes a place of fear and danger, the liminal space no longer offering the opportunity of an endless springtime coherence and flow, but signaling the return of conflict, violence, and confusion. The brief respites, of course, never last, and will dissolve the assurance and sense of belonging David craves. Stillness bursts into chaos, articulation into din. David’s meditative trance by the river ends “with the suddenness of snapping fetters the spell broke,” when he is wrenched from his thoughts by the peeling warning of a ship's blow horn. The scene of bliss and cleansing light gives way to an instance of cruelty and coercion.

For though, as we have seen, David will soothe himself with Isaiah 7, the panic he feels before is worth noting. Not long after “steadiness” returns to David’s quivering self, and the ground beneath his feet "stiffened and grew firm," he finds himself at the mercy of an older, caustic group of boys, whose promise of "magic" proves once again world-shattering, in the short-term temporary, but in the long-term devastating. Coming across the three, with their "tough, hostile faces, smirched by the grime and rust of the junk heap and screwed up into malicious watchfulness," David is "trapped" and dragged unwillingly through the junkyard. In the "impartial" April sunlight, that "spilt over a hill of shattered stoves, splintered wheels, cracked drain pipes, potsherds, marine engines split along cruel and jagged edges" familiar street and car tracks, turn "suddenly alien" (CIS 252). Amongst the ragged industrial and domestic wreckage, David's initial vision of the embracing white light on the river will transform into a violent, devastating force on the car tracks. David is bullied into crossing tracks to drop the sheet-zinc sword in between the tracks, with the promise of not only magic, but that they "would let him go" (CIS 252). Yet in dropping the "sword" onto the third rail, the previously "harmless" tracks that he had crossed over, "hundred[s] of times without a thought," what emerges instead is pure "power." "Like a paw ripping through all the stable fibres of the earth, power, gigantic, fetterless, thudded into day!" reports Roth, "And light, unleashed, terrific light bellowed out of iron lips. The street quaked and roared, and like a tortured thing, the sheet zinc sword, leapt writhing, fell back, consumed with radiance" (CIS 253). David, "blinded, stunned by the brunt of brilliance," "sprints madly" towards the refuge of Avenue D, where, finally again at rest, "empty and nerveless," "in the red sea of sun-lit eyelids his spirit sickeningly rolled and dipped" (CIS 254). Not until his body and spirit is again oriented in the babbling avenue's "warm and palpable realities" can David find stillness enough to? comprehend. Sense returns in the security of sound, as thought "[takes] on" the "Chop. Chop." rhythm the familiar world. Only once again in such dissonant calm can David recollect himself, articulate his experience, as words "[flow] out of him on their own accord," in a streaming, involuntary attempt at grasping what he has witnessed (CIS 255).

The point being that David must go through the hell of anxiety, of terror, to experience a fundamental break with the world, to find footing in it again. Whether we take this as a sign of the artist or not, in order to reconstruct the world, David must, screamingly unfairly, lose it, again and again. With acute, excruciating awareness, David is made continually to realize that even moments of bliss, of understanding, hide the potential for ruin. While David will find a moment of contentment here, as we have seen, in the *cheder*, as he continues to construct his mythology of the burning coal and God's light, such overcoming is fragile and forever scarred by the shattering power he has witnessed. The God that creates the grounded definition is the one who at any point could crumble those grounds. David burbles "Could break it in his hands if He wanted. Could hold it in His hands if He wanted. Could break it, could hold it, could break it, could hold it, could break it, could hold it, was there" (CIS 255). God, as does David's world, can prove volatile in his whims, making tracks once harmless and familiar, streets once called home, turn menacing.

Where in the dazzling light David may find some secure articulation of self and world, within the wasting paw of the third rail's light, David finds the same dazzle can blunt and betray. The wholeness of cleansing and recollection found in pastoral stillness not only cannot last, but also proves itself tied to the quaking rumblings of the world. A worm of anxious knowledge bores its way into David's psyche, one that destabilizes him as much as fuels in imaginative constructions. Such knowledge, however, does not open the world to him, but closes it and his communities off as it also underscores David's idiosyncrasy. If he becomes anxiously skeptical of a world that could break or turn at any moment, he also becomes grotesquely incomprehensible. Or so he dreads, at least in comparison to those figures he perceives as flourishing in that world, many of whom are the same ones who deceive or pull him in competing directions. And within this anxious knowledge, David finds himself not only alone, but marked as if implicated, used up, and repudiated.

## V. "I am a mouse–I'm an ogre!": David's Anxious Skepticism and Feeling of Monstrosity

As David becomes, in his anxiety, skeptical of the world and others, he begins to anxiously feel himself to be acutely, unrecoverably at odds with the world and community. In other words, he feels himself to be a liminal monstrosity, unfitting and potentially dangerous. The world throughout *Call It Sleep* is for David increasingly unmoored and uncanny, tending towards refraction and collapse. David's endless attempts at finding and creating structure endlessly shatter. Their breakdown slings back in David's face, his idiosyncrasy and the ordinary world's uncanny repudiation. His anxiety initiates him into a secret knowledge, a shivering world whose shards never truly glue themselves back together again, but instead manifest a continued cycle of shattering. For others "didn't know as he knew how the whole world could break into a thousand little pieces, all buzzing, all whining, and no one hearing them and no one seeing them except himself" (CIS 55). David's anxious mode of being, his constant negotiation of the buzzing, the whining, the blooming confusion of his everyday life, seems then to damn him to nervous isolation, both groundless and uncertain. With a unique inability to attain and navigate community, David's experience of acting in the world confirms only his groundlessness and ineptitude. He exists in an anxious liminal exile, not *quite* alien to the community, but unable to successfully play its games and fluidly participate in its "forms of life." This section traces how David's external skepticism becomes internalized in his anxiety, as he becomes, at least to his mind, outside a "form of life" in which he would make sense.

David's difficulties in participating in any "form of life" registers him as out of tune with his surroundings and radically alone. Seemingly too idiosyncratic to participate with others against a horizon of "shared understanding," David lives in constant dread of violence and persecution by that horizon. David anxiously cannot find agreement with his world or others, and yet must live, and strives to live in this world he cannot find footing in. Though entangled, he still remains outside of any "form of life" that would make both him and the world make sense. In essence, David, even (or particularly) as a youngster, becomes enveloped by the totalizing anxiety of the hardline skeptic and traditional epistemologist, as understood by Cavell. David, as with Cavell's skeptic action "having begun in wonder, a modern wonder," tragically ends in the conviction "of being sealed off from the world, within an eternal round of experience, removed from the daily round of action, from the forms of life which contain the criteria in terms of which our concepts are employed, in which, that is, they are *of* a world — or, as Wittgenstein would put it, a position in which one *must* speak 'outside language games'" (CR 224). With, perhaps, the sole exception of David's mother, David's idiosyncrasy renders him abject,[35] a stranger to his community. This repudiation by his community lays the framework for David's often paralyzing and tragic stance of anxious skepticism and foundational mistrust of both the world and himself. Skepticism, far from bedrock truth *or* absurd obscurantism, is "a response to, or expression of, a real experience that takes hold of human beings," that is, the experience "of being sealed off from the world,'' in which "the world drops out" (CR 140, 144, 145).[36] Skepticism is a response to a very real instability and repudiation that brings with it sense and emerges from a "profound alienation" (Norris 8).

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[35] Both in terms of the Latin word *abjectus* and *abicere* (and laymanized Kristevian concept) denoting being thrown away, rejected, or cast off, but also not alien to the more standard meaning of feeling cast *down* self-abasing, or especially to David's mind,

This dropping out of the world, this sense of alienation from the world and others, of being outside of a "form of life" in which we must nevertheless exist, is for nervous creatures like David, perhaps the hallmark moment of anxiety. If a "form of life" is so truly fundamental, then being outside of it, or having such a deep skepticism towards it, makes it feel (if for some only momentarily) something akin to inhuman. If "the world drops out" in our skepticism, then we are also "sealed off" from it as if in exile. The anxious knowledge of skepticism that David is initiated into is an ostracizing knowledge, or at least a knowledge that confirms for him his own exile. It is an exile he takes as a mark of his grotesqueness, his monstrosity. David Hume, the originator and most eloquent voice of skepticism, understood the deeply personal and social consequences of such fractured and doubtful sense-making suffered by David Schearl. Even as he criticizes others for their faith in their senses and sense-making processes, he finds

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ignoble and sordid (Merriam-Webster). See Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1980) for a more psychoanalytic use of of the term not discussed here.

[36] Credit to Andrew Norris in *The Claim to Community.*

himself a pariah and utterly isolated. With skeptical dread strikingly in tune with David Schearl's, Hume writes, during a moment of personal reflection,

> I am first affrighted and confounded with that forelorn solitude, in which I am plac'd in my philosophy, and fancy myself some strange *uncouth monster*, who not being able to mingle and unite in society, has been expell'd all human commerce, and left utterly abandon'd and disconsolate. Fain wou'd I run into the crowd for shelter and warmth; but cannot prevail with myself to mix with such deformity. I call upon others to join me, in order to make a company apart; but no one will hearken to me. Every one keeps at a distance, and dreads that storm, which beats upon me from every side… When I look abroad, I foresee on every side, dispute, contradiction, anger, calumny and detraction. When I turn my eye inward, I find nothing but doubt and ignorance. All the world conspires to oppose and contradict me; tho' such is my weakness, that I feel all my opinions loosen and fall of themselves, when unsupported by the approbation of others. Every step I take is with hesitation, and every new reflection makes me dread an error and absurdity in my reasoning. (*THN* 1.4.7.172, italics added)

Hume sees himself become an "uncouth monster" through his intrinsically oppositional and, indeed, unsatisfactory ideas and opinions of knowledge and sense-making. Such "uncouthness,"-defined as a lack of "refinement," itself defined as "the process of removing impurities or unwanted elements from a substance," represents a rupturing quality to a world view of how things *should be*. Hume's monstrosity isolates him by making him unclassifiable and oppositional to a common "form of life."

Roth's David is remarkably similar. With the exception of his mother's consistent, overflowing love and protection, David's support systems prove fragile and fickle, often coupled with terror. In a world prone to duplicity and violence, David, like Hume, also perceives himself torn between unfathomable chaos outside of him and unremitting "doubt and ignorance" inside him. David's cry of "Never believe. Never play," emphasizes both epistemological uncertainty as well as social isolation of being outside his communities' games. A world not built for David, whose rules and workings like the pipes behind the walls are ever unintelligible to him, becomes for David a world that at all points "conspires to oppose and contradict him." In a world where "even sidewalks" and well-worn paths "turn," David has no ground beneath his feet. Unmoored, literally and figuratively "beat[en] upon…on every side" and regularly rejected by his community, David's world is dictated and mediated by dread, navigated through wavering "hesitation." Not only does David have to cycle through destruction and reconstruction of his perceptions unrelentingly, but his world also refracts and restructures itself *ad nauseam*, too. Yet by the end of the novel, David internalizes this alienation not as intrinsic to the world outside but increasingly due to some defect or heresy on his part. "Confounded by forlorn solitude," David inevitably reaches Hume's conclusion that it is *he* and not the world, that proves a "strange uncouth monster," unable "to mingle and unite in society," "expell'd all human commerce, and left utterly abandon'd and disconsolate." If his world and society contradict David, then David in turn contradicts his world and society.

For both David and Hume, this contradiction, this inability to "mingle and unite in society," in a "form of life," is not simply awkwardness but idiosyncrasy turned (or deemed) *monstrous.* David nervously begins to see himself as embodying the riddles and wretchedness that plague him throughout the novel. Out of joint with any of his world, closed off its multiple meanings, and marked and excommunicated from all communities, David sees himself to be as liminal and aberrant to himself as the food he rejects. David, unclean, an inbetween, views himself as the sort of category defying "monster" that he abhors. Early in the novel, David's innocent musings on Puss in Boots turn to terrified brooding. Instead of Puss, whose spring heels allow him to bounce freely above the rooftops, David equates himself to the ogre-turned-vermin. Twice David exclaims, “I am a mouse–I’m an ogre!” (CIS 36). Neither is a particularly gratifying position. If he is not monstrous, he is vermin–rejected and despised. If he is not beetling his way into a further ambush, David is cast out as some ill-formed creature. Either way, he finds himself entangled in and by a world, a community, that at once entraps him and pushes him away. David’s nervous skepticism becomes a mark of his repudiation from his community, and turns his idiosyncrasy, his hybridity, and liminality, into a monstrosity. But what is it exactly that is “monstrous” about David *to* David?

Monstrosity, for David, appears to mimic a state of vile in betweenness. David sees monstrosity and abjection in these instances of unclassifiable amalgamation. This is particularly clear in David’s relationship to food and the dietary restrictions of Jewish culture. David, through his kosher upbringing, reacts strongly against the nature of non-kosher food. “[R]ocks, they eat too,” reflects David of gentiles, “…rocks all different colors. They bust ‘em open with a knife and shake out ketchup on the snot inside. Yich! And long, black, skinny snakes. Peeuh! Goyim eat everything” (CIS 226). Later, referring to crabs at Leo’s house, he describes the crustaceans as “strange pink creatures, all legs, claws, bodies” and “monsters” (CIS 319, 320). However, while David’s repulsion is founded in tradition, his repulsion seems even unclear to him. He may accept the tenet, but he does not understand how such a tenet came about. His impression of oysters as “snot” in “rocks” and his later assertion of crabs as “monsters” suggests a certain hybridity that defies categorization. He cannot describe them simply by what they are or what they do, as he can with fish or chickens (“cuckacucka”), but must describe them in imaginative, conglomerative terms.

This idea of that which is in between as grotesque or dangerous, again links David Schearl to David Hume in his understanding of the monstrous. Hume, that "strange uncouth monster," attempts in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* to draw out a definition of monsters and monstrosity. Here, Hume emphasizes monstrosity amalgamations and the products of our constructive abilities' limitations. Hume explains that concerning the human imagination, "Nothing, at first view, may seem more unbounded than the thought of man, which not only escapes all human power and authority, but is not even restrained within the limits of nature and reality. To form monsters, and join incongruous shapes and appearances, costs the imagination no more trouble than to conceive the most natural and familiar objects" (EHU 2.1.13). On a formal level, Hume understands monsters as the joining of "incongruous shapes and objects." They are constructed out of contradiction, again uncouth and unconventional. If they exist, monsters puncture conventional understanding and classification, underscoring such acts' own constructedness. Monsters are those abject contradictions whose uncanniness and idiosyncrasies disturb us to the point of hostility. Indeed, when monstrosity is not enacted through literal violence, violence is found in the challenge their very existence poses to society's self-conception. Monsters are what lack or jeopardize reasonable coherence; they represent the ragged, darkened horizon against which civilization's "ray of truth" projects its own rational and structural intelligibility. Monsters instead belong to neither here nor there but within the realm of uncertainty, a bastardization of objects existing in the world.[37] To be a monster is to be abject, to occupy a liminal space as both a part of and apart from the gestalt of society's sense-making and conditions of self. Nevertheless, as Hume notes, monsters are not made up of inconceivable, unknown "shapes and appearances," but can only be imagined and defined within the limits of human imagination, those shapes and appearances, the "rocks" and "snot" of which we are familiar.

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[37] It is perhaps no coincidence that David's father, who sees David as an uncanny, unnatural thing, also suspects that he is a bastard.

For David, such imagination is kindled by disgust. David's visceral nausea when even reflecting upon the bastardized monstrosity of crabs and oysters provokes uneasy groping for analogy and definition. That these in between entities are also *sinful*, are not kosher, adds a certain depth and depravity to their existence. However, David often reflects upon *himself* with horror, aligning himself with monstrosity and vermin-hood. In doing so, David despairs in sharing in that un- and in-secure, neither-here-nor-there existence that utterly repulses him, the same one he finds destabilizing in the world. As Ninh, following Sianne Ngai, writes on "negative," noncathartic affects like anxiety, "Ugly emotions daring not to find their rightful objects become senses that communicate only to the self. As such, they slip easily into becoming communications only about the self, their pain delivering messages of inadequacy and guilt about the internal rather than external world" (Ninh 52). Anxiety emerges in confrontation with objects that slip our distinctions. So even if anxiety begins with an object, its spiraling outwards, its uncomfortable abstraction leads its commentary back on to the anxious subject.

This liminality of the sinful, the grotesque, and the non-kosher is abstracted by David. David begins to anxiously view himself as unclean, shamefully marked, compounded by his anxious conviction, often correct, of the community's repudiation. Unsettled in self and society, David's private, uncovered truth of the world's shifting duplicity and contradictions is exposed as a dark truth that he and the world share. David, when hearing of the story of Isaiah, explicitly interprets Isaiah's sin as one of language and voice. "He said dirty words, I bet. Shit, pee, fuckenbestit–" reflects David, before asking, "What did Isaiah say that made his mouth dirty? Real dirty so that he'd know it was?" (CIS 231). But he also immediately realizes he becomes embroiled in the sin by voicing it. As soon as *he* says the dirty words, he nervously frets, "Stop! You're sayin' it yourself. It's a sin again! That's why he–Gee! I didn't mean it. But your mouth don't get dirty. I don't feel no dirt." (CIS 231). The act of reflecting is itself fraught with sin, and yet it is at once something that David can neither understand physically ("I don't feel no dirt") nor stop himself from committing. Even after chastising himself, he is still compelled to reason, abortively beginning to conjecture what Isaiah said with a "Maybe–". Reasoning here triggers the repetition of sin; the act of reasoning trespassing against its own moral logic. However, faced with the chaos of his world and the sparseness of his infantile knowledge, this compulsion to reason is a necessary act of restructuring after his world's violence and fragmentation. In David's child-logic, a prison begins to form here, where reason leads to its own undoing in moral paradox, and internal thought and outward speech bleed together. The monstrous uncertainty that David finds in the world has infected him, as the limits between internal and external are made fuzzier.

At his best, David can accept the world in the terms given him, falling back into a sense-certainty that reflects inwards also as a self-certainty. While adults may impose an even violent logic onto experience, as we may see in David's Rabbis and his father, with little distress, David's sense of self is both dependent upon the inherited logic and tradition (of old-world beliefs and practices) which perform as scaffolding for his worldview and which challenge by the flux and flow of experience (the new world). However, while his parents and his elders may be able to rest upon their acceptance and upbringing of tradition as a foundation, tradition only passively reaches David as the residue of a past world that, as Sollors notes, is unavailable to him. This scaffolding of the past becomes incongruent with David's existence within a much more real, alive America of his present and future that is constantly thrust upon him. David's own answer concerning the issue of kosher dietary restrictions presents one solution to this riddle of coherence. David muses of Moses's prohibitions, "But how did Moses know? Who told him? God told him" (CIS 226). On the one hand, David leaves it simply at this. The answer is self-contained and, therefore, complete. On the other hand, his answer is not really an answer but a resignation that suggests that incoherence exists within the act of asking the question itself. As opposed to Cavell's skeptic, who turns both self and world into monstrosity, David's falling back on the closed-circuit logic of innocent faith underscores a pining for a near pastoral certainty. The world here has not "bottomed out" but is buttressed by the same God-given, sense-certain, and self-identifying logic of the chicken's "cuckacucka." His practices and his traditions hold him steady.

Nevertheless, David's anxiety increases as this idea of a cultural tie is also too binding for David the more he tries to interact with the secular American world. Already feeling ostracized from his immediate Jewish and tenement community, paradoxically David finds the constraints that still hold him to that community refuse him the freedom that others' cultures have in this American world. Later, in another scene involving food (particularly crabs) David envies his Catholic "friend" Leo's freedom (arguably, his self-contained and concrete nature). Leo's ability to do anything and eat everything, turns Leo into the very embodiment of the freedom that both repulses and attracts David. While David is tangled in the riddle of his monstrous hybridity and the tear of conflicting social expectations and constraints, Leo, though in truth still a part of a marginalized class, instead enjoys a sense of freedom and insiderness in this strange land, that allows a certain unquestioning self-assured coherence in his life. David apprehends, and envies, Leo's lack of limits—no parents, no prohibitions, no entanglements, nor anxiety. "I eat what I want," boasts Leo, and as the novel hurtles towards its end, we become painfully aware that this freedom of rapacious and unbridled consumption extends almost totally to persons around him. Unlike David, whose life is an existence of cognitive dissonance, Leo is at home in a wilderness of freedoms, extending even out towards the sexual realm. Confident, seemingly whole in himself, he is able to flow freely through a dissonant world. While Leo's devil-may-care attitude may point to a lack of moral limitations, and while David may "[rejoice] over his own tenets" (CIS 320), David, nevertheless, also craves a structure (or the confidence to exist without one) that the world gives to Leo, but does not allow for himself.

Freedom in the world is freedom from anxious care that only, to David, seems to come from a feeling of unquestionable belonging and strength. In the face of Leo's freedom, David's experience of the world–in both center and periphery – cannot but feel as some fatal ostracization and punishment. He yearns for the confident freedom Leo's life represents, a freedom that knows the anxious, arbitrary Kierkegaardian entanglement that David feels.[38] To David, Leo's world represents the impossible spring-heeled highflying freedom of Puss. Through the eyes of Leo, David sees his own culture as an impediment, and himself, culturally, as a grotesque oddity. Leo, and in turn, David, sees the Jewish population as inescapably awkward and beyond the pale. However, David who finds himself monstrous and outside the "form of life," of his community, tries to balm his repudiation *by* his community with a repudiation *of* his community in his aligning with self-assured Leo. For David, such aligning brings him closer to the highflying, "contagious" independence and freedom from fear, even at the price of his community (CIS 319; 305). Learning that Leo has broken a mezuzah only to find it "full o' Chinese on liddle terlit paper," David does not feel hurt or strong guilt, but fully accepts Leo's judgment and his "derisive," yet "intoxicating" laughter. "If Leo thought it was funny," reflects David of the smashed mezuzahs, "then it was funny and it didn't matter" (CIS 306). The traditions of his culture that bolstered his world, when faced with Leo's laughter, dissolve into obscurity or meaninglessness. In Leo's degradation of the mezuzahs, their holiness, their import do not simply pass into mere joke; in Leo's laughter, David faces his own culture's othering, a process that does not end at gentiles, but seeps into his own self-image.

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[38] This is discussed further in Chapter 3.

This self-disgust fully envelopes David when Leo seduces David into playing accomplice to his violation of David's cousin. With this act, the world begins to crash again, the "gentleness," the "wordless faith" and "fixity" of the world dissolving into the corrosive "something else, something sinister" of play, that hides behind all sure acts of freedom and inclusion. However, far from simply the world that proves grotesque, David, in his anxiety, places the grotesquerie of the world squarely on his person. Finding the only consistency in the world his own unfitness, David anxiously turns his critique inward. David loses himself in a world whose conflicting rules, and self becomes a symbol of the liminal uncertainty he despises. This introspection and internalization of pain further isolate David, trapping him in a cycle of self-referential anxiety. Such doubt and guilt throws David back into his role as an untranslatable, monstrous, impure being, one that must be cleaned through near death to become something resembling complete and accepted.

As *Call It Sleep* draws to a close, we are left not with the neat resolution of a hero's journey, but with the raw, unvarnished reality of David's exhaustion and fragmented sense of self. Critics and readers of *Call It Sleep* seem anxious to cast the end of the novel in terms of closure or mythological completion. *Call It Sleep* brings its readers no such closure. The only immediate closure is David’s—and our—exhaustion. By the end of the novel, David has thrown his family into chaos. David is revealed to be Leo’s accomplice in his cousin’s violation and has further confirmed his father’s suspicions of Genya’s infidelity through unnecessarily making up a story of his birth to his Rabbi, constructed out of half-heard hardly understood conversations between his mother and aunt. In a panic, he hurls a zinc ladle onto the trolley’s electrified track in an attempt to bring about a cleansing light to absolve his sins, nearly killing himself in the process. An anxiety-ridden David, now thoroughly skeptical of a world constantly shattering and uncanny, finding himself not fitting into any “form of life” in which he would make sense, has now found a similar uncanniness and brokenness in himself. The book ends in his own physical shattering, though perhaps in his mind cleansed by God’s light; but it is tragic in itself that he feels that this cleansing must occur and that he has been brought to this point.

## Conclusion: "You might as well call it sleep"

An exhausting novel ends in exhaustion and ambiguity. It is unclear what we should make of *Call It Sleep*, its ending, or the "it" of the title. Some critics seek closure in the novel's conclusion, making much of David's father's admission to the policeman carrying an injured David, who twenty pages earlier, he previously disowned as a bastard, that David is "my sawn. Mine" (CIS 437). Yet, based on the evidence given, this means little in terms of a definitive change or salvation. Certainly, David makes no claim of familial, psychological (Sternlicht 142), developmental (Adams 62), theological (Mooney 27), or aesthetic "victory" (Kazin [Roth xx]). What David finds is calm—not one of finality or epiphany, but a calm that arrives through an utter relinquishing of effort. Lying with his swollen foot in bed, David is in no state to make decisions or analyses of his current situation. Finishing the tea offered him, David suffers a "sudden, flushing surge of heat that filled the hollows of his tired body [driving] a stipple of perspiration to his brow and lips" (CIS 439). "His underwear clung to him cutting at the crotch," continues Roth, "the rough of the bedding where he lay had become humidly warm and uncomfortable. He wriggled closer to the cooler edge of the bed where his mother was seated and lay back limply" (CIS 439). This does not feel like the sweet exhaustion of victory. No. This is the bitter, feverish, exhaustion and physical discomfort of heat and pain that pricks us actively to seek cooler comfort. There is no heroism, only humanity.

David, in a rare moment of near-annihilating peace in his anxious existence, drifts off into a half-conscious but highly reflective, if ambiguous, state. "He *might as well* call it sleep," writes Roth, "It was toward sleep that every wink of the eyelids could strike a spark into the cloudy tinder of the dark, kindle out of shadowy corners of the bedroom such myriad and such vivid jets of images" (CIS 441, my emphasis). Adrift in semi-consciousness, he sees the images of his life pass before him, vividly, silently, in a soft "glint" and "glow" like a flickering newsreel. However, he does not conjure these images unless we count his mechanical blank blinking to be an artistic process, nor does he order them but passively observes them. Roth continues, "He *might as well* call it sleep. It was only towards sleep that ears had power to cull again and reassemble the shrill cry, the hoarse voice, the scream of fear, the bells, the thick-breathing, the roar of crowds and all sounds lay fermenting in the vats of silence and the past." Sleep becomes a moment of contemplation in which the anxious and unconscious final act of producing the cleansing spark from rails *might* become meaningfully conscious to David. However, he does not examine its meaning.

Instead, for David, his "victory" is his ability, in reflection, to feel part of the community, part of a "form of life," indeed the focal point of that community — the world. In this equivocal sleep, he may "feel them all and feel, not pain, not terror, but strangest triumph, strangest acquiescence" (CIS 441). Roth's novel then asks us not to take David's conclusion as an archetypal completion, a triumphal moment of creation, or even a moment of collective peace. What David experiences *for* David, what David "might" call sleep, is an equivocal but individual peace, a moment free of anxiety, a moment where he no longer feels monstrously other, but a genuine part of a "form of life." This "triumph" is not an act but a submission, an "acquiescence" to the flow of life and the weight of his exhaustion that obliterates the need to organize and synthesize. David merely, and significantly, relaxes, finally, into the fold.

Perhaps at the end of some other track, perhaps in Roth's later Ira, in *Mercy of a Rude Stream,* having found "a saving unity for him, a kind of beatitude in his aimless, deeply troubled, dejected, self-distrustful life," we might see David gather his imagination's disera into some order and emerge as the artistic, Modernist hero many of us may want to discover (MRS 2.78). However, David is far from this moment by the end of *Call It Sleep*, his anxious existence not nullified by what may or may not be his trajectory written over 60 years later. Life remains for David "aimless, deeply troubled, dejected, self-distrustful." Nonetheless, David, in his construction of an alternative mythology, in his gesticulations of burgeoning expression, is left not vitalized or rooted, but thoroughly de-constructed at the novel's end. David is continually dismantled by the world, a world whose colors run just as its pictures emerge. He must, without end, restore his understanding, and himself. His mental patterning, his anxious dialectic, spurred by his continual rejection by his society, in turn shapes and determines his movements and self-construction, as well as Roth's aesthetic. David's *elan vital* is unrelenting anxiety; his muse, the world's cruelty; his Modernism made under duress. He is not an artist seeking the "new," nor propelled by a need to fly past any nets; David is a child who finds no firm footing in a world he must traverse. In his desperate attempt to enter whatever questionable "golden land" America represents, he is *forced* by its rejection into "new" constructions and articulations. In his nervous cycle-spiraling, and confronted his repudiation of himself, David himself is unwillingly made, and worse, *re*made (a)new. By the conclusion of Roth's novel, David has not learned an ultimate lesson. He experiences no epiphany, constructs no articulable aesthetic. Indeed, he has not expressed a desire to change nor to create anything whatsoever.

This is not to say that David's experience does not have an aesthetic aspect. However, why *must* we see David as an artist, or victorious champion? Far from a figure of Joycean free-flying self-making, David dives directly towards the nets of nationality, language, and religion, and the communities they imply, only to find himself not safely secured, but snarled in their grasp or flung back into the wild. David's journey of self-discovery can never be the triumph that we desire. His is a story of tragedy, of the emergence of a binding and isolating skepticism. If we look for what the logic and language of the child seek to accomplish, we find David's desire not abnormal or herculean, but a rather simple, foundational, yearning to understand and communicate (with) his world, with safety and assurance. Our desire for him to be more may, in fact, point towards our stubborn, "grown-up" illusions and convictions that fortify our own need for stability and to forget the essential instability of the ground we stand upon. These desires emerge, from our need to anxiously forget or combat the threat of skepticism, not through its therapeutic dissolution, but through a tragic avoidance of responsibility. We watch in David how this skepticism emerges, not from any philosophical or artistic insight or reflection—David rarely has time to reflect but usually muses or acts "unthinkingly"—but as a response to the isolating cruelty of his world and community. We see a child shattered, struggling to cleanse himself of perceived sin, a sin that opened the gates to knowledge of the world's insecurity.

Only in exhaustion and near death is David afforded a breath to re-collect and presumably revitalize. Yet this amounts to admitting that, as much as David pines to, he cannot assimilate his experience or into his community unless incapacitated. If these are the only conditions that we and David's society can make sense of David, then there is a need to confront this grave and dehumanizing conflict. In turn, we find in David the full emergence of a corrosive skepticism, born and bred from anxiety stemming from communal rejection. Without community, David is without reason. To answer David's mother's question, of "when will [he] know?" (CIS 173), we may have to answer that not only is that yet to be determined, but is perhaps an annihilated possibility. In some sense, though Cavell and Wittgenstein may be correct, suggesting "[o]ur relation to the world as a whole, or to others in general, is not one of knowing, where knowing construes itself as being certain" (CR 45). David's condition emphasizes how falling into this belief is not simply deeply seductive; it can in fact be enforced by the traumatic battering of our existence in a hostile society and world. To answer Cavell's question then, "Why does the skeptic —how can he —take what he has discovered to be some extraordinary, and hitherto unnoticed, fact? Or perhaps we could ask: Why does he take his discovery to be a thesis?" (CR 45), we can say that it has been, for David, developed out of an anxious necessity, to survive.

Skepticism, Roth's account of David illustrates, may very well emerge not from not only a concerted effort for certainty but, particularly for an idiosyncratic nature such as David's (or Hume's), from a rejection of the community that is supposed to provide at least a modicum of firm footing. It is then that our "conceptual scheme" collapses, with or without "intense" philosophic meditation, leaving us in "moans of delirious terror" (CR 47). The battering of David drives him towards an abyss, the "dizziness of freedom," and what emerges is not a confidence of choice but a visceral lesson that his choices destabilize already unsteady ground. If, indeed, the alternative to "to hav[ing] a native tongue… is having nothing to say, being voiceless" (CR 28), then we are forced to admit that David is destined to the skeptical, sleepy silence that envelops him by the novel's end. As Sollors suggests, in discussing a lost David's questionable articulation of which street he lives on, the novel seems to ask if there "[a]re limits to translation" and in turn our orientation and attunement to those who live in intercultural liminality (Sollors 146). However, the novel illustrates, I would like to say, that in his constant alienation, David as a whole might be beyond these limits, both in terms of being translatable to others and able to orient himself in the shifting American landscape. Anxiety, born of rejection, has bred in David a skepticism of the world and society, further compounded by an understanding of himself as a monstrous in-between. And in his "monstrosity," David is left inarticulate, incomprehensible, and untranslatable to himself and others. He is left alone.

To ask more of this child so weathered by questioning seems cruel. Instead, we may want to ask ourselves the question Cavell asks us, "Why do we take it that because we," eventually, "must put away childish things, we must put away the prospect of growth and the memory of childhood?" Roth's novel by placing us within an anxious, child logic and perspective makes us confront our distance from childhood to find something that has been lost. For the anxious child, the world is a question and a mountain (even if only a sink), a fracture in understanding where we seek answers and voice. Whatever anxiety of alienation David feels, no matter how tragic and incomplete his ending, we as adults can by participating in his education rescue David from incoherence and remind ourselves of the natural and vital capacity of anxiety. In the face of the oddity and spiraling of David's experience and questions, much like Cavell's philosophers, we ourselves become anxious, and realize that "we are children; [that] we do not know how to go on with them, what ground we may occupy… It is as though it must seek perspective upon a natural fact which is all but inevitably misinterpreted" (CR 125). In our anxiety, when the world ceases to make sense and everything looms large, when we do not know how to go on, we may rediscover something of our lost, but luminescent childishness. For it is not the creation but our constant creating: the anxious fact of the "fatality of expression" and our exposure, our inevitable projecting into the future, anxiously unsure of what those projections will meet with or become (Laugier). It is an anxious realization that we must create in spite of ourselves, that we must go on in spite of not knowing how. Indeed, Cavell understands "not knowing how to go on" intimately related to Wittgenstein's understanding that "[a] philosophical problem has the form: 'I don't know my way about'" (PI § 123). This sense of "not knowing one's way about" or "not knowing how to go on," for Cavell, comprises the feeling of exile, not unlike David's own (NYU 36). For David, in not knowing how to go on, does not feel at home or secured.[39]

David's creative act is one dependent upon an anxiety deriving from his innocence and accentuated by his alienation. In suffering the malady of skepticism, the world retreats from David as he finds, in turn, his expression unreadable, thus losing his society as well. In losing the world David is forced, as it were, into a reflective, reconstructive stance towards it,[40] where the "world must be regained every day, in repetition, re-gained as gone" (QO 172). What we *can* say is that the way in which David confronts (or even his inability to confront) his world, unlike father or is his parents, depends upon a questioning that expands outward from the self, from the community, certainly causing distress and fracture, but in order to attempt to build home for himself from the shards of his experience. While David is in no sense an artist, as yet, nor does he experience an "aesthetic victory," David's consciousness shows how the same anxiety that generates skepticism, at once demands a compulsory aesthetic approach to the world in our neverending act of picking up the pieces and regaining the world day in and day out. The world may shatter, but it cannot remain so. Where his relaxation occurs David finds, if ever so briefly, a moment where the incongruous pieces fall into a unifying, brilliant place, like a mosaic of broken glass. Such moments, find David not struggling for creation or acceptance, but an active part of the creative vision of the world he simultaneously creates and by which he is created.

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[39] See also Chapter 3.

[40] What Cavell and Wittgenstein would recommend as therapy for the anxious (sickly) philosophical mode.

Such a vision is universal in its far-reaching aspiration and deeply personal in its continued construction. With present a constant Jamesian "blooming, buzzing confusion" and with "[m]uch of the past is lost to him," a uprooted David's mournful nostalgia becomes "paradoxically *forward* looking" (Sollors 148). This forward facing nostalgia for a lost past, at least in the likes of David, is entwined with anxiety's tendency to project forward. Akin to anxiety's own groundless projections, such mournful nostalgia directs itself away from the dubiously "concrete and local" "sensual particulars" and "towards transportable abstractions" (Sollors 148). In essence, it underscores the groundless projection of the anxious individual themselves. Yet in such a projection the visions we create, though often terrifying to the point of breathlessness, also breathe life into a future yet to be born. Accordingly, anxiety can function as a creative and constructive force, not despite, but due to its dialectical connection to de-constructive impulses. This destabilization leads to an ability for self-articulation, however, stuttering, that proves highly imaginative and vital. While David is far from the fully articulated self, he may have become had Roth explicitly continued his journey, we as readers, if we choose to listen and go through anxious cycling of construction, de-construction, reconstruction ourselves, may see the creative potential and unique voice allowed for by David's tragic, skeptical, anxious, yet beautiful relation to world. When the world of the novel is so deaf to David, we may choose to recover him in our attentive listening. We may at least remember what it is like to not know how to go on, and the importance of that anxious feeling.

With every fracturing of the world, David collects more pieces to glue together into some vision of a reality and home that society denies him. Only David goes through, with all its failure and rejections, the actively creative process of attempting to analyze the shards of his existence in a heroically naive attempt at creating coherence and community. Lost as cognitively as he is often physically, David's quest is always to find his way back to it, even if it is fated to fall from him again. It is a quest, that almost inevitably in its whim towards constant soft constructions, takes an anxiously aesthetic turn, as David is thrust into creative acts by his inability—his not being allowed—to simply exist. David constructs because he constantly kept out of the common, yet necessarily, tragically a part of it. However, David's anxious experience attempting to *be* (American, Jewish, or simply exist) and *be again,* and his unique, if unchosen, way of putting his world together, gestures at the creative, if disconcerting potential of anxious thinking. The tragedy is that for David, any such comfort that could emerge from this, is left to an unsung future, and is present in Roth’s novel as anxious survivalism, dislocating skepticism, and a sense of monstrous incomprehensibility. He and his world remain mutually “untranslatable.”

Yet, David’s anxiety-driven attempts to make sense of his surroundings reveal an imaginative and perceptive engagement with the world, where his nervous energy fuels moments of insight and understanding. These moments, though fleeting, demonstrate that anxiety, while often debilitating, can also serve as a catalyst for profound creative and intellectual growth. Through David's anxious eyes, we see a world in perpetual flux, where the search for stability and meaning is a continuous and dynamic journey. Thus David, left by Roth in a liminal space in his life and exhausted into acquiesce, does triumph; not through closure, but through a certain, and undoubtedly temporary resting in his liminal role, in his liminal state of childhood and pre-sleep. He claims an anxious victory he will have to wrest from each day. Such is the start of salvaging David from the wreckage of allegory and critical or national fetters. And as he watches the images flicker past his eyelids, the salvaging of his experience that such ordering brings, though bitter and incomplete, may prove the single therapeutic act of his fractured existence.

# CHAPTER 3

## “WHO IS HE WRITING TO?” OR “PLEASE BE PATIENT. ARE YOU THE ONE I CAN TELL MY WHOLE LIFE TO?”: THE ANXIETY OF ENTANGLEMENT AND ALIENATION IN *TRIPMASTER MONKEY* AND *ERASURE*

### Introduction: “a wall or a roar”

“I didn’t overhear it all the way through. During jokes, I have trouble hearing anyway,” Wittman Ah Sing confesses to his soon to be wife Taña after overhearing a nearby table in a restaurant in *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* by Maxine Hong Kingston,

> I get this blockage in my ears, like a wall or a roar that protects me. Line by line, I’m thinking, Is here where I break in and call them out, ‘Don’t tell coon jokes?’ And try to educate them as to the unfunniness of the genre. Or can I laugh, it’s not a coon joke? I’m a good sport, I’m ready to catch on and laugh, or catch on and bust ass. (TM 215)

Throughout Kingston’s novel, Wittman constantly struggles to find place and attunement in a racist world. His acute anxiety expresses itself in a near constant internal debate over communal belonging and a hypervigilance against a hostile world that either alienates or attempts to appropriate him. His anxious desire to communicate, to “tell his whole life,” staggers against his anxious impulse to protect himself reflexively behind the isolation of “a wall or a roar” (TM 16).

Similarly, in Percival Everett’s *Erasure*, the experimental writer Thelonious “Monk” Ellison falters in his attempts to find community while pushing back against racist tropes and expectations. Already alienated from his community, both familial and cultural, Monk becomes utterly disillusioned by a literary marketplace that feeds on racist, urban literature as the “real thing.” In hateful response to this literary scene, he writes the stereotype-laden *My Pafology*, later *Fuck*, by the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh, to entrap and satirize the public's voracious appetite for such racist literature. Yet, Monk is left frustrated, anxiously disoriented, and dislocated when the novel becomes a runaway success and, worse, is taken as an authentic portrayal of Black life. However, instead of coming clean, Monk "becomes" Stagg R. Leigh in order to profit from the ruse, under the guise of continuing the satire, only to find his pseudonym take over his life. "I had managed to take myself, the writer, reconfigure myself, then disintegrate myself, leaving two bodies of work, no boundaries yet walls everywhere" (E 257). Monk makes himself anxiously split, as the public's embrace of Stagg reconfigures and disfigures Monk's identity between his sense of self and his ironic racial performance, and he loses control of his words.

In their anxieties over authentic identity and community, both Wittman and Monk struggle to maintain meaningful relationships and identity when faced with the inherent instability of performance, racial identity, and language. For both figures, their sense of outsiderness both as raced individuals[41] in America, but also within those racial communities, makes their sense of subjective and political self unstable as it is unclear who they speak for, who speaks for them, and who and for whom they would want to do so. Sandra Laugier, summarizing Stanley Cavell, observes, "[s]ubjectivity becomes a political question that arises: the question of representation and the subject's expression by her community, and, inversely, the community's expression by the subject" (16). This reciprocal and political nature of expression is anxiety inducing for Wittman and Monk, as in their alienation it becomes uncertain who and how community and subject ethically speak for each other, whether within the bounds of their local, minority communities or those of American national society as a whole. Their stories illustrate how their anxiety about speaking and being spoken for, particularly within America's racial landscape, divorces them from any community. In consequence, Wittman and Monk embody what David L. Eng describes as "racial dissociation," trapped in a "psychic nowhere" feeling rootless and unmoored (Eng 4). In this way, they embody Stanley Cavell's sense of interpersonal skepticism and detachment as a lived experience. Struggling to find an authentic place locally or nationally, they embody an anxious "nomadism" that threatens the "loss of culture, home, or community" (NYU 66).

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[41] See footnote 15.

Out of joint with any community through anxious awareness of the rift between the sense of an authentic, independent self and the performance and obligations demanded respectively between the national and their local communities, Wittman and Monk find themselves in a position of Cavellian divorce. Though each demands to be accepted as simply American individuals independent from their race, they are yet anxiously aware, Wittman's case militantly, and Monk's case reluctantly, of their constricting and discriminated against racial status in America. This leaves each protagonist split internally and communally as they contend with their double consciousness. For Wittman, whose life wobbles between playful, if aggressive, performance and vigilant seriousness, the question is whether he can navigate beyond the theatrical to find authentic dialogue bridging the anxiety-inducing divides within and between his internal and external worlds. His plea–"Are you the one I can tell my whole life to?"—voices a desperate, vulnerable desire for acknowledgment, and also the anxiety of exposure in such an appeal (TM 16). Monk's detachment leads to a different form of exile, where ironic aloofness, underscored by a publisher's frustrated question—"who is he writing to?"—acts as a boundary, holding the world at a calculated distance (E 42). Neither can accept or believe that they belong to their communities, and this refusal itself becomes a form of being. In their anxiety, they talk and live monologically, out of conversation, shutting off or running on (until running aground). Shadows, acts, and endless transformations proliferate, creating distances only true dialogue would bridge, a dialogue which their anxiety neither believes in nor allows.

Thus, this chapter focuses on the anxious feeling of being outside of a "form of life" and representative community in which a person can interact and find a sense of security, to ethically speak and be spoken for. Specifically it looks at the anxious position of raced individuals who, in trying to assert their independence from racial concepts, at once find that the urge towards such an independence places them outside both their national and local community. Caught astride performance and authenticity, aggression and aloofness, they find themselves anxiously detached from any community threatened by the compulsion to play into racist constraints. Adrift outside "the stream" or "weave of our life" in a nomadic state, they wander without finding communal refuges (LWPP2 30; PI 174; NYU 48). They are exiles who struggle to find an acceptable place in their world, a place of meaning, where they are worthy of love and acknowledgement. Cavell's concept of "remarriage" as partly a metaphor for the individual subject to reconciling himself with the world of others[42] captures a paradox in Wittman's and Monk's progression. Cavell's concept stresses restoring connection to the world while acknowledging the challenge of accepting existence as part of the world's flawed fabric and that this return must occur freely. As Wittman and Monk wrestle with their simultaneous desire to be understood outside of the constraints of racial performance and their identity within it, each agonizes over the unnerving possibility of a return to the world that their anxious withdrawal resists. In their narratives' conclusions, both Wittman and Monk must each try to reintegrate into the world they had resisted in order to find authentic meaning, to find a society in which they can find expression and expression by.

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[42] Or at the very least a world of two.

This chapter discusses three interconnected questions about anxiety as it emerges in *Tripmaster Monkey* and *Erasure*. Firstly, in what ways do racial constraints and expectations generate anxiety for raced individuals and hinder their sense of expression with, within, and by their communities? If they do not trust our society to ethically and authentically speak for them, how can they authentically speak for their society? This leads to a form of detachment that leaves them isolated. Secondly, how do the anxieties of raced individuals over this reciprocity manifest in a self-splitting, exacerbating tensions of individuality and communal belonging? And finally, how do they convince themselves, in their anxiety, of their inability to connect or express themselves fruitfully to others? Beginning by examining the critical debate and reception of each work, we look at how critics of each novel express certain critical anxieties that lead to either rejection of or over-identification with their protagonists. Next, the chapter examines how Wittman and Monk's ways of navigating their worlds become anxious performances that leave them further isolated. The third section focuses on how such performances express and spring from internal fracturing and splitting. In the fourth section, we examine how these internal fractures extend outward into a failure to communicate. Finally, drawing on Cavell's concept of remarriage, the chapter ends by describing how each protagonist makes tentative returns to their communities through an anxious step towards acknowledging vulnerability in an unjust world. Their stories show that a path toward reconciling their fractured selves and to transform exile into meaningful belonging requires a movement through anxiety.

## I. "I cannot hear... the author above the racket of her creation," or "I can't tell you how much that pisses me off": Exclusion and Over-identification in the Critical Reception of *Tripmaster Monkey* and *Erasure*

Critical response to *Tripmaster Monkey* and *Erasure* express critical anxieties centered around rejection and over-identification with each novel's protagonist that find parallel in the tensions each protagonist wrestles with in their novels. Though different in temperament, there are similarities between the positions of both Monk and Wittman. Each are artists of color frustrated by their lack of recognition and acceptance, and the prevalence of racial pigeonholing. In their strivings for artistic and cultural autonomy in the American racial landscape, they run up against alienation from their own communities. Each novel ends on a stage where the protagonist faces communal judgment concerning whether each should be embraced or rejected. Their stories wrestle with the anxious dilemma of a protagonist who desires belonging while dreading exposure and rebuff. Reading each novel, critics recapitulate the conditions for each character's anxiety, dislocating them through refusal, as in *Tripmaster Monkey*, or over-identifying with them, as in *Erasure*, to align with their critiques to a "correct" position. As Cavell notes, "In everyday life the lives of others are neither here nor there; they drift between their own inexpressiveness and my inaccuracy in responding to them" (CR 84). These protagonists, who are in their own ways neither here nor there, nevertheless provide us a space to confront our way of responding to them, of welcoming them into or rejecting them from our society. They provide us with an opportunity "to be open to adventure is to be attentive, ready to be illuminated by the text" (RO 221). Fittingly, the final, anxious moments for Wittman and Monk become a stage for the reader's uncertain involvement. Do we attempt to accurately, sincerely respond to them? Or do we rebuff or appropriate them in a manner that dooms them to inexpressiveness? Are we prepared to understand them, or do we, like the societies each novel critiques, risk reducing them to caricatures, appropriating them to our purposes, or dismissing them altogether?

Reviewing the reception of *Tripmaster Monkey*, it is evident Kingston's Wittman Ah Sing has been a source of critical contention since the novel's publication, with many reviewers rejecting out right his unique, at times, grating voice. He is a character who insists upon himself, whether we want to hear him or not. "You want details? I can impart details to you," Wittman declares almost with an edge of threat to Nanci Lee, his dream girl (TM 16). There is a sense that we are in the position of Nanci Lee when Wittman speaks. It may feel as if we're forced to listen to the uninvited, anxious outpourings of a mind desperate to explain and justify itself. But beneath the surface of Wittman's manically anxious verbosity—the insistent "I will tell you"—there lies an equally anxious, and vulnerable plea of "Please, let me tell you." His inner monologue captures his desperate need to be understood, his desire for another's patience. "She wasn't," and hopefully, we aren't either, "bored out of her mind anyway. Please be patient. Are you the one I can tell my whole life to? From the beginning to this moment? Using words that one reads and thinks but never gets to hear and say?" (TM 16). The issue is whether or not we can effectively hear and respond to "the call" of Wittman. As Cavell explains, to reach the inner life of the other, "is not exactly [a condition where] I have to put the other's life there; and not exactly that I have to leave it there either," but rather it is one where “I (have to) respond to it, or refuse to respond.” When “it calls upon me; it calls me out” and “I have to acknowledge it,” as if “I am as fated to” (CR 84). The challenge of Wittman is when he calls to us through the pages of Kingston’s novel, we must figure out a means of responding that leads not to further alienation. While we could always put the book down, say that Wittman is literally nothing but words, doing so recapitulates the tendency to dismiss the excessive other, all the Wittmans “out there,” to say they have no place “in here” that makes them articulable in our presence and our society.

This no small ask, and Wittman, though one of Kingston’s most enduring figures (reappearing in later works of fiction and poetry) was not universally embraced upon his debut. Wittman’s relentless monologues and dominating presence have drawn mixed reactions. Early reviews, such as Le Anne Schreiber’s review, though recalling the impact of Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980), Schreiber laments her transition to fiction. However, this dissatisfaction is set squarely upon the shoulders of her protagonist. Wittman, described as a “chattering, squealing monkey-hero,” for Schreiber is a monomaniacal force that drowns Kingston’s narrative and voice. Though Schreiber concedes that “the author clearly loves” Wittman, his totalizing presence and “manic monkey talk” made her “long for the less fevered but more exciting voice of Maxine Hong Kingston speaking for herself.” Schreiber observes, the novel is “[m]ostly a book of talk, Wittman's talk,” where “Nobody else gets a word in edgewise” and all action occurs “under the steam of his own hot air.” While sometimes “spellbinding,” his verbosity is “too often... just a windbag.” Despite Wittman’s talk of community, “Wittman, like his namesake, sings a Song of Himself. No one else achieves any reality in his telling. ‘I.I.I.I.I.I.I.I.I.,’...is the refrain Wittman wants to make his.” This critique finds its summit with the avalanche of Wittman's forty-page closing monologue, described by Schreiber as a "brilliant, maddening diatribe, a rant born of anger and pain." Longing for Kingston's "precise, sinewy... beautiful" voice, Schreiber complains, "I cannot hear... the author above the racket of her creation, the creation who speaks but never listens." This leaves readers to wonder if his voice carries the collective or merely echoes his own (Schreiber BR9).

Schreiber's review encapsulates the challenge *Tripmaster Monkey* poses to readers. They engage with a protagonist who is both compelling and overwhelming, embodying chaotic self-expression and the search for community. Wittman is a captivating presence, yet exhausting, arresting attention through an unrestful voice. Mita Banerjee, looking back on the novel's reception, noted that the critical debate around *Tripmaster Monkey* focused on Kingston's blending of didacticism with open-ended aesthetics. Banerjee presents this tension as the novel's thematic question, as "How, through what aesthetic politics or form, can a mainstream be resisted that is certain of the fact that the Other can be *known*?" (Banerjee 56). Finding Wittman's didacticism flooded out the aesthetic enjoyment, other early reviewers shared Schreibers mixed reception. Aamer Hussein describes Kingston's "tense and jagged" prose as "rapid and fragmented, often unmusical and occasionally oblique," while also praising her "visionary" moments, where "her voice's uneven grain, her political intensity, and her unfaltering gaze" shine through. However, he criticizes Kingston's "overwhelming diversity of overlapping images," suggesting that the novel's rambling and tangled complexity detracts from its power (299-300). Similarly, John Leonard expresses the disappointment of critics expecting another memoir, like *The Woman Warrior*, or *China Men*. Although conceding

Kingston “earned the right to write about whatever she chooses,” many critics were caught off guard by a “literary trickster,” hungering instead for “more magic, ghosts, dragonboats.” This response risks re-orientalizing Kingston, reinforcing the marginalization Wittman resists (768-70). By centering her novel on Wittman, Kingston raises a key question: does his dominance achieve the communal storytelling he aspires to, or does it merely echo in isolation?

However, such reviews, not so much of the novel but of Wittman himself, are flattening as they fail to understand or embrace his overflowing presence. They refuse to recognize that his obsessive self-consciousness is both a consequence of his anxious position in American society, and his way of combating that positionality. If Wittman is prone to echo, he is also riddled with internal division and dissonance. The multifaceted identity of Wittman indicates the anxious position of an artist of color caught between a desire for recognition, and the dread of misrecognition or diminution. Some critics have understood this. As Royal remarks, “Kingston manipulates genre expectations in order to open up Chinese American representations as well as the very act of representing itself” (Royal 143). Through his relentless, bombastic performances, his “productions of signifiers (both visual and auditory),” Wittman attempts to forge “a new rule for the imagination” (TM 34). James T. F. Tanner adds, “Wittman’s persona attempts to speak as a new kind of man... a cataloguer, a dramatizer” of what Charles Crow dubbed “great inclusions and reconciliations” (Tanner 63; Crow 85). So if lukewarm responses to *Tripmaster Monkey* register the challenge Wittman and Kingston face in seeking a recognition that does not fall prey to marginalization, the novel also holds potential to open a margin for those who feel outside of a community. Marilyn Chin, interviewing

Kingston in 1989, confesses that "[t]he opening chapter of *Tripmaster Monkey* made me cry" (86). As opposed to critics who reject Wittman in their weariness as "an obnoxious personality," Chin recognizes in Wittman her own distress. "Being a poet in San Francisco where immigrants are making their dream," explains Chin, "…I said, how have I lost that dream? I recognize that desperation in Wittman" (Chin 1989, 86). Chin's reading identifies Wittman as a fellow exile, achingly searching for home, desiring to claim his stake and stake his claim to America.

Wittman's uncompromising stance towards this desire both alienates and endears. His personality overflows the page. When reading Wittman, then, we must be more careful than his play's reviewer and not act as "food critics" (TM 307) in a desire to make him more digestible, to assimilate him in a flattening manner. As Sau-Ling Wong explains, figures such as Wittman force us to reinterpret the term "assimilation" away from meaning to simply "allo[w] the circumstances controlled by those in power to overwhelm them." Instead "the experts in 'eating bitterness' assimilate even the most unpromising material for their own sustenance," and confront us to do so as well. "Thus," concludes Wong, "is the external transformed into the internal, the alien overcome, and life, continuity, ensured" (Wong 77). Wittman's bitterness and excess, which makes him hard for some critics to swallow, emphasizes the challenge of being torn in competing directions, overflowing all constraints. "[W]ithout a proper name" as "Ah Sing... at best serves as a nickname used by close friends or peers" is stuck with a name full of referents yet empty of meaning (Li 76; Chen 2). Wittman embodies the tension between public and intimate, outside and inside, lacking a place in American grammar to make sense of him, yet forcefully asserting his place within that grammar.[43] This anxious dissonance follows Wittman's story. The novel accordingly resonates with readers who find him a fellow exile in the quest for belonging, even as his existence critiques an American literary and cultural tradition favoring clarity over ambiguity. While it may be an uncomfortable, anxious position to be a multitude, it is not inherently destructive if local and national communities are large enough to embrace them or the subject does not act through avoidance. Kingston's prose can, in turn, amplify anxiety for readers, challenging them to be responsive to a narrative marked by agitated contradiction.

Though experiencing a less contentious critical history than *Tripmaster Monkey*, Everett's *Erasure* has elicited critical anxiety as well. An acerbic satire, Everett's novel provokes an anxious desire among reviewers to align correctly with his critique. Unlike the disappointment of some critics of Kingston's third book, *Erasure,* Everett's twelfth novel, was heralded as his greatest artistic and critical success to date. As the author fumed, "I can't tell you how much that pisses me off" (Allen, "Interview" 105). *Erasure* was praised by critics who lauded its withering critique of "the notion of a public and its relationship to the health of art" (Strecker, "Erasure"). Bernard Bell applauded the novel as "a provocative satire on the impact of the publishing industry on the authority, authenticity, and agency of autonomous, non-conventional contemporary African American novelists... and on the double-consciousness of middle-class African Americans in general" (Bell 474). Bell particularly lauded the "story-within-a-story structure and style" and its "paradoxically double-voiced satirical attack... on African American double-consciousness, African American neo-realism, [and] Eurocentric poststructuralism" (Bell 475). Ultimately, Everett's satire compels readers to come to terms with their own understanding of the connection between racial authenticity and literary value.

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[43] See footnote 13.

In doing so, *Erasure* generates anxious attempts by readers to find a stable vantage point from which to orient themselves in the satire, as well as to position themselves on the correct side of Everett's critique. This has caused problematic approaches. If Wittman proved too cumbersome a character for critics, early critics of *Erasure* tended to embrace Monk as their shepherd too completely, problematically aligning Monk with Everett in a way flattened the complexity and individuality of both. Bell calls *Erasure* "probably Everett's most…disturbingly semi-autobiographical and metafictional novel" (Bell 474). Bell continues, "Everett chooses in *Erasure* to erase or nullify his African American identity in his transgressive quest for freedom and wholeness as an artist. In contrast, white publishers of both Monk and Everett paradoxically erase their individuality by rejecting their books as not black enough" (475). This confusion of aligning Monk and his author is encouraged by Everett by including details that align Monk with Everett himself. As Margaret Russett notes, it is "certainly easy—too easy—to identify Everett with… Ellison, and to read *Erasure* as a fictionalized account of Everett's career" (Russett 358). Monk shares biographical links with Everett, for instance, both being Black writers of experimental fiction, each coming from medical family background, among other factors. Everett goes further by weaving parts of essays and stories into the text.

This impression of insider perspective may have contributed to the initial popularity of *Erasure*, since "whereas Everett's earlier works have rarely suggested a biographical referent, *Erasure* begins in the genre of the confession" (Russett 358-59). Finding themselves anxious for interpretive grounding, readers become (perhaps in a concealed manner) skeptical, trying to "search others," such as Monk and Everett, "out with certainty," which "[i]nstead it closes them out" and subjects them to a kind of inexpressiveness beyond what we want them to express (CR 84). Instead of, as often happens in Cavellian skepticism, closing out the other due to unknowable privacy, we instead flatten them to quell our anxiety, to make them our guide and spokesperson, one who negates the pressure of figuring out how to respond with "accuracy."

*Erasure* appears to offer readers exclusive access to an inner circle—the "real thing"—providing more than a stable position from which to navigate the novel, but one from which they could navigate the fraught minefield of racial relations. According to Vincent J. Cheng, "modern and contemporary cultures—especially First World cultures—are increasingly marked by an anxiety over authentic cultural identity" (3). This anxiety creates an unease about both protecting and navigating authenticity, at times by cordoning it off, but also by demarcating those who can act as "authentic" representatives for us. "In the presence of…a gestalt of confusion and anxiety [over cultural authenticity]," writes Cheng, "we search for the recognizably genuine" (2).[44] Especially for white readers, Monk, and by extension Everett, can become the racial insider who, in their authenticity, authorizes interpretation. If Ellison is Everett, we appear to get the goahead to believe we are getting the honest truth, the real thing for once—an authorial stamp on the anxious matter.

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[44] Cheng's passage is in reference to a piece by Gish Jen. Who marvels at "how awed we feel in the presence of tradition, of authenticity." She muses, "We wonder who we are—what does it mean to be Irish-American, Cuban-American, Armenian-American?—and are amazed to discover that others wonder, too. Indeed, nothing seems more typically American than to obsess about identity. Can so many people truly be so greatly confused? We feel very much part of the contemporary gestalt." (*New York Times Magazine* 5/7/00: 28 qtd. Cheng 1-2).

The anxiety to interpret *Erasure* "correctly" and not fall into its satirical traps, replicates the broader cultural anxiety over authorial authenticity that Everett attacks through Monk. As Anthony Stewart warns in *Approximate Gestures*, though Monk "resembles Everett in manner and what appears to be predisposition, if not also in name," we should resist positioning Monk as a substitute for his author. Stewart emphasizes that "habitual practice[s]" like this "can get us into all kinds of trouble, not unlike that of expecting certain specific things—and only those certain specific things—from novels written by African American writers." Expecting as much, Stewart contends, betrays a tendency to reduce the narratives of Black writers to mere reflections of the author's identity. This risks making literary value of works by artists of color solely based on questions of cultural representation.

This seeming access and the reader's desire to believe it regurgitates the reductive readings of "African-American" literature throughout the novel. Just as in the novel, the "Urban" literature depicted gives readers an illusion of the "real thing," gritty life that lets them feel self-righteously informed. If we don't immediately get it, we can rest assured Everett and Monk can let us know, balm our qualms, by explaining the "black thing" (E 260). Indeed, in what feels like an absence of authenticity, Cheng explains, "[e]veryone wants an authentic culture and identity to claim as one's own genuine self—and thus there are many willing consumers for those who would peddle 'authentic cultures'" (172). So, as "high" cultural artists of color, then, Monk or Everett too risk being co opted and formed into palatable, marketable representations. Accordingly, to take Everett or Monk as cleareyed and plainspoken guides is to shift responsibility for our interpretations, "our responsibility for what we say and for the way we listen to others," off of ourselves (RO 62).

This creates uncomfortable slippages. Most criticism surrounding *Erasure*, to Everett's mind, misses the target. Everett lamented, it "is getting attention for all the wrong reasons ... the race stuff" (Ehrenreich 26). Everett elaborates, "I see it essentially as a book about the creation of art and all the impediments placed in front of some of us as we set out to do that within this culture." In an interview with Sean O'Hagan, Everett sighs, "When I see my books in the Black_Fiction or Black Studies section, I feel baffled. I really don't know what those terms mean. Especially when I look around the store and there is no corresponding White Fiction section." He quickly adds, "But, here we are again,... talking about race. I don't want to talk about race, I just want to make art" (O'Hagan). Everett's work places readers in the anxious position of constantly playing a game with them, all the while firmly insisting upon the reader's autonomy. A prodigiously prolific author of unclassifiable works, across multiple genres, Everett gives no firm ground for interpreting his works. Simultaneously suggesting and nixing fixed explications of his works, Everett rejects any endeavor to anchor his art to his identity, previous work, theories, or conventions (Maus 4). Nor has Everett, notoriously resistant to self-analysis of his art, willing to offer any help grounding interpretations. Indeed, in response to the critical embrace *Erasure* received, Everett proved merely vexed, dismaying that "[t]here's been a lot of people getting onboard and agreeing with me, and there's nothing more boring than that" (Ehrenreich 26).

Everett’s work then generates an acute anxiety about how one feels about not getting a joke, not getting it right, or not being “in the know” (or “woke”). His satires constantly make us question whether we are responding correctly, something that in turn makes us very self conscious about our own conceptions and awareness of race just as he questions the validity of such a conception. Derek Maus and Danielle Fuentes Morgan both note the piercing nature of Everett’s satirical critiques of societal and racial constructs. For Maus, Everett’s work embodies a Menippean satire, set on “demolish[ing] …foolish certainties” (Maus 54). Such a description matches Morgan’s opinion that contemporary, Post-Soul satire unveils the “inherent absurdity of race and racialization” (Morgan 2). If their readers are aware enough, Everett’s narratives can make readers squirm by forcing them to evaluate their part in sustaining wrongheaded narratives. Accordingly, as Morgan asserts, “impact is always greater than intent” (Morgan 87). Morgan concludes, contemporary satire places “the burden …squarely on the audience to make meaning” by creating “a space where” we must interrogate “our response” (Morgan 55). Everett’s multi-levelled texts create an atmosphere of unease, as we are thrown back on our own perceptions and biases, left only with ourselves to navigate the satire effectively. In reading Everett, we must redefine what it means to be “in on the joke,” becoming active participants in tension of representation and authenticity. Satire critiques not just its subject but also the audience’s complicity in understanding, or misunderstanding it. In essence, Everett’s satire of satire places readers in an anxious position by placing the responsibility on them to navigate the novel correctly and avoid its traps.

The critical debate surrounding *Tripmaster Monkey* and *Erasure* contain a shared anxiety over what it means to be included or excluded. While reader's of Kingston's Wittman have found it difficult to embrace his overwhelming and often discordant voice, readers of Everett's novel have over-identified with Monk, avoiding the responsibility of fully taking on the burden of interpretation. Both Kingston and Everett created protagonists that trouble readers' tendency towards simple interpretation, provoking reflection on what it means to understand a protagonist who bucks reduction. As readers, we risk recapitulating the exclusionary sins of American society through rejection, misrecognition, and/or appropriation of Wittman and Monk. As each protagonist wrestles with mutual acknowledgment, expression, and acceptance, readers must question their own roles in maintaining an exclusionary form of reading and practice ethical listening and acknowledgment. Both works, even at the level of reception, thus dramatize the anxiety of what it means to be "in on" something, be it a narrative, a joke, or a community.

## II. Navigating Anxiety Through Performance and Withdrawal

We can recognize a fundamental anxiety about being part of a "form of life." To be incorporated into a shared world, where our actions and responses are not simply understood, but indeed only make sense within the shared grammar of that world, is so natural, that explaining, even as I am now, inherently threatens to distance us from its full meaning. Because of its naturalness, we may feel profoundly alien when we fail to connect with others, as if we are inherently excluded from a purpose and sense-making community. Even worse, being so out of attunement may lead us to feel irreparably outside any social circle. Unable to play the game, not understanding the rules, the world ceases to make sense. Such is the anxiety of David Schearl in Call It Sleep, who cannot get right with his mates during a game of Follow the Leader. This anxiety is that of being out of attunement with his social world, unable to feel secure and understood. Such a disconnection plays through Wittman and Monk, who both suffer a sense of simultaneous exclusion and entrapment as raced individuals who strive for independence in America. Wittman's bombastic, performative behavior, though often outwardly carefree, fails to hide anxious hypervigilance. His behavior often drives others away as he anxiously attack first to maintain control of his narrative. Similarly, Monk erects barriers to others that exacerbate his sense of disconnection through an facade of ironic detachment, meant to shield his vulnerability.

A "form of life," built upon a shared sense of criteria is essential for meaningful commerce, as it allows individuals to act within a common framework. Wittgenstein's concept of "forms of life" suggests that there are trenchant alignments within communal practices that denote whether we are fundamentally in attunement with each other. These forms of life act as the given, foundational backdrop supporting communal comprehension. Indeed, without belonging to the same "form of life," even critique collapses, as we are divorced from any common grammar of understanding. It is essential to understand just how deep this goes. Wittgenstein's dictum that "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world" means that we are not simply talking about practices or "mere" ritual; on the contrary, this idea and the idea of a "form of life," parallels Kant's notion that space and time shape perception, that is to say thinking beyond these boundaries is inconceivable (TLP 5.6). Our "grammar" of understanding and meaning emerges from coexistence; we can neither form similar judgments, critique false views, of and accommodate differences without working within a common frame.

If individuals are not in attunement with their communities, they may feel as though they have retreated into privacy, plucked from the weave of life. Or at least we may insist on this in our anxiety over exposure and rejection. This feeling of absolute "privacy," Cavell argues, constructs a wall against our fellows and the world. In turn, it posits an unbridgeable gap and unknowable singularity (CR 84, in reference to PI §432; §§454-55). Such a feeling encourages a tendency towards withdrawal. Feeling out of step with the world, we may decide our true home lies within us, arguing that it is this inner world and language that makes the external world and its language meaningful. Yet this fundamentally mispictures expression and selfhood. There is a "fatality of expression," which brands our inextricable entanglement in the world. We cannot help but respond to the world, to act within a "form of life," even as we feel most alienated from it. So while we may find ourselves outside of a social world as if not in on a joke, we even in that very alienation must participate within the world that alienates us. We are fated to, we must act, to express, and yet the act and expression is freely ours to make beyond that "must."

This feeling is exasperated in characters such as Wittman and Monk. In their wrestling with the racial constraints placed upon them, they attempt to withdraw, either through closing themselves off in feelings of inexpressibility, or ironically through aggressively attacking local and national communities which try to lay claim to them. Nevertheless, in spite of their rebellion, a "multicultural" America both marginalizes them as it absorbs them. As Lisa Lowe writes,

> Multiculturalism levels the important differences and contradictions within and among racial and ethnic minority groups according to the discourse of pluralism, which asserts that American culture is a democratic terrain to which every variety of constituency has equal access and in which all are represented, while simultaneously masking the existence of exclusions by recuperating dissent, conflict, and otherness through the promise of inclusion. (Lowe 86)

In their entanglement, Wittman and Monk's free actions accrue meaning they vehemently hadn't intended and their attempts at dissent often leave them even more entwined, while feeling ever more alone. Anxiously uncomfortable and unclear about their implication in nationally racist and locally racialized communities, they find themselves nevertheless fated to respond and act within both. This fatality of expression combined with this entanglement in racist communities is part of what makes their existence anxiety inducing. It racially modifies Kierkegaard's definition of anxiety as "entangled freedom" that characterizes existence, where one is free to act, but only through one's entanglement in the world (CA 49). Both Wittman and Monk are forced in their entanglement in the world and consequently in their problematic communities to respond, to act, even as they feel completely misunderstood, degraded, and out of step with them. As this section illustrates, each is forced into forms of performance that act as well as forms of withdrawal.

### *A. "One big light blasted me": Wittman's Anxious Performance in a World of Exclusion*

Wittman's anxiety about being both completely free and out of attunement often pushes him to engage in performances, in order to assert control and elevate himself above a racist society. But these attempts often collapse into anxious displays of outrage. Though occasionally empowering, Wittman's idiosyncratic performances, as both efforts to connect yet also attempts to preemptively protect himself and his autonomy in a racist society, are more often isolating. His anxiety over attunement, and its relation to performance becomes evident in his engagement with humor. While his performances can be entertaining, even humorous, these performances are connected to his anxious hypervigilance regarding racist exclusion.

In an exchange with Taña, at this moment his soon-to-be wife by a matter of hours, Wittman asks, “So you never heard the one about the difference between Chinese toes and Japanese toes?” “Take a look at my toes,” he quickly follows up, “and tell me if you see anything unusual?” Taña’s replies, “Is this a test to see how many men’s toes I’ve been looking at?” Taña’s joke is not far from the truth. For this is a test of sorts. Wittman responds, “Comic books and Life magazine said that the way to tell a good Chinese from a bad jap is that the former has more space between the toes” (TM 156–57). Tellingly, during the banter he inwardly registers with relief, “Good. She did not tell him that she liked ‘yellow’ skin or ‘slanty’ eyes… She’s not getting any mysterious East from me” (TM 156). Wittman’s jokes and performances anxiously assess others and allow him to maintain a protective distance. His anxiety turns banter into a test, as he muses internally, “Whenever you find a white person you can trust, get some inside answers to questions. Spy out specific racisms” (TM 156). So though he opens up a space for connection, he anxiously needs to maintain control over the narrative, guarding against rejection and reduction.

Wittman’s anxiety about being excluded or objectified manifests as a hypervigilance. At a restaurant with Taña, he overhears, “Every Mexican in town has one,” followed by laughter. “He knows, it started out as a chink joke, but they had looked about, saw one, and changed it to Mexican” (TM 214). Wittman scrutinizes the group, noting, “They looked like the kind who entertain one another with race jokes.” He becomes the “vigilante of parties,” ready to attack perceived slurs, attacking the table, “You say a joke about me? Say it to my face.” “[R]eady to catch on and laugh, or catch on and bust ass,” Wittman’s readiness to (rightful) outrage, makes him, what Sara Ahmed might call, a “willful subject.” Here Wittman endangers the communal sense of happiness built upon racist underpinning. As Ahmed writes, “The happiness of a situation is protected by treating anything inconsistent with happiness as foreign to the situation” (Ahmed, *Willful* 168).Wittman’s rebellion, his willful inclination to lash out and correct threatens unthinking happiness that is built upon the exclusion of the foreign. Understanding that “[a] bond forms between those who have seen an odd phenomenon or laugh at a joke,” Wittman anxiously understands how racist jokes can negatively define communal attunement, forming identities based on who is included and who is the butt of the joke (TM 166). Wittman gets how humor can sharpen social boundaries as much as question them.

However, Wittman’s defensive humor does less as a response to these dynamics. As discussed above, Wittman, during these moments, gets a “blockage in my ears, like a wall or a roar that protects me,” as “[l]ine by line, I’m thinking, Is here where I break in and call them out… “ready to catch on and laugh, or catch on and bust ass.” He concludes, “They get quiet when I walk into the party. I don’t get to hear as many jokes as most people. I caught the punchline in there” (TM 215). Wittman’s defensive hyper-awareness develops out of an anxiety about racial perception. His vigilance is not just protective but rooted in the dread of being made other, or “foreign” in spaces where inclusion is already precarious. As Ahmed sighs, “No wonder the foreign is such an anxious site," as it becomes, for Wittman particularly, a sign of not simply anxious otherness, but a symbol of a tear in the social fabric (Willful 168). Anxious "foreignness," what stamps him as not a "native speaker,"[45] becomes that which seemingly bars him from the "form of life." In reaction, with a "blockage in my ears," anxiety creates a wall that insulates and isolates him, even in interactions with his friends. Through his own jokes, his parody of racist punchlines, Wittman attempts to assert control. However, this humor at once betrays unease. His need to preemptively "bust ass" or laugh becomes a marker of the relentless and exhausting self-monitoring and vigilance that as a raced individual his anxiety demands.[46]

Ironically, while both the humor of others and his own humor threaten to isolate him, Wittman's humor ultimately reflects his entanglement with the world, a state of constant performance driven by fear of rejection and a longing for recognition. When he mockingly tells his own racial joke at the restaurant ("What's ten inches long and white? Nothing, ha ha"), he attempts to reclaim control by flipping the script to expose its underlying violence. However, even as tries to wrest control, he remains ensnared in the mechanisms he seeks to escape. Wittman's sense of humor lets slip an anxiety, to avoid becoming the mechanical brunt of racial stereotypes that would keep him always on the outside. This is particularly clear in moments such as his final rebellious act at the toy shop. Here, he manipulates a mechanical organ grinder's monkey and a Barbie Bride. Kingston's narrator relates, "He took off its little vest, and inserted batteries in its back. It hopped about, clapping the cymbals and smiling… Wittman unboxed a Barbie Bride. He put her on her back… and the monkey on top of her. Her legs held it hopping in place and clapping her with its cymbals" (TM 64). The crude absurdity points to his anxiety of being reduced to a predictable, Bergsonianly mechanical caricature shaped by society's essentialist views. By taking control of the toys, Wittman metaphorically asserts his agency, attempting to upend the racialized, mechanized image imposed by stereotype.

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[45] See Chapter 2. In reference to Wittgenstein and Cavell's concept of being outside a "form of life" (PI §7; CR 28).

[46] None of this is to say that Wittman is wrong to react hostilely. Wittman's understanding of racism is not in question here, nor is it an "invention," a simply "willful word," in the sense of a nonsensical disruption. It's charge is merited disruption, and if anything, Wittman embodies Ahmed's "willful maxim" concerning racism: "Don't get over it, if you are not over it" (*Willful* 168). The point is that Wittman *does* occupy an "anxious site" that spurs both hostile reaction and relentless self-monitoring and vigilance.

Nevertheless, the performance, echoing Frank Chin's themes of masculine aggression against racist portrayals of Asian American men as effeminate, also shows Wittman's latent misogyny and how his humorous defiance is co-opted by the same systems of commodification he resists. The manipulation of the toys merely underscore his society's racist constraints, transforming his rebellion into another mechanical act, while underscoring the limitations of his own inclusiveness. So, Wittman is thrown once again into an anxiety over the futility of acting out of his entanglement, yet also feeling left outside of a community by the futility of his acts. Much like Mattel rally, "[i]n this form of community, spontaneous expression is nonexistent: identity is frozen and fetishized in the form of Malibu Barbie, and rebellion… is commodified into an antiseptic and nonthreatening form" (Royal 153). This recognition leads Wittman, or perhaps the narrator, to lament, "*Ah, Bartleby. Ah, Humanity*," in disillusionment, as his defiant performances remain entangled in the machinery of representation and commodification (TM 65). Like Bartleby, Wittman finds himself out of attunement through his reluctance to abide in a world that insists on reducing him to an unyielding, mechanical role.

If we listen to Wittman, we can hear how his anxious performances have always been both acts of rebellion and yet something expected by society. His abrasive performances are a means of combating his anxious unease of being in the world, and yet he is also anxiously uneasy about the expectation of performance by the world. Consciousness itself seems connected to this anxious performance, even emanating *from* anxious performance, as he tells Nanci Lee what seems to be a theatrical depiction of consciousness coming into being, likened to the illumination of a stage. Wittman asks us to "think back as far as you can… First it's dark, right? But a warm, close dark, not a cold outer-space dark." Then, in a series of quick flashes, "you made out a slit of light, and another, and another—a zoetrope—faster and faster, until all the lights combined. And you had: consciousness." For most people, he suggests, awareness awakens gradually, but Wittman describes a jarring, all-at-once illumination, akin to the anxiety David experiences as a "blooming, buzzing confusion." Framing consciousness as theatrical and disorienting comprises the anxiety of being thrown into a world demanding performance before having a script. "I got zapped all at once," Wittman recounts:

> That may account for why I'm uncommon. I saw: all of a sudden, curtains that rose and rose, and on the other side of them, lights, footlights and overheads, and behind them, the dark, but different from the previous dark. Rows of lights, like teeth, uppers and lowers, and the mouth wide open laughing—and either I was inside it standing on the tongue, or I was outside, looking into a mouth, and inside the mouth were many, many strangers. All looking at me. For a while they looked at me, wondering at my littleness. And pointing at me and saying, 'Aaah.' Which is my name, do you see? Then one big light blasted me. It was a spotlight or a floodlight, and I thought that it had dissolved me into light, but it hadn't, of course. I made out people breathing—expecting something. They wanted an important thing to happen. If I opened my mouth, whatever it was that was pouring

> into my ears and eyes and my skin would shout out of my mouth. I opened my mouth for it to happen. But somebody swooped me up—arms caught me—and carried me back into the wings. Sheepcrooked m'act. (TM 16)

His world doesn't just light up; it explodes with brightness, strobing and consuming him. The world becomes a stage, demanding performance. Yet this act is not easy, especially when he dons his Baby Uncle Sam outfit, a costume that "came off of a circus monkey or a street-dancing monkey," complete with a hole for a tail. His Americanness is both innate and performative, and his "monkeyness" hovers between chaotic freedom and degrading mechanization.

His stage—the world, his "scaffold"—offers a space for expression, yet he remains isolated, gazing out at a maw threatening to consume him (TM 30). This may explain the sudden, jarring intrusive thought during his reflections,"(When you come across 'lights' in books, like the Donner Party ate lights, do you think 'lights' means the eyes or the brains?)" (TM 16). Such unsettling intrusive thoughts haunt Wittman's every anxious performance. What the world consumes is not just an act but a consciousness, swallowing that very light of his being. Wittman struggles to articulate the origins of his need to perform, stammering to find genuine expression despite his verbosity. As he tries to speak or scream, adjusting to the blinding light, "a door had swung open before [him], and now [he is] among the alembics in the firelight…[his] theater came into being," only to be "sheepcrooked" away to the wings. He is perpetually being pulled back into privacy, just as he steps into the spotlight, pushed back into the shadows, right when the light would embrace him, encapsulates his anxiety over finding a community he can speak for and that will speak for, and not devour him. His is a life caught between the compulsion to expression and the constant threat of rejection and erasure, defining his strivings be seen and heard. Wittman finds a poignant echo of his performance anxiety in Rilke's evocative description of exposure, in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), where Brigge's feels trapped under observation, laid bare to an ever-present audience's expectations and judgments. Rilke writes, "*They take him by the hands, they draw him toward the table, and all of them, as many as are present, stretch inquisitively into the lamplight. They have the best of it; they keep in the shadow, while on him alone falls, with the light, all the shame of having a face*" (TM 184). In this moment, Rilke describes the terrifying intimacy of exposure, the "anxiety of exposure," where the light illuminates not just a person's outward appearance but the shame of having a face, a shame rooted in being scrutinized, interpreted, and judged by others (Laugier). It is the shame of having a face to necessarily receive and to respond with.

Yet for Wittman, this scrutiny seems even more insidious, as much his own relentless self-examination as the judgment of others. Standing in Taña's bedroom after sex, a fragile Wittman's feverish imagination transforms the scene into an explosive spectacle of resistance and defiance, blurring the line between performance and reality. "The curtain opens," or as the narrator undercuts, "he flung her dresses aside," and in a mirror is reflected "the great killer ape in chains sees the audience." "He opened his mouth wide like in the silent movies. Laughing at me, are you? Look at my red lashing tongue, and down my gullet—a real ape, not some fool inside an ape costume. Feel my guffs of hot breath. I will slip these chains. White hunters, you will die. Let me make my hand small here, change it into a wing, a red fin." But Wittman cannot make the miraculous transformation to soar away, "Oh, no, I'm stuck at ape." So he accentuates his form, "I'll grow then—to one hundred thousand feet." He imagines using the chains that bind him to escape, imagining that "[h]e tears through man's puny barriers against reality, and leaps out of the proscenium into the stampeding audience…He screams louder and higher than the ladies. Swooping Fay Wray up in his mighty arm, he and she swing across the ceiling of the San Francisco Opera House." Brushing off the "chains" imposed on him, he dominates the white world, scooping up Faye Wray and vaulting out of the opera house toward freedom. "The ape is loose upon America. Crash their party. Open his maw mouth, and eat their canapés and drink their champagne," Wittman imagines, "The party is mine" (TM 221-22).

And yet, when it all comes crashing down, and Wittman's adrenaline putters out along with his imagination, he faces only himself. "No one left but me. And this fellow in milady's dressing-table mirror, and in her hand mirror. With opposing mirrors, I can see my profile. I look like an ape. I have an ape nose. I do not look like a flounder." In this moment of self-recognition, his bravado crumbles into something more tragic. Looking at Taña, he doesn't see the triumph of a revolutionary ape but instead envisions a desolate scene of loss and trauma. "Who's that human being unconscious down there? Dead? And here is her suitcase for going away to death camp. I alone am left alive. She is a mother dead beside the evacuation road. I am her babe clinging to her dead body still warm. Tanks are coming. And bombers in the sky. If I run after the others, I leave her dead alone forever" (TM 222). The performance dissolves, leaving only haunting emptiness and a desperate longing for meaning and connection in a world that feels dangerously out of reach. He shuts up and lies down next to Taña. Wittman's pursuit of validation and belonging through comedic bravado is as much an act of self-assertion as it is a defense against exclusion and rejection. This anxious performance leads to exile, where his performance isolate him, turning his attempts at community into solitary acts.

### *B. "I just didn't care": Monk's Stoic Retreat and the Burden of Self-Division*

In contrast to Wittman's bombast, Monk cloaks himself an ironic and aloof detachment, using intellectual distance to manage vulnerability. Faced with an anxiety-inducing uncertainty of the world and the threat of becoming the butt of its unpredictable twists and turns, Monk responds by adopting a stance of detachment. Monk projects an image of calm, collected aloofness toward the world, coloring even his approach to race. Much like the Hegelian stoic, Monk portrays himself as embodying a "freedom of self-consciousness" that deals solely with itself, accepting the world as it is and turning inward to his "free" self. As Hegel notes, "In thinking, I am free, because I am not in an other, but remain simply together with myself, and the object, which is for me the essence, is in undivided unity my Being-for-myself; and my movement in concepts is a movement within myself" (§ 197). Russon adds that the stoic "finds her own sense of self-determination to be the foundation of meaning, the criterion by reference to which the significance of appearances can be judged" (127-28).

Indeed, upon first reading, many readers may see themselves aligning closely with Monk's opinions and stances. The more "progressive" the reader, the more they may sympathize with Monk. He positions himself as the intellectual knife cutting through the fog of racial madness in the American landscape.[47] Monk's opening monologue, his cool, ironic rundown of his credentials can be read as a vehement denial of stereotype or even race, providing a “stamp” of cultural sophistication. “I graduated summa cum laude from Harvard, hating every minute of it,” Monk lists, “I am good at math. I did not grow up in any inner city or the rural south. My family owned a bungalow near Annapolis. My grandfather was a doctor. My father was a doctor. My brother and sister were doctors” (E 1-2). Monk establishes his distance from cultural expectations. He is “no good at basketball” and “cannot dance,” making clear his identity does not fit society’s narrative for Black men (E 2). His interests span from Mahler to Aretha Franklin and Charlie Parker, reflecting a rich, “sophisticated” cultural taste that distances him from urban stereotypes. He is crucially aware of racial contradictions yet presents himself as objective and cerebral. Even his name signals cultural acceptability. Crucially, Monk exudes a detachment towards race, claiming, “I don’t believe in race. I believe there are people who will shoot me or hang me or cheat me…because of my brown skin…but that’s just the way it is” (E 2). Others’ views on race may affect Monk, but to him, race itself is neither real nor worth contemplation. It does not encroach upon his identity. If the world responds differently, “that’s just the way it is.”

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[47] In fact, in a time of an increasing conservative attacks on DEI programs and references under the Trump administration, Monk may also appeal to conservative readers' insistence upon "color blindness" as well.

Monk’s cool detachment shapes how he navigates his anxiety in an alienating world. He interprets stoic acceptance as growth, remarking, “It used to be that I would look for the deeper meaning in everything, thinking that I was some kind of hermeneutic sleuth moving through the world, but I stopped that when I was twelve.” He “abandon[s] any search for elucidation of what might be called subjective or thematic meaning schemes,” replacing it “with a mere delineation of specific case descriptions…that would allow me to understand the world as it affected me.” In doing so, he claims, “I learned to take the world as it came.” Yet, he adds, “[i]n other words still, I just didn’t care” (E 26).

This declaration exposes the limitations of his approach. While it seems he has found grounding, it is ultimately a retreat. Monk's "delineation" reflects the myth of privacy, as Laugier describes it, where the world is reduced to one's "inner" understanding rather than risk the exposure of externalization (Laugier). His anxiety degrades the "hermeneutic sleuth" he once was into anxious self-containment, reimagining the world solely through personal impact and prioritizing self over broader connection. This "cool" response inhibits his ability to connect. As reflects on his Alzheimer afflicted mother he has just committed, "I tried to consider her coming loneliness, waking in a strange bed, with strange faces, strange food, but instead, I thought of my own loneliness" (E 228). This is not to condemn Monk, but to show how far Monk's anxious withdrawal has maimed him. For Monk, the world is also a strange bed with strange faces, yet his thoughts always return to his own lonely condition. This insulating relationship to the world, crafted to maintain control, shades his relationships. What seems like an attempt to engage authentically is, in fact, a withdrawal.

Here is where some trouble lies. Monk's description of growth is telling. Starting from a place of anxious confusion, he begins by trying to navigate that confusion by mapping out a meaning or schema that would allow him a position to understand the whole. With that failing, he swings in the opposite direction, moving away from general grasp of the world, to one of particularity. Yet while this may seem at first like a therapeutic, even Wittgensteinian maneuver, that he has abandoned suspicion, disclosing, to description and grounding, he has in fact simply reconceived the world into his own particularity. It is not about understanding the world, or a social world, but conceiving the world only inasmuch as affects him. While this supposedly allows him to embrace the world, “to take the world as it came,” by renegotiating how his feelings are bound up in it, this is admittedly reduced to a withdrawal from the world, to not “care” about it. Anxiously recoiling from a world that often ceases to make sense, Monk turns inward, monkish, and stagnant. As Michael Inwood writes of Hegel’s stoic, he withdraws into his own thought, into ‘lifelessness’, inactivity, and freedom from suffering” (Hegel 404). Everett seems to suggest as much when he has Monk follow up his reflection with a particular memory:

When I was thirteen and my sister was sixteen, she caught me masturbating with a magazine in the front basement. When she asked me what I was doing, I said, “Masturbating.”

> My response was so casual that it gave her pause. As I was fastening my belt, she said, “You’re a pervert.”
> “I might be,” I said. “I don’t know what a pervert is.” (E 26)

In other words, having ceased to find an anxiety-free relation to the social world, Monk withdraws early on. While he may be a creative, there is something stagnant and self-contained about Monk. Whether or not we actually think of Monk’s personality and work as masturbatory, we can see that he becomes closed off into himself and insular. His interactions throughout the novel emphasize this retreat.

Monk tries to deny how much the world affects him, masking his true feelings with a veneer of detachment. We can see how Monk’s aloofness, not only attempts to insulate him from his feeling of communal estrangement but also of the scarring effects of racism. This tension between Monk’s assertion of stoic autonomy and the pain he feels in his entanglement in a racist world is evident in a scene at Borders, where Monk becomes nauseated while reading a section of Jenkins’s novel. When he abruptly shuts the book, his sister asks, “What’s wrong?,” Monk replies,“‘Nothing,’ I said, dropping the book back onto the stack.” Monk recollects the memory:

> “What do you think of that book?” she asked. “I read it’s going to be a movie. She got something like three million dollars for it.”
> “Really.” (E 29)

Monk barely keeps composure, and yet even as he truthfully and poignantly admits some disturbance, his response rings a bit false. The immediate following section reveals this. “The reality of popular culture was nothing new. The truth of the world landing on me daily, or hourly, was nothing I did not expect,” Monk claims, “But this book was a real slap in the face. It was like strolling through an antique mall, feeling good, liking the sunny day and then turning the corner to find a display of watermelon-eating, banjo-playing darkie carvings and a pyramid of Mammy cookie jars” (E 29). It’s hard to believe that Monk truly accepts the “reality of popular culture” that is also “truth of the world” that clobbers him. The social world, as designated problematically or not, by popular culture, consists of a reality that he cannot stomach, in spite of his claiming familiarity. Monk’s attempt at aloofness shatters, revealing how piercingly racial commodification affects him. Despite claiming he “hardly ever thinks about race,” his reaction disrupts this pretense, exposing the dissonance within.

A muttered “3 million dollars” betrays him, exposing his envy and frustration, revealing a crack in his stoic facade. His intellectual and emotional recoil from the world, intended to give him control, deepens his isolation and anxiety. Monk’s satirical novel, conceived in anger, only heightens his anxiety in the public’s embrace of it as the “real thing,” amplifying his sense of alienation and distancing him from genuine societal interaction. Monk betrays a profound fissure within himself, manifesting as self-division.

His attempt to withdraw from the absurdities of the world, while intending to protect him, reinforces his isolation and his anxiety. Even when Monk reenters the world, it is under disguise, driven by rage. This does not imply full blame on Monk but shows that his stoic persona crumbles under the weight of his own anxiety. His journal projects a figure seemingly, literally, more composed than he truly is. Ultimately, his attempt at satire, meant as an outlet for his righteous fury, fails to soothe his anxieties and instead exacerbates both angst and his detachment from authentic interaction. Anxieties about societal values and his place within them carve a division within him.[48]

Strangely enough, both Monk and Wittman are almost all expression, Wittman through bombast and Monk through careful calculation; however, it is an expressiveness that forecloses upon further dialogue. Faced with the fatality of expression, they withdraw by means of, at times ironically aggressive, self-assertion and self-protection that evokes the myth of absolute, unknowable privacy. Accordingly, both characters are anxious to find a grammar that makes them intelligible and connected to others within a shared "form of life," while adamantly claiming their separateness. Their humor and detachment, motivated by anxiety, become isolating, turning efforts at control into acts that increase exclusion. Any attempts navigating the American racial landscape reveal the tension between freedom and confinement, while disclosing unfulfilled need for recognition and a longing to be understood. In turn, their self-consciousness, their double consciousness, leaves themes anxiously split within themselves in a manner that disrupts any fluid engagement with their world and communities.

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[48] It is also perhaps important to note that Monk's novel is full of hints that he is filtering his anger towards his immediate life through his writing. Particularly his rage at his mother's diagnosis of Alzheimers and the constraints it puts on his own life find voice in Van Go Jenkins's refrain of "I loves mama. I hates mama," especially in his dream of killing her. Monk's tendency towards misogyny is also brought more to the surface (E 117). While we have been able to clock it throughout the novel if we look somewhat carefully (at say, his interactions with Linda Mallory), it brims to the surface in the ease of which he able to write Van Go's awful actions, and his vehement disparaging parodying of both *Push* and *The Color Purple*.

## III. Split and Shadowed: Anxiety and the Fractured Self

Wittman and Monk attempt to reject societal and racial definitions while yearning for connection and place, splitting themselves in the process through cognitive dissonance. In their narratives, as we witness them confront their racist and race-based societies we also observe an anxious division grow within them that drives an inability to fully connect with *any* community. This self-division manifests in a split consciousness that exceeds even a Du Boisian double consciousness. For Wittman, this emerges as "multiple consciousness," revealed through his racing inner monologue and intrusive thoughts, while for Monk, it appears in the inconsistencies of his overly manicured self-presentation. However, while Wittman's performance has already betrayed his fracture, Monk's division becomes apparent as it is externalized through the creation of Stagg R. Leigh, a persona embodying the stereotypes he critiques. The act ends up splitting him between the intellectual writer he sees himself as and the caricature the world embraces.

Consequently, in their anxiety to control their narrative, each enacts a performative doubling that signals their conflict with Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's "racial shadow." The racial shadow, Wong contends, is a form of projection that "keeps at bay the threatening knowledge of self-hatred." She writes, "By projecting undesirable," in Wittman's case "Asianness," and in Monk's case "blackness," "outward onto a double…one renders alien what is, in fact, literally inalienable, thereby disowning and distancing it" (Wong 78). Through their anxieties concerning "otherness," both Wittman and Monk clash with their racial shadows, while betraying a deep anxiety over the racial constraints placed upon them. Both characters' attempts at narrative control crumble into skeptical (dis)engagement with the world and others, as they wrestle with fractured selves shaped by external demands and internal anxieties.

For most,[49] inner speech is a fundamental aspect of existence, reflecting the linguistic and communicative logic that structures our thought processes. Norbert Wiley describes this phenomenon as inherently conversational, where "the I talks to the you about the me," dividing the mind into subject and object (Wiley). In moments of crisis, however, this inner dialogue shifts from cohesion to opposition, creating a sense of divided consciousness. Anxiety often arises or expresses itself, when this inner dialogue becomes intrusive, casting the self into a perpetual state of self-objectification and conflict. This dynamic aligns with Hegel's concept of the "unhappy consciousness," where skeptical "self-consciousness causes to vanish… not only the objective [reality] as such, but its own attitude [or relationship] to it…What vanishes is the determinate, or the difference" leaving the subject with the "the vertigo [or dizziness] of a perpetually self-engendered disorder" (§205). In striving for unity, the subject finds itself trapped in a cycle of anxious, dizzy restlessness, yearning for an unattainable absolute that only adds to the sense of separation and inadequacy.

Anxious consciousness, paralleling the "unhappy consciousness," as Lara Scaglia describes, reflects "the tension between changeable and unchangeable" and manifests as "the yearning of the particular towards the universal, the iterative, interminable quest of the thinking" (91). This relentless striving brings no resolution but reinforces existential discomfort. Unlike stoicism, which puts the world at arms distance, skepticism intensifies engagement with reality, resulting in what Scaglia calls "absolute inquietude and restlessness" due to the internal rupture between one's empirical existence and the abstract identity of consciousness (91). This "absolute laceration" reveals that freedom itself, as Russon notes, has become "an anxiety of meaninglessness," where freedom is not empowering but dizzying and uncertain (128-29). Anxiety arises from the absence of an attainable position or object to secure the self, outside the recognition of what it other from it. So it is in this sense that a racist American society, while fully ready to actualize itself in digesting the Other into it, refuses to give credence to the dissenting, indigestible voices of the other. As such America also, perhaps in its shame, shows an unwillingness to embrace the Other's recognition, putting the onus on the raced "other" to contort themselves to its needs to be recognized at all.

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[49] There are indeed individuals who do not experience internal monologue or speech. For them, anxiety would express itself in a different form, a fact that is registered but goes beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Accordingly, Wittman and Monk become anxiously split within themselves as they try to find place within the American community at large, while trying to assert themselves as above its devouring need for affirming recognition. Against this voraciousness of American society, othered individuals might adopt a certain vein of individualism that asserts individuality over any community as a form of combating such devouring. However, if one attempts to speak solely for themselves, they run the risk of speaking for no-one but themself, placing themselves outside of any sense-making community. Both *Tripmaster Monkey* and *Erasure* illustrate this conflict for Asian American and Black artists to assert themselves as against the racial status quo, while maintaining a sense of solidarity within racial communities against devouring expectations of American racial politics. In their struggles against racist expectations and contortions, however, Wittman and Monk risk placing themselves outside of any community. Entangled in the social world, Wittman and Monk are subject to the at once empty yet powerful construct of race, a category that alienates and fractures them. Their estrangement from community, stemming from their conflicted relationship to race, leaves them struggling to reconcile their individual selves with a sense-making whole. Wittman and Monk, this section shows, in being divided within themselves, vie against their internalized anxious voices that dominate their own sense of narratives and place.

### *A. "Scattered across the universe": Wittman and the Anxious Split Consciousness:*

Kingston's novel is Wittman's song of himself, yet the question remains: who is Wittman? What is the "Ah" he sings? His "I" (IIIIII III) is our "Eye," as he opens his mouth (Ahhhhh, Aaaaaieeeeee), not just as an incessant talker but as a scream against the constraints of that "I" and an American world that does not accept him beyond his race (Wang 101). He is torn between individuality and the pressure to assimilate into a society with racialized expectations. Singular yet singing wit[h] "Man," he is connected to the collective, though the American collective isolates him. Kingston and critics may see Wittman as a postmodern "China Man" and a new national figure redefining "American," expressing a new vision and inventing a new language. Yet this "New Man" is introduced as one who plays with annihilation (Chen 2). He is whole but on the verge of exploding. Kingston writes, "Wittman Ah Sing considered suicide every day. Entertained it" (TM 1). Entertaining suicide, he imagines a gun beside his right eye: "He looked side-eyed for it. Here it comes. He actually crooked his trigger finger and —bang!— his head breaks into pieces that fly far apart in the scattered universe. Then blood, meat, disgusting brains, mind guts, but he would be dead already and not see the garbage. The mouth part of his head would remain attached. He groaned. Hemingway had done it in the mouth" (TM 3). Narcisi notes, "from the opening pages, and throughout the novel self–consciousness and anxiety threaten to tear this lone monkey apart" (249). This opening fantasy, while seeming a gimmick since "Wittman never suffers from such self-abnegating despair thereafter," betrays his fear of losing his essence, becoming "nothing more than an inarticulate mouth still attempting to speak his blown-apart mind" (257). Our first impression of Wittman is not just of a talker or singer but of someone overwhelmed by the task of assimilating a fragmented identity within himself and the nation. As Wong writes, though experts in "eating bitterness," like Wittman, can challenge reductive understandings of assimilation, "there is such a thing as having to swallow too much, until one can no longer hold in the pain and humiliation" (77). He wishes to scatter himself across the "scattered universe" yet finds sharing himself impossible without annihilation.

The suicide fantasy, where he left as merely gaping mouth, captures Wittman's internal conflict of his desiring for genuine expression colliding with the anxiety of being reduced to incoherence. It points to the tension between maintaining individual wholeness and self-preservation against the anxiety and the fear that true self-disclosure or assimilation would lead to obliteration. Accordingly, his sense of identity teeters on the edge of fragmentation, already present in the very presence of overwhelming and continuous intrusive thoughts. In these moments, Wittman's mind, like many others, "suffers a loud takeover" (TM 3). David Foster Wallace, in his 2005 Kenyon commencement speech similarly suggests we each wage a desperate bid to silence the mind's relentless monologue. Under its spell we are "hypnotized" by its "constant monologue" within us (*Water* 50). This voice, not completely alien to us, is both ours and yet *not* ours. Wallace's language here implies a split in the mind of the individual, a split that is explicitly personified as two selves put in interrelation. The first is the self of the monologue, an agency automatic and ever running; the second is closer to what we traditionally call self, a controlled and deliberate agency. However, in its relentless monologue, this first voice distracts us from not only the outside world, but our own agency. It convinces the other self of its inadequacy and delusion. In its grasp, we no longer rule our "skull shaped kingdoms" benevolently, but instead become "slaves" to the "terrible master" of that voice (*Water* 50). This anxious conversation traps the mind in a power struggle with itself, transforming the inner voice into an intrusive presence trespassing upon our right to selfhood.[50]

Wittman's thoughts reflect this same sort of seizure, not deliberate but invasive and intrusive. Wittman is "[a]ware of the run of his mind, he was not making plans to do himself in, and no more willed these seppuku movies—no more conjured up that gun—than built this city." Instead, "[t]hese gun pictures were what was left of his childhood ability to see galaxies. Glass cosmospheres there had once been, and planets with creatures, such doings, such colors. None abiding" (TM 3). Wittman's suicidal ideation reflects not just despair, but the collapse of a once-expansive imagination. The "galaxies" and "cosmospheres" of his childhood have vanished, replaced by the harsh reality of a fragmented adult mind. For Wittman, this anxiety is a battle with a world that limits his identity, pushing him toward self-fragmentation, “inner rupture between the empirical world – of which the subject is still part of – and the inner abstract identity of the consciousness with itself,” that is, “this absolute laceration constitutes the unhappy consciousness” (Scaglia 92). Cavell’s idea that philosophy is “self-preservation…for who is it that the philosopher punishes when it is the mind itself which assaults the mind?” (MWM 18) echoes Wittman’s predicament. His mind questions its own integrity, and escape and clarity find expression only in self-destruction. The longing to scatter himself across the “scattered universe” is a bid for preservation that paradoxically entails dissolution. Wittman’s internal war, as his mind assaults itself in his aggression not only toward the world but also himself.

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[50] Fitting with Wittman, Wallace surmises that because of this buzzing monologue, "[i]t is not the least bit coincidental that adults who commit suicide with firearms nearly always shoot themselves in…the *head*" (*Water* 58).

In his anxious split between his desire for individual wholeness and the fragmentation imposed by external and internal forces, Wittman grapples with inadequacy and questions his intellectual and cultural identity and authenticity. With Nanci Lee, who offers her idea for a regendered and reinterpreted version of Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape,* a blustering Wittman is thrown into anxious self-doubt. He screams inwardly, “Why hadn’t he thought of that? She must think him ill-read and a dried up intellectual not to have seen the sensuality in Beckett” (TM 25).[51] Her reimagining makes

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[51] Nanci’s reinterpreting, in a somewhat saccharine manner, of Beckett’s sexually suggestive line “let me in” to merely “let me into your eyes,” underscores both the avaricious nature of Wittman’s feelings, as well as his inability to actually open himself up to others, to know and be known by others, in spite of constant torrent of words. In passing, it is perhaps also worth mentioning that James Knowlson, in his biography *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, tells of Beckett, with a chuckle, slyly suggesting that all he meant was “let me into your eyes” (451). Knowlson’s biography coming years after the publication of *Tripmaster Monkey,* we would, if we take Beckett seriously, have to chastise ourselves, Nanci, and perhaps Kingston, for all taking the line sexually at first. (Or alternatively, Nanci is much more in line with Beckett than any of us could imagine). In any case, Wittman slightly undercuts it all, by exclaiming to himself,

Wittman anxious that his limitations and vulnerability have been exposed, revealing his anxiety of being trapped in his own head. Wittman's anxiety about appearing "ill-read" or overly cerebral generates from his concern with how he reads and is read by others. This self-questioning recurs throughout the novel as he attempts to balance intellectual impressiveness with a craving for grounded understanding.

From the beginning, dread colors his interactions with Nanci, disrupting his ability to "read" her intentions. "Is that a sneer on her face? In her voice? Is she stereotypecasting him? Is she showing him the interest of an anthropologist, or a tourist? No, guess not" (TM 12-13). Wittman remains unsure of her true feelings, her inner workings, entertaining the idea that her interest might be performative. He observes, "There was no guile on her face, which seemed always uplifted. Was she joyful, or was that curve the way her mouth naturally grew? The way some cats and dogs have smile markings. Yeah, it was not a smile but a smile marking" (TM 19). Wittman's is consistently anxious of misreading others or being misread himself. His anxiety over being cast into a lifeless, rigid, "stereotypecast" surfaces in his metaphor of taxidermy. External stereotyping demands cliched performances by racial minorities that the dominant culture finds pleasing or comforting. However, it is also an anxiety he finds within in his own racial communities. Here his anxiety is not simply about being constrained by "stereotype," but also of being "typecast" and expected to take on specific, deading and mechanical roles and performances. "Stiffs. Dead behind glass forever. Stuffed birds stuffed inside pried-open mouths. 'Taxidermy' means the ordering

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"You're resorting to Krapp, Nanci, because of being left out of the [American dramatic pantheon of the] Hogan Tyrone Lohman Big Daddy family" (TM 25).

of skin. Skin arrangements," he grimaces, "If you're at my bedside when I die, Nanci, please, don't embalm me. I don't want some mortician who's never met me to push my face into a serene smile" (TM 11). Wittman's plea expresses a dread that his living essence will be replaced by a lifeless, imposed external representation or "skin arrangement," of becoming simply "ordered skin."

This anxiety of being fixed into a form not of his choosing, becomes manifest as self-splitting anxiety for Wittman. Nowhere is this clearer than in his contentious relationship to FOB immigrants and his own claim to America. Wittman enacts a certain self-rejection through his justifications for distancing himself from new immigrants by emphasizing his fifth generation Californian heritage. Wittman anchors himself within American identity and history, placing him above recent arrivals, declaring, "Great-Great Grandfather came on the *Nootka*, as ancestral as the *Mayflower*... America, his province," (TM 41). This anxious assertion of belonging indicates Wittman's need to prove himself as "truly" American, contrasting with immigrants' perceived foreignness. His mockery elevates him while binding him to the racial hierarchies he loathes. And yet his need to assert this shows how far he is from this fact being accepted by America.

His encounter with immigrants portrays his internal, self-splitting struggle with identity and self-perception. Kingston implies Wittman's fantasies of self-destruction are tied to his self-conscious aversion to "foreignness." Walking through a fog of a San Francisco park, he decides to "let it all come in," only to become unsettled by what he sees:

> Heading toward him from the other end came a Chinese dude from China, hands clasped behind, bow-legged, loose-seated, out on a stroll—that walk they do in kung fu movies…As luck would have it, although there was plenty of room, this dude and Wittman tried to pass each other both on the

> same side, then both on the other, sidestepping like a couple of basketball stars. Wittman stopped dead in his tracks, and shot the dude a direct stink-eye. The F.O.B. stepped aside, following, straggling, came the poor guy's Wife. Immigrants. Fresh Off the Boats out in public. Didn't know how to walk together. Spitting seeds. So uncool…Can't get it right. Uncool. Uncool. The tunnel smelled of mothballs – F.O.B. perfume. (TM 4-5).

The exaggerated, caricature-like demeanor embodies the very image of foreignness that Wittman wishes to disown. The newcomer's posture—"hands clasped behind, bow-legged, loose-seated" —evokes stereotypical depictions Wittman finds embarrassing and unnerving. Wittman's rails against the immigrants' "uncool" nature and inability to "get it right," to *be American.* Again, the foreign becomes a "site of anxiety." Although he critiques American racism, he simultaneously distances himself from the unassimilated Asian American population by playing into these stereotypes. His reaction—a "direct stink-eye"—becomes a defensive response that says more about his anxieties than the newcomer's actions. For Wittman, the FOBs represent the encrusting, deadening threat of stereotype as well as the typecast performance America expects of him. The tunnel scene, echoing and filled with the smell of mothballs, symbolizes preservation, representing how these immigrants bring remnants of their pasts into their present. For Wittman, this smell brands their perceived backwardness and his own anxiety of association.

Thus, Wittman's derision is a projection of his own self-lacerating racial insecurities. As Wong's concept of the "racial shadow" suggests, for Wittman, the "FOBs" symbolize a haunting presence he wishes to reject about himself, reflecting a crisis of self-acceptance. Molded through an anxious cycle of repression and projection, the double disquietly mirrors Wittman's disowned self (Wong 82). Mackin, in conversation with Wong, adds that "Wittman's culturally multiple persona both conforms to and also complicates Wong's discussion," as he becomes "an inveterate 'doubler,' a recycler, constantly recombining the elements of his experience in an attempt to versify (or re-verse) the flotsam and jetsam of his San Francisco wanderings." Mackin further observes, "As his 'trip' assembles the ebb and flow into meaningful combinations, it is also a game where he plays with the power of language to claim or reclaim cultural artifacts" (Mackin 522). Wong emphasizes that the racial shadow operates as an external manifestation of an internal crisis, exerting disproportionate influence over the protagonist. The interaction with the FOB man exemplifies this anxious splitting. While Wittman may eventually stare him down, it is not before the two perform some foil and folly work of accidentally *falling into a* performance of a slapstick dance with each other, sidestepping not only like basketball players, but in mimicry of the Marx Brothers' famous mirror scene of *Duck Soup*. He cannot escape the double, the part of him America (type)casts as other and backward. The image of the FOB pantomimes him, stoking his anxieties. Marked by moments of mockery and derision, Wittman's relationship to his racial shadow attests to how his struggle to claim America is marred by anxieties of being framed as an excluded other, (type)cast out into exile to the anxious site of the foreign.

### *B. "What did it mean that I could put those questions to myself?": Monk's Split Identity and the Burden of Representation*

Monk's experience with his own alter ego, Stagg R. Leigh, parallels Wittman's anxious self-splitting and confrontation with the racial shadow. As Morgan notes, "If whiteness is always assumed in American literature through an absence of signifiers, then Blackness must be called into being" (74). Such an imposed necessity forces writers of color to make racial difference visible all while striving against the expectations placed on them. Monk becomes increasingly disillusioned by the obligation to claim representation, to speak for others. Monk's angry, visceral reaction to Jenkins's portrayal underscores his anxieties over representation when he sees her image on Time magazine. He explains, “the pain started in my feet and coursed through my legs, up my spine and into my brain and I remembered passages of *Native Son* and *The Color Purple* and *Amos and Andy* and my hands began to shake... I was screaming inside, complaining that I didn’t sound like that, that my mother didn’t sound like that, that my father didn’t sound like that” (E 62). For Monk, Jenkins’s success faces him with the weight of history and commodified racial narratives pressing against his sense of self. For Monk, Jenkins’s work, like the Mammie cookie jar, becomes a racial shadow, a projection of internalized anxieties and the external expectations that haunt him.[52]

Yet when his own mock novel is published and reviewed, it is to his dismay adopted as the authentic article, or at least enjoyable by readers of all races. Already angered by critics who praised Jenkins’s novel as “a masterpiece of African American literature” with “haunting verisimilitude” that allows one to “hear the voices of her people as they make their way through the experience which is and can only be Black America” (E 46), Monk is dismally frustrated when his own grotesque satire is lauded an authentic representation of black life. The jurors who consider *Fuck* for “The Book Award” applaud the work as:

> “The best novel by an African American in years.”
> “A true, raw, gritty work.”
> “So vivid, so life-like.”
> “The energy and savagery of the common black is so refreshing in the story.”
> “An important book” (E 254).

Some praise appraises the work on its “educatory” value, as one juror proclaims, “I learned a lot reading that book…I haven’t had a lot of experience with color—black people—and so *Fuck* was a great thing for me." This comment particularly spurs Monk to voice frustration, crying "that's exactly what I'm talking about. People will read this shit and believe that there is truth to it." Even worse, another juror responds, "This is the truest novel I've ever read. It could only have been written by someone who has done hard time. It's the real thing" (E 261). If Jenkins's novel depicts "the ghetto…painted in all its exotic wonder," where "[p]redators prowl, innocents are eaten," *Fuck* confirms readers' preconceptions of Black life as raw authenticity (E 46). Wayne Waxen of the *New York Times* embodies this delusion, describing *Fuck* as portraying "sheer animal existence, one that we can all recognize," both reducing the protagonist, Van Go Jenkins, to a racist trope, while elevating him to the level documentary, mimetic realism (E 260). Waxen waxes, "The characters are so well drawn that often one forgets that *Fuck* is a novel. It is more like the evening news. The ghetto comes to life in these pages and for this glimpse of hood existence we owe the author a tremendous debt." He concludes, "[t]he writing is dazzling, the dialogue as true as dialogue gets and it is simply honest. *Fuck* is a must read for every sensitive person who has ever seen these people on the street and asked, 'What's up with him?'" (E 260). Such responses from jurors and critics show how fictional authenticity becomes the litmus test of the real. It is a situation that deepens Monk's anxiety, as he struggles to both fight against this perceived reality, while maintaining the ruse and capitalizing on its success.

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[52] This is not unlike Ellison’s Underground Man, who looking upon a “self mocking” “piece of early Americana—racist cast iron bank, depicting a wide grinning “very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro”—at Mary’s house, reflects that “In my hand, its expression seemed more of a strangulation than a grin” (Ellison 319).

The irony is that his attempts to combat the racial shadow the world projects onto him, the creation of *Fuck* and the persona of Stagg R. Leigh as satirical responses to the world's constraints, end up literalizing the racial shadow he fights against. His act intensifies his self-splitting, as the satire intended to reclaim control begins to overtake the real. His identity becomes fractured between Monk and Stagg, creating a blurred boundary between his true self and his creation. As Leigh gains in popularity, Monk's anxiety wrestles with his loss of control. "Had I by annihilating my own presence actually asserted the individuality of Stagg Leigh? Or was it the book itself that had given him life?" Monk distresses, "There he was for public scrutiny and the public was loving him. What would happen if I tired of holding my breath, if I had to come up for air?" He concludes, starkly, "Would I have to kill Stagg to silence him? And what did it mean that I was even thinking of Stagg as having agency? What did it mean that I could put those questions to myself? Of course, it meant nothing and so, it meant everything" (E 248). Monk's anxiety pushes him into the self-lacerating space of Hegel's "unhappy consciousness." He finds himself fragment by the tension between his awareness of the external forces shaping his identity and his inability to reconcile his fractured self. This inner conflict leaves him simultaneously alienated from and consumed by the persona he has created. Meaning "nothing," Stagg's public existence becomes the everything that is the nothingness of anxiety, a figure that lays bare the flimsiness of his world's grounding. The persona of Stagg becomes a haunting presence that threatens to overwrite his true identity with a version of himself dictated by societal expectations.

Much like Wittman's insulating "wall" of outrage when hearing a racist joke, Monk experiences walls that both isolate him and ironically collapse boundaries, leaving his identity undefined and vulnerable. He ponders, "I had managed to take myself, the writer, reconfigure myself, then disintegrate myself, leaving two bodies of work, no boundaries yet walls everywhere" (E 257). This fractured state reveals the cost of Monk's attempt to navigate a world that rebuffs his self-definition. Monk becomes "walled in" by public perceptions, much like Stagg Leigh on the subway, “encased with other black men” (E 246). He becomes tethered to the very tropes he sought to dismantle. He concludes, “I had to defeat myself to save myself, my own identity. I had to toss a spear through the mouth of my own creation, silence him forever, kill him, press him down a dark hole and have the world admit that he never existed” (E 259).

For Monk, the anxiety of being caught between authenticity and performance transforms his quest for selfhood into a battle for survival within a racially coded social order that consistently “stereotypecasts” him. The split between Monk’s authentic work and inauthentic novel and persona of Stagg emphasizes the anxiety of “having face,” the anxiety of maintaining authentic presence and expression in a world hostile to that authenticity and demanding performance. Of course, regardless of editors’ calls for more “real,” “black,” stories from Monk, Monk is indeed “living a black life, far blacker than he could ever know, that I had lived one, that I would be living one” (E 2). Yet as Monk recognizes, the “beautiful” irony emerges that the more Monk attempts to distance himself from race in his work, the less he makes sense to racist world and more he is racistly diminished. “[I]n denying or refusing complicity in the marginalization of ‘black’ writers, I ended up on the very distant and very ‘other’ side of a line that is imaginary at best,” he muses,

> I didn’t write as an act of testimony or social indignation (though all writing in some way is just that) and I did not write out of a so-called family tradition of oral storytelling. I never tried to set anybody free, never tried to paint the next real and true picture of the life of my people, never had any people whose picture I knew well enough to paint….[T]he irony was beautiful. I was a victim of racism by virtue of my failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have my art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression. (E 212)

While speaking cooly, we can see anxiety piercing through Monk's rhetoric. Whether or not Monk plays the game, he is deeply anxious about being forced into a situation where he must justify himself and his work in terms he does not believe in. Yet in refusing to do so, he is, ironically, placed in another anxious predicament of being erased from the public eye through his refusal to embrace the title of raced individual and author.

So when his racial shadow, Stagg, begins to be embraced as the "real thing," Monk finds himself, by dawning the costume of Stagg and continuing the act, to disappear further, creating an anxious situation where he find his inauthentic self gaining fullness as his authentic self threatens to wither. This is particularly true the more he compromises his own ideals in pursuit of satire, or profit. However, beyond this, Monk's explanation betrays his fundamental anxiety concerning community. Throughout Everett's novel, as we will, Monk is deeply anxious about not belonging to any community. Though he may here couch his dismissal of writing for others as a means of skirting the racist constraints, it nevertheless betrays Monk's predicament that he may not speak for anyone, or to anyone, at all. Like Wittman, confronted with a racist society that demands he act and write to its racist expectations, Monk nevertheless reacts in such a manner that leaves him anxiously plucked from the weave of life, that is, out of the grammar of any community whatsoever.

Confronted with their racial shadows, it becomes clear that both Wittman and Monk are lost on their cognitive maps, as they must be ever vigilant about not losing themselves. "[T]he idea of not knowing one's way about, of being lost," explains Cavell, "… [becomes] the issue… of a loss of self-knowledge; of being, so to speak, at a loss" (NYU 36). Uncertain and unwilling to accept any "inheritance" of culture that hamstrings them,[53] each protagonist struggles to find roots that would ground and orient them (NYU 64). They become anxiously suspended, unable to make their way forward. While this anxiety comes immediately from wrestling against constraints on a national setting, it overflows into their lives with their local communities. It leads each protagonist to either lash out in an alienating manner against even his loved ones, or withdraw from their loved ones under the impression that they have an innate inability to communicate and be loved. Split within themselves, they divide themselves too from their communities, leaving them outside the weave of life, and groping for meaning.

## IV. "It's incredible that a sentence is ever understood": Language, Anxiety, and Estrangement from Shared Forms of Life

Wittman and Monk's self-splitting anxiety does not remain confined within their psyches; it bleeds into their every interaction, complicating their relationships and increasing their isolation. The schism between autonomy and racial performance and definition manifests outwardly, affecting how Wittman and Monk engage with others. Anxiety emerging from their confrontation with the racist national shapes not only their self-perception but also their connections with their local communities. Estrangement from the national community may amplify their alienation from local communities as well. Thus, Wittman and Monk each embody what David L. Eng designates as "racial dissociation," as both wander nomadically a "psychic nowhere" feeling rootless and unsecured (Eng 4). The paradox of "emotional autonomy and independence"—promising freedom but delivering isolation—leaves them without a clear home (Eng 109). They become, as Cavell would say, "exiles," and "nomadic," losing a sense of community and world. Facing a racially alienating culture, both Monk and Wittman respond by distancing themselves from *any* community, both in assertion of their individuality, yet also in despair of finding a home and meaning within any community under the race based conditions of American society. Without a home, anxiously dislocated, their ability to converse, and thus to find community and reason, is made precarious. This section identifies how Wittman and Monk, whether through their manic attacks or out of a sense of innate inability to relate, position themselves outside of any communities that would have them.

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[53] At least none that is not of their own choosing. Both Monk and to an even larger extent Wittman are both fluent in and made up of an astounding amount of multi-cultural aesthetic and philosophic texts. Particularly for Wittman, where Asian American culture fits into the accepted Western, "American" culture in a way that is not orientalizing is symbolic of his own difficulty of finding a foothold as American and claiming America.

### ***A. "Agoraphobic on Market Street": Wittman's Anxiety and Exile Within Community***

While Wittman, much like Monk, tries to maintain a facade of distance from his work's reception, he is actually anxious to be embraced and understood. The narrator reflects on Wittman's anxious ego after he reads a poem to Nanci Lee, musing, "The poet—the one in real life, not the one in the poem—wouldn't mind, when the poem ends, if his listening lady were to pay him a compliment." He pines for Nanci to make some affirming comment "such as agreeing" or engaging with his poem's imagery. "He'd love her for such particular appreciation," explains the narrator, "At least, praise him on the utilitarian level. From out of my head into the world." Here we find Wittman's need for validation and dread of rejection. It is an anxiety to be seen and understood, to bridge the gap between his inner world and external acknowledgment. But "Nanci made no move to show that she heard that the poem was over," causing the narrator to chide, "Give her a love story, Wittman" (TM 30).

Unable to make a connection through a "love story," what occurs instead is that Wittman goes ape. "No coward," Wittman asks Nanci, "How do you like my work?" Though he believes he can take it, he is caught off guard by her comment. "You sound black," Nanci responds, "I mean like a Black poet. Jive. Slang. Like LeRoi Jones. Like … like Black" (TM 32). Her response fails to provide the affirmation Wittman seeks. By comparing him to Black poets, she inadvertently dismisses his particular voice, provoking his outrage due to his own racist opinions but also his sense of wounded racial pride. Wittman is already anxious over what he sees as the cultural inadequacy of Chinese American culture, reflecting elsewhere, "Where's our jazz? Where's our blues? Where's our ain't-taking-no-shit-from-nobody street-strutting language? I want so bad to be the first bad-China Man bluesman of America" (TM 27). And so Wittman goes berserk. "Slam[ming]" down a "fistful of poem," he leaps onto his desk, "squatted there, scratching," making a chaotic scene:

> "Monkey see, monkey do?" he said. "Huh? Monkey see, monkey do?" […] "Monkey shit, monkey belly." […] "A lot you know about us monkeys." […] He sprang from the desk onto the chair, and from the chair to the mattress, and from the mattress up to the desk again, dragging his long arms and heavy knuckles. His head turned from side to side like a quick questioning monkey, then slower, like an Indian in a squat, waggling his head meaning yes-and-no. He picked a flea from behind an ear […]. He picked up loose papers with one hand and looked at them, scratched his genitals with the other hand, smelled hands and pages, nibbled the pages. "'Black?'" he hatefully imitated her. " 'Jive.' " He let drop the papers, nudged one farther with his toe, and wiped his fingers on his moustache. "That bad, huh?" He lifted a page and turned it, examined it back and front. Upside down and sideways. " 'LeRoi Jones?!' " He recoiled from it, dropped it over the edge of the desk, and leaned way over to watch it fall. Keeping an eye on it, he picked up another sheet and sniffed it. "Too Black. If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. That's my motto." He wadded it up and threw it over his shoulder. He jumped on top of the trunk, scrunching and scattering the whole shit pile, then pounced on a page, and returned with it to the desk. […] He wiped his eyes with the paper, crushed it, and pitched the wad at the window, which was shut. Sorting

> papers into two piles, he said, “Goot po-yum. Goot. Goot. No goot. No goot. Goot. No goot.” He tasted one, grimaced. “No goot.” Breaking character, he said, “Now, if I were speaking in a French accent, you would think it charming. Honk-honk-ho-onk.” He did the Maurice Chevalier laugh, which isn’t really a laugh, is it? He started new piles. “Angry po-yum.” “Sad po-yum.” “Goot and angry.” “Angry.” “Angry.” “Imitation of Blacks.” He threw some to the floor. “Angry too muchee. Sad. Angry sad. No goot. Angry no goot. Sad. Sad. Sad.” (TM 32-33).

Wittman explodes in frustration and hurt. However, his performance serves as both a problematic critique of Nanci's racial assumptions and a self-destructive, and itself racist, act that isolates him further. In his outrage, he retreats into minstrelsy and caricature, exacerbating the very misunderstandings he resents. This behavior is a form of willful self-exile; by responding with such aggression and embracing offensive stereotypes, he drives Nanci away and reinforces his isolation. His aggressive performance lets slip his inability to communicate his hurt and desire for acceptance. Instead of bridging the gap, he widens it, willfully isolating himself through his outrageous behavior.[54]

By the third chapter of *Tripmaster Monkey*, Wittman is wandering a void of sorts. “Depressed and unemployed,” writes the narrator, “jobless Wittman Ah Sing felt a kind of bad freedom. Agoraphobic on Market Street, ha ha. There was nowhere he had to be, and nobody waiting to hear what happened to him today. Fired. Aware of Emptiness now” (TM 67). Without a context to ground him, Wittman faces emptiness, the Nothing, the “existential anxiety” that is, in fact, “forsakenness” (Brann 323). This draining of life’s content leaves, as Heidegger would have it, only individuation. Wittman falls out of the world, and the homelessness he has always felt becomes accentuated. The world has not disappeared, but it ceases to make sense, becomes “unhomely;” Wittman is no longer at home, though he must reside here nonetheless. Wittman's "bad freedom" finds kin in Kierkegaard's vision of anxiety locked into our freedom and the void. Here is an anxious despair that confirms his entanglement in the world, where action is demanded amid dizzying emptiness. Yet is also like Heidegger's understanding that anxiety as "reveals the nothing" where it "leaves us hanging because it induces the slipping away of beings as a whole" (WIM 101). As the world and its objects recede in anxiety, we seek a world, whether as home or threat. This paradox provides the impulse and backdrop for Wittman's anxious projections onto the world around him. Linda Wagner-Martin explains, Wittman becomes "a postmodern entity." He "changes genders, he has given up his home, and he makes no plans. He uses no stable language; his life is trickery. He is either a ghost or a hipster. In any case, he can find no suitable narrative for himself" (Wagner-Martin 93). Estrangement and entanglement frame his restless fight to navigate social and cultural expectations in a world that feels increasingly inaccessible.

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[54] For more on this, see Mackin comments on the disturbing, and indeed anxiety inducing nature of Kingston and Wittman’s adoption of minstrelsy.

However, to be "agoraphobic on Market Street," implies being anxiously withdrawn in the very heart of the social, and commercial, world. It means to be surrounded by community and yet out of anxiously out of attunement with or withdrawn from it. Wittman's impulsive decision to aggressively engage Lance at the latter's party is a sign of his anxious failure of attunement. Lance's gathering for the "Young Millionaires" epitomizes a world Wittman feels excluded from, a realm where individuals appear seamlessly integrated into a system of capitalist networking. For Wittman, the party is not merely social but symbolic of a world that prioritizes economic value over authentic human connection, leaving him acutely aware of his own misalignment. Lance casually embodies this ethos that business and community naturally coexist, asking, "Make any good contacts?" and "Are you having a good time?" (TM 115). To Wittman, however, this transactional view of relationships feels dissonant, even corrosive. "When people are going around polling one another, 'Are you having a good time?,' they're not getting into the party," he observes. His frustration grows, exclaiming "I think that it is fucked to make contacts rather than to make friends. I don't like contacts. What do you say to one? 'Of what use are you to me?'" (TM 116).[55] Wittman's yearning for a community free of such utilitarian motives, though admirable, are also symptomatic of his anxiety about his inability to harmonize with the world of others. He cannot find commerce with anyone. His rejection only increases his entanglement, as he remains caught in the ideological framework he critiques. Neither fully within nor entirely apart from the system, his resistance doubles in his alienation as a form of anxious engagement.

Wittman's reactionary engagement at the party is symptomatic of his ambivalent feelings himself and his sense of isolation. For all his raging and disdain, Wittman is often embraced by those around him, even as he resists them or lashes out. Nevertheless, in his anxieties over connection, *he* often positions *himself* outside the community, resisting, avoiding the love of others. For instance, though he treats Lance with contempt, accusing him of ranking his friends, the narrator explains that Wittman "wouldn't mind knowing what number he himself was on the list but they couldn't torture such a question out of him," while also considering "Lance as his best friend, though lately he hardly saw him except at parties" (TM 120). When Wittman attacks Lance at the party, he exposes a complex web of anxiety rooted in memory, identity, and his painful desire for recognition. Accusing Lance of leading childhood bullies, Wittman seeks vindication, "You were taidomo no taisho—leader of the kids... You led your army out of the camps and into the schoolyard, and beat the shit out of me" (TM 116). His words brim with the need for his pain to be recognized, but Lance's indifferent response heightens Wittman's sense of invisibility. "I don't remember you," remarks Lance, "Are you accusing me of beating you up?" (TM 117). The line triggers an anxious thought of being erased from communal memory. "Why is it that Wittman remembers others," scowls Wittman, "…but they don't remember him?" However, Wittman's anxiety is only increased by Lance's admission that trauma of the internment camps erased much of his early life. Learning that Lance remembers little before "about seventh grade," that "to make memories, [he] need[s] documentation" evokes in Wittman a mix of "pity and envy." Despite knowing better than to romanticize trauma, Wittman is "overawed at anyone who achieved more pain than he did, given average American conditions" (TM 121). In spite of himself, he envies Lance's dramatic past, longing for a narrative that might give his own life more weight. "If only he hadn't been but a toddler at the time, Wittman would have gotten on the train that took people who looked like himself away" (TM 126). This fantasy points to Wittman's desire for a history affirming his significance, even if it means appropriating the pain of others.

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[55] Heidegger, in *Being and Time,* makes much of "idle," "small talk" as being an inauthentic or diverting approach to being in the world, one that also redirects us from the foundational nothingness that anxiety reveals. Wittman here too seems to be at least suspicious of idle chit chat. However, from a Cavellian angle, his detesting of "repetition" and idle talk seems to underscore his very trouble with authentically connecting with, of speaking the same language as others. That Lance merely laughs off Wittman here emphasizes this. Monk has a similar issue.

His anxiety is further complicated by Wittman's understanding of his own inadequacies, his feeling of ordinariness. The tension between his aspirations and the reality of his situation gnaws at him. “How to kill Lance and eat his heart, and plagiarize his stories? As a friend of the hero, you’re a sub-plot of his legend. When you want to be the star. And wear a beret,” Wittman bitterly muses. His frustration is magnified when he compares the grand journeys of the wealthy to his own constrained circumstances. “And go on vision quest, for which a Young Millionaire can afford plane rides to the other side of the world,” Wittman thinks glumly to himself, “The minimum-wage earner—the unemployed—goes for a walk in the park, where Wittman Ah Sing has had vision enough. Everything that comes in—that’s it. Foolish ape wants more vision” (TM 126). The envy of others’ tragedies becomes a reminder of his own perceived insignificance, a sense of foolishness in wanting more meaning when the world already threatens to overwhelm him.

Wittman’s fight against ordinariness, paired with his lashing out at those closest to him, reflects the anxiety of wanting to distinguish oneself while simultaneously yearning to belong. Lance and his friends represent a class of Asian Americans who have successfully navigated—and perhaps even capitalized on—the very structures that Wittman finds alienating. His argument with Lance regarding a “continuous fight at Lafayette Grammar school,” in reality, indicates a personal fight of Wittman to fit within the grammar of his immediate and national community and history (TM 117). Lance’s trauma, while undeniably devastating, also anchors him to a specific, though painful, narrative within American history. His experience of persecution grants him a tragic yet defined place in the American story, shaping a life narrative with a kind of determinable significance. Wittman, in stark contrast, embodies the anxiety of rootlessness that pushes him to envy even tragedy. Despite being five generations deep into America,Wittman feels adrift, lacking a clear context or a tangible sense of belonging. Though he may claim that he's "Got no money. Got no home. Got story," Wittman's anxiety is fueled by the absence of a story that gives his existence form and purpose (TM 175). What is certain, is that Wittman, facing in his anxiety, the "obstinacy of the 'nothing and nowhere within-the-world,'" is profoundly homeless (BT 231).

### *B. "I didn't know what to say to that": Monk's Anxiety of Incomprehensibility:*

Monk is almost as willfully monological, if not as theatrical as Wittman. Though a master of parody ironically cannot master the language or "form of life" that allows him to be part of a community. Monk recalls a memory of playing basketball at seventeen with some kids. Absorbed in thought, "considering the racist comments of Hegel concerning Oriental peoples and their attitude toward the freedom of the self,"[56] Monk is caught off guard when a teammate passes him the ball, prompting him to take "a wild and desperate shot which had no prayer of going in" (133–34). When his teammates demand to know "what [he] was thinking about," he admits, "Hegel... I was thinking about his theory of history," which is met with a wave of exasperation:

> "Get him."
> "Philosophy boy."
> "That's why he threw up that brick?"
> "Where the hell did you come from?"
> "What are you thinking about right now?"
> "You'd better Hegel on home." (E 133).

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[56] For more on this exact topic as indicating an "anxiety" in German thought, see Nicholas Germana's *The Anxiety of Autonomy and the Aesthetics of German Orientalism* (2017). Germana's work illustrates how Kant's and Hegel's belittling remarks on Eastern art and philosophy betray an "anxiety of autonomy" that reveals itself as an anxious effort to differentiate German (Occidental) culture from the Orient. Such an anxiety underpins German Idealist and Romantic thinkers conceptual frameworks of Self and Other as well as the limits of autonomy.

An alien in the moment— "where the hell did you come from"—makes the phrase "Hegel on home" particularly poignant. In context, the phrase serves as a condemnation of alienation. Distracted and stuck in the mud of the intellect, Monk becomes detached from the game at hand. He admits that he is "not very good" at it and does not find pleasure in "playing the game," going through the motions and merely "enjoy[ing] the exercise" (E 133). He is not present, hardly responsive within the context of the group activity. Yet, on a more abstract level, the phrase "Hegel on home" also reflects the nature of Hegel's dialectic, where consciousness winds its way toward a destination—toward some momentary realm or form of stability. It captures the spirit or mind's continuous attempt and anxious odyssey to find "home" through the buildup and breakdown of identities and interplay with non-identities.

Yet, as he admits, Monk is no good at dance or games, and is in almost every way unattuned to the communities he might be expected to belong to. "Anyone who speaks to members of his family knows," he asserts, "that sharing a language does not mean you share the rules governing the use of the language" (E 32). Initially, this statement seems benign—who hasn't misunderstood their family at times?[57] Yet Monk's alienation strikes deeper, digging a nearly pathological gulf between him and his kin. "No matter what is said, something else is meant," explains Monk, "…But since I didn't know the rules, which were forever changing, I could only know that [my sister] was trying to say something, not what that something was" (E 32). Monk's description of this interaction suggests not merely misunderstanding but a fundamental disconnect. When he observes his sister, recognizing that she is "trying to say something" but not understanding "what that something was," it feels more like watching than listening. This disconnection is not due to obliviousness or malice but a profound disjoint. As Cavell writes, "If the connection between 'our words' and 'what we mean' is a necessary one, this necessity is not established by universals, propositions, or rules, but by the form of life which makes certain stretches of syntactical utterance assertions" (CR 208). Monk exists outside this "form of life," unable to share in the context that binds his family. He may claim the rules change, but they cannot change so drastically. Monk cannot keep up because he cannot catch up—he remains perpetually outside. Despite his authorial stance, language, and with it, people, escape him.

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[57] In this sense, one might say the way Monk is most attuned to us, the way we most connect to Monk, is through the fact of his alienation.

Monk struggles to accept the conditions that others' forms of life entail. While he may, in theory, acknowledge "our finitude, our mortality, our separation from each other," he fails to go further. As Toril Moi glosses Wittgenstein, "I am trying to understand why you say what you say and do what you do; I can't just will away your form of life. On the contrary, I must accept it as the conditions of possibility for your words and acts" (RO 60). This acceptance is what Monk finds difficult. His inability to connect often stems from his own biases. When talking to a patient at his sister's practice, Monk is surprised by her knowledge of Hurston and Toomer, having assumed her to be clueless based on her economic status. Taken aback, he asks if she went to college. When she laughs, he encourages, "Don't laugh… I think you're really smart. You should at least try." She replies, "I didn't even finish high school." Monk mulls, "I didn't know what to say to that. I scratched my head and looked at the other faces in the room. I felt an inch tall because I had expected this young woman with the blue fingernails to be a certain way, to be slow and stupid, but she was neither. I was the stupid one." In the same scene, Monk's disconnection becomes clearer. Engaging in "small talk" with his sister's receptionist, he loses her. "Yvonne looked at me as if my words were getting lost in the space between us," Monk remembers, "She nodded her head without looking directly at me and went back to her work on the desk." He concludes, "I felt awkward, out of place, like I had so much of my life, like I didn't belong" (E 21). This alienation extends to his relationships. When he confesses, "Sometimes I feel like I'm so removed from everything, like I don't even know how to talk to people," his sister Lisa bluntly replies, "You don't. You never have." Monk's anxiety and inability to accept the forms of life that shape his interactions leave him isolated and adrift (E 26).

If, as Levinas asserts, conversation bridges the gap between two infinitely separated individuals, then the failure to communicate arises not from infinite meaning but from a lack of attunement—a failure to meet the other on common ground (Levinas 39). Monk, in his anxiety, cannot bridge the gap between himself and others, often self-sabotaging any relationship he comes close to making. This anxious pattern of insecurity and self-sabotage becomes painfully clear in his budding relationship with Marilyn, one of the few genuine connections he seems capable of forming. Just as they approach intimacy, Marilyn pauses to disclose that she has ended things with her ex-boyfriend, Clevon,[58] whom Monk met the night before. "The news pleased me," Monk admits, "but I was unsure how I was supposed to take it." The moment sours further when she confesses, "I have to tell you, though, that we slept together that night." Monk spirals, ruminating, “Why did she have to tell me that? I didn’t need to know it and I could have done quite well without knowing it.” His overthinking intensifies,“Had I not known, I would not have cared, but now all I could do was care. I cared about what he meant to her, about what I meant to her, about whether she was on top or he, about whether she had had an orgasm, more than one?, about the size of his penis, about the size of mine, about why she had told me” (E 187).

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[58] Clevon also happens to be the name of an older boy who bullies a young Monk at a teen party where has an awkward sexual experience.

Outwardly, he forces calm, “Well, those things happen, I guess.” Marilyn reassures him, “I realized he doesn’t mean anything to me.” They try to move forward, and for a moment, it seems the evening might be salvaged. Marilyn initiates intimacy: “She got up from her chair and came to me, bent at her waist and kissed me on the lips. She pulled me to my feet and led me by the hands into her bedroom, where again she kissed me. We rolled around a bit, gyrating and rubbing body parts with a level of arousal that was both refreshing and, sadly, stale, my understanding that the excitement was partly, at least, simply a function of newness” (E 187). Yet Monk remains detached, too cerebral to fully engage. Then his gaze lands on Marilyn’s nightstand, where a copy of Jenkins’s novel sits. “I stopped moving,” he narrates, triggering a rapid unraveling. His tone shifts to patronizing interrogation:

> “What did you like about the book?”
> “I don’t know. It was a good story, I guess. Lightweight stuff, but it was fun.”
> “It didn’t offend you in any way?” She stared at me for a couple of seconds, then said, with an attitude, “No.”

Monk presses further:

> “Have you ever known anybody who talks like they do in that book?”
> “What’s wrong with you?”
> “Answer the question.”

> "No, but so what? I just read through that dialect shit. I don't like the way you're talking to me."

Monk's attempt to apologize is disingenuous. "I'm sorry," he says, "feeling genuinely bad for having sounded like I was attacking. It's just that I find that book an idiotic, exploitive piece of crap and I can't see how an intelligent person can take it seriously." Marilyn, understandably hurt, recoils, "I think you should leave." Despite a feeble apology, Monk hears her cry as he leaves but finds "nothing to say" (E 188).

Much like Wittman, Monk's anxiety about his own performance both physical and intellectual, pervades his interactions, undermining his ability to connect meaningfully with others. His obsessive questioning—"whether she was on top or he, about whether she had had an orgasm, more than one?, about the size of his penis, about the size of mine, about why she had told me"—exposes a profound insecurity, which quickly pivots into an anxious critique of Marilyn's literary taste. His dismissive judgment, "I can't see how an intelligent person can take it seriously," becomes a defense mechanism, cloaking his vulnerabilities in intellectual superiority. Yet this performed detachment cannot mask the underlying tension, that is, Monk's inability to align his emotional insecurities with his intellectual ideals fractures his connections with others. His anxiety drives him to dismiss these connections, framing them as intellectually inferior, and yet are indicative of his inability to inhabit the communal forms of life that make such connections possible.

Even if he pretends otherwise, Monk's self-sabotaging tendencies are rooted in his anxiety that keeps him disconnected from any community he longs to join. Reflecting later, on "the stupid fight that had ended my brief, and no doubt short-lived-anyway, relationship with Marilyn," Monk claims his reaction wasn't just literary snobbery or disdain for Marilyn's taste. Rather it was driven by what Jenkins's novel represented *to* him *about* him. "I reacted because the book reminded me of what I had become, however covert," Monk justifies to himself, "And that was an overly ironic, cynical, self-conscious and yet faithful copy of Juanita Mae Jenkins." The novel comes to symbolize his deepest anxieties about the compromises he is making, the performativity he despises, and his inability to escape the systems he critiques. However, this "artistic" anxiety quickly collapses into into personal disparagement. He sighs, with fatalism, "Not only my situation but my constitution seemed to make me an unsuitable candidate for the most basic of friendships, new or old, and romantic involvement seemed nearly ridiculous to me" (E 221). This anxiety that he is unsuited for connection and is unloveable saturates Monk's self-perception, making every relationship feel predetermined for failure.

Yet even this admission feels insincere. Monk consistently throughout the novel finds others trying to connect with him. So Monk uses his supposed incapacity for connection as a shield from vulnerability. Monk paints his anxiety of intimacy, his anxiety of exposure, as rooted in some fundamental, unfixable flaw. In turn this excuses him from responsibility, framing his failures as inevitable rather than consequences of anxious withdrawal. His fight with Marilyn becomes emblematic of this pattern, where his anxious avoidance of intimacy ensures he remains isolated. Concluding there is "nothing to say," Monk absolves himself of the responsibility to repair the connection or acknowledge her emotions. His self-awareness does not lead to growth but instead becomes a protective mechanism, insulating him from accountability and intensifying his self-exile.

In fact, Monk's inability to be attuned with others corresponds to the failure of his satire to communicate effectively, something that, as we have seen, amplifies his anxiety about being misunderstood and isolated exponentially. His satire becomes less a mode of connection and more a test, like Wittman's own humor, of his audience's perceptiveness. After completing *Fuck*, under its original title *My Pafology*, Monk refuses to flag it as parody, telling his editor,

> "Send it out."
> "Straight or with some kind of qualification? Do you want me to tell them it's a parody?"
> "Send it straight… If they can't see it's a parody, fuck them" (E 132).

Written in fury, *Fuck* aims to eviscerate the "ghetto" novel genre and its claims to realism, to the world. Nonetheless, while we may wish, along with Monk, that the audience would understand it as parody, parody often requires flagging itself as such. However, Monk refuses to put his name on the book, declaring it "a book on which I knew I could never put my name" (E 62). This refusal, driven by his hubris and desire to protect himself, ensures that Fuck is taken at face value, transforming it into what Fritz Gysin identifies as "a commercial success due to its failure as a parody." Without his name or any flags of intent, the satire collapses into the very spectacle it was designed to critique. As Görey writes, "The fact that he had meant the book to be a parody of such books becomes an utterly empty gesture as the irony is totally lost" (Görey 94). Monk's refusal to acknowledge the work reiterates his larger failure to acknowledge others and his own complicity. Farebrother notes, "satire's political implications are realized only at the point of reception," making it "dependent on the interpretive competence of informed, engaged readers" (117). Yet *Fuck* is deliberately opaque, lacking "the third person, who… bears witness by his laughter," which would denote the joke as such (Freud 122 qtd. Mackin 526). As Farebrother concludes, “While *Erasure* satirizes America’s eagerness to consume racialized images of the ghetto, especially within an increasingly commodified literary marketplace, it also dramatizes the limits of satire” (117-119).

The irony is that *Fuck*’s success as parody depends on being mistaken for the real thing. As Greil Marcus writes, “What transpires is a wonderful, hideous joke—but no matter how hard Thelonious Ellison tries, *My Pafology*... is not a joke. Ellison can disrespect anyone who might read an idiot satire like *My Pafology* as real life... but he cannot disrespect words.” Monk’s refusal to sign the work and his decision not to contextualize it for his readers displays frustration with cultural literacy and anxieties over (mis)recognition. *Fuck*, in turn, becomes “a failed conception,” an “unformed fetus,” even masturbatory, not simply because of its quality, but because Monk refuses to put his name for it (E 62). Ironically, because this inauthentic work is taken as the real thing, the recognition of the work isolates Monk further. The fate of Monk’s satire thus parallels his issues with acknowledgment and connection. His refusal to take responsibility and risk exposure foreclose any possibility of dialogue that would bridge the gap between himself and his audience. Worse, he finds himself having to participate in the toxic racial spectacle his work critiques, mostly for money, while ironically no longer being in control of the joke. As much as Fuck critiques commodification, Monk’s failure to communicate ensures his work becomes complicit in it. In his refusal to guide its reception, Monk’s satire not only reinforces the stereotypes it seeks to dismantle but also reproduce the personal anxieties that keep him misread and misreading, both in his art and in his life.

## Conclusion: "You never left my hand": Navigating Anxiety and the Fragile Journey Back to Connection

Wittman and Monk in their struggle find an authentic position within a society marred by a narrowing racial constriction and fall into an anxious self-exile. Distrusting any one to speak for them, they in turn speak for no one, in essence becoming dislocated and divorced from any community. Each becomes nomadic, extracted from the weave of their life and the grammar of their societies, even as they pine for a sense-making place within them. America's destructive racial framework encourages such dislocation. And yet, as we have seen with David, those whom America deems outside can also be outsiders even within their own community. From feelings of anxious precarity arises a self-violence, a suspicion—not quite to the point of full paranoia, but certainly anxiously shaping their actions—that sets individuals on constant alert, anxiously trying to secure ground. Unable in their separate ways to make themselves vulnerable, each protagonist isolates himself either through hypervigilance or withdrawal. While these actions are responses to a racist American society, the protective mechanisms used by Wittman and Monk perpetuate the gap between them and the world. Anxious at the prospect of rebuff or victimization, each undermines their search for community by putting up self-protective walls, making attunement out of reach, and leaving them all the more anxious. In such circumstances, they balm their anxiety through either believing themselves to be uncontainable forces or unrelatable and uncommunicative.

However, anxious feelings of divorce, complete privacy, and outsiderness are troubled by the nature of their inevitable entanglement. Even when we feel out of joint with the world, we cannot fail to act and exist in that world. As Kierkegaard reminds us, it is entangled freedom that constitutes our anxious existence. This sense of being entangled yet alienated flows through a story from *The Journey to the West* that Wittman tells his cast. "Ah Monkey is bragging to Tripitaka." Sun Wukong, the Great Sage Equal of Heaven boasts to Tripitaka, "I crashed the party in the sky, and ate up the food. I've been cooked in the pot on the moon. I'm a chase-master, and catch arrows in my teeth. I climb skyscrapers. I bet you I can polevault over those clouds." Tripitaka challenges him, "I bet that you can't clear this hand." Taking the bet, Monkey "polevaults into the sky. Clouds go by. The moon and sun and stars go by. He arrives on a mass of pink-and-white ether and meteorite dust. If this were a decent theater, he would be up in the catwalk." Believing he has reached "the white columns that hold up the sky," Monkey tags his presence on a mountain, writing, "The Greatest Wisest Man wuz here." With characteristic impudence, he unzips and takes a piss. Confident in his victory, he returns to earth, bragging, "I jumped clear of your hand and your head and of Earth… all the way to the top of the sky" (TM 285). But Tripitaka retorts, "Fool ape, ...you never left my hand." He holds his hand to the monkey's nose—and to the audience—who recoil at the smell of "monkey piss." Tripitaka shows the ink on his middle finger and, "With thumb and finger, he picks up the monkey, and lowers him into his other hand." Tripatatika sneers,

> "Do you see the tiny monkey on my hand? See? See? A teenyweeny gorilla? See his little hat with the feathers? See his cute tail?" Like King Kong with Fay Wray in his hand, but vice versa. At the table where the bee had sat, he suddenly smashes his hand down. Bang! The audience jumped, some let out a scream, and laughed. "A mountain holds Ah Monkey imprisoned for five hundred years." (James Dean covers with his red windbreaker the toy monkey broken in the gutter.) (TM 286)

Wittman's retelling of Sun Wukong's story casts himself as the Monkey punished for his hubris, emphasizing entrapment over overconfidence. However, it also becomes a parable about his anxieties about his precarious position in America as a raced individual. Like Sun Wukong, who wields godlike powers, Wittman finds that no effort can free him from societal constraints. America wagers with minority subjects, promising that if they surmount barriers, they will find freedom and a place at the table. Yet, no matter how high they leap, they remain trapped in America's palm. His retelling becomes a tragicomic commentary on the futility of escaping America's interpellating and assimilating forces. Wittman inverts the roles of "King Kong with Fay Wray in his hand, but vice versa," showing how the seemingly delicate white world holds power over minority aspirations. If the original King Kong myth conveyed anxieties about miscegenation, Wittman's version accents how America holds the minority subject threateningly.

It is an anxious state when the vision of autonomy and meritocracy crashes into brutal reality. As Priscilla Wald contends, such artists, and artist figures, suffer an "anxiety surrounding the conceptualization of personhood," of those identities "suppressed and repressed by the official stories of 'We the People'" (Wald 4). For Monk and Wittman, not only are these stories not accurately told, but they are made more anxiety-inducing by their cooption into a "We" within which they do not actually see themselves. As Laugier understands, "anxieties about 'what *we* say' appears when we ask ourselves not only what it is to say, but what this *we* is. How do I, myself, know what we say in such or such circumstances? In what way is the language that I speak, inherited from others, mine?" (Laugier, emphasis added). For Wittman and Monk, who expresses them, is never a “we” they recognize as including them, yet one speaks on their behalf any way. Moreso, the question of “we” concerns how the voice is both a subjective and general expression: it is what makes it possible for my individual voice to become shared,” then to be unclear of belonging to “we” risks our becoming voiceless (Laugier).

Refused their genuine claim to America and unwilling to define themselves solely through reductive notions of race, Wittman and Monk strive to create authentic selves, yet struggle to belong to a “we” that would give weight to that sense of self. Like Wittman’s broken toy monkey covered by James Dean’s red windbreaker symbolizes his failed rebellion against societal norms, both characters, despite their actions, find themselves within the conventions he seeks to dismantle. Though both Kingston’s and Everett's novels argue for inclusion, each shows how the desire to belong is complicated by structures that simultaneously promise and deny access. The “fist of the universe” in Wittman's retelling of Sun Wukong is America's racial prison, where to escape, individuals may try to anxiously withdraw or attack. In either case, individuals like Wittman and Monk in their anxiety remove themselves from community in order to find a position outside or above its contamination. In seeking such a position, they exile themselves from the world and others, recoiling at having to respond to a fallen, imperfect world. Yet, if the world makes no sense to them, it is also the only world in which we make sense. They find that instead of leaping over, they must make the qualitative leap forward.

In such a compromised world, what actions would save them or make us less anxious may elude individuals. Even while wishing for community, it is unclear in a fallen, in this case, racist, world, what communities are left untainted by a toxic environment. The essential issue becomes knowing how to go on, or rather how to return to community once a break has been made. As Cavell writes in terms of the Comedy of Remarriage, an ethical coming together depends upon an anxious break and passage through alienation. For marriage to be a free and legitimate act, it must spring from divorce or separation. Cavell argues that a "legitimate marriage requires that the pair is free to marry, that there is no impediment between them; but this freedom is announced in these film comedies in the concept of divorce" (PH 102-03). His conception operates on multiple levels, addressing relationships between individuals and our internal recommitment to ourselves and the world. This involves facing the threat of exposure and the anxiety of our entanglement with an uncertain, unguaranteed world. Individuals must face the "fatality" of expression and action, even amidst groundless nothingness and cruelty.

It is fitting that two characters at odds with their worlds and in exile end their stories on a public stage, semi-returning home. As *Tripmaster Monkey*'s narrator reflects, "Anybody American who really imagines Asia feels the loneliness of the U.S.A. and suffers from the distances human beings are apart" (TM 141). Against loneliness, this distance between humans that marks America, Wittman seems to come in from the cold, ending his journey surrounded by community and begins to suture his multi-cultural identity. He returns his lost grandmother, Popo—a symbol of an abjected "foreign" past—back home; he stages a play involving nearly every character we've met throughout the novel; and he has an actual remarriage of sorts with Taña, after a falling out over the concept of "being a wife." Wittman must overcome his own blockages to let another into his life. Wittman exclaims, "The marriage is about two months old. I know what will happen next. I'm going to stay married to her; we're going to grow old... Taña, if you're listening in the wings, you're free to leave if you want to leave me. But I'll always love you unromantically. I'll clean up the place, I get the hint. You don't have to be the housewife. I'll do one-half of the housewife stuff. But you can't call me your wife. You don't have to be the wife either. See how much I love you? Unromantically but" (TM 339). He must put aside his warring tendencies against the world and himself to manifest change. As Cavell writes, "The price he will have to pay is, in his turn, that of change as well; he requires a move that will leave him different and, therefore, not different (because otherwise what would he be different from?)." That is, he must find a way of coming to peace with things, not resorting to self-protective stoicism or self-annihilation. "He must," as Cavell suggests, "come to stand to himself in, say, the relation that remarriage stands to marriage, succeeding himself" (PH 259).

For Wittman, embracing a life of repetition paradoxically pushes him forward while affirming the world daily. Yet he is anxious about falling into patterns and denies repetition. "Repeating himself already," Wittman ridicules himself, while speaking with Nanci, "One of his rules for maintaining sincerity used to be: Never tell the same story twice. He changed that to: Don't say the same thing in the same way to the same person twice. Better to be dead than boring" (TM 19). For Wittman, sincerity requires avoiding patterns and mechanical movements. His constant changes and manic transformations reflect his anxiety to be sincere and authentic. However, these movements deny authenticity by preventing any stable structure, effectively denying the ordinary. In this denial of identity, he also denies community or communion.

To overcome the “craving for revenge against human condition (our separateness)” that hinders togetherness and “reconciliation,” we must embrace the “comic ‘Yes’ to human finitude,” and thus repetition (Hammer 111). Embracing organic repetition becomes the hallmark of the communal. Meaningful change occurs alongside repetition; we cannot change without a stable sense of self or community. Wittman comes to learn that against anxious isolation that withdraws in exile, we must “do something communal” (TM 141). In putting on his grand, multi-night play, begins to understand that “[c]ommunity is not built once-and-for-all; people have to imagine, practice, and recreate it (TM 306). Such repetition and recreation delineates a “happy return to the ordinary,” from anxious exile, where instead of “vain hopes of continual renewal or nostalgic dreams of returning to the past,” there is “an unconditional willingness to accept the repetitiveness of the diurnal and the daily and thus a faith in the domesticity of the domestic.” By doing so, we pass through anxiety to make the leap toward the communal in an “ecstatic affirmation in the bliss of the shared joke,” a “vision of joy [that is] the life of the ordinary—ordinary life” (Hammer 112).

By the end of his journey, Monk finds his way back to his community, though less stably. He must emerge from self-splitting parody and isolating irony into a communal realm, opening himself to exposure. At the Book Award ceremony, he divulges himself, reconciling his split personality by taking ownership of his creation. Walking to the stage, Monk enters a hallucinatory state that suggests reentry into community and recovery of self. Monk observes, “The faces of my life, of my past, of my world became as real as the unreal [judges] and the corporations and their wives and they were all talking to me, saying lines from novels that I loved, but when I tried to repeat them to myself, I faltered, unable to recall them" (E 293). In the convergence of past and present faces, Monk's fragmented identity begins to coalesce, even as his faltering recall signifies the overwhelming nature of his experiences and the disintegration of barriers he erected between himself and others. Stewart writes that "[t]he anxiety that attends Monk's walk to the podium... looks something like a nervous breakdown." However, he clarifies, "his anxiety is attributable not to the dissolution of his own personality but to the insanity of the reception of Fuck and his loss of control over a fictional persona…." Yet, through this breakdown, Monk's walls give way, allowing his literary, familial, and past worlds to meld. As Stewart notes, "Monk's contentment in his psychic communion with his family... demonstrates a sense of relief, a fully integrated personality... as he sees the prospect of his performance finally coming to an end" (Stewart, "Giving," 184). Monk's hallucinations serve not just as a symptom of anxiety but also as a means of reintegration. The convergence of his multiple identities suggests a move toward self-acceptance and a tentative reconnection with his community.

However, both Wittman and Monk's stories end ambiguously. While they feel a return that quells some anxiety, it does not change them completely. For Wittman, after his long monologue, amid his play's festivity and remarriage announcement to Taña, he keeps one eye on the door. Although "he was having a good time," feeling confident that "[h]e still had choices of action, more maybe," these include possibilities "[i]f he wanted to drop out and hide out." The community still does not fully understand him, projecting their desires onto him. Wittman realizes, "Out of all that mess of talk, people heard 'I love you' and 'I'll always love you'" and that about dying and still loving after a lifelong marriage. They took Wittman to mean that he was announcing his marriage to Taña, and doing so with a new clever wedding ritual of his own making" dismays Wittman. Indeed, "Wittman's community was blessing him, whether he liked it or not" (TM 340).

For Monk, while his story may end with him smiling into a camera, this action ironically reproduces end of *Fuck*. Further, the *Erasure* concludes with Newton's statement, "*hypotheses non fingo*" [I make no hypothesis], leaving ambiguity. Thus, their return to community does not promise permanent reprieve; anxiety may reemerge, shattering us and forcing recollection, divorcing us from loved ones and the world, and goading us back to them. As Cavell writes, you "cannot achieve reciprocity by telling your story to the whole rest of the world." Instead, we must "act... within your connection with others, forgoing the wish for a place outside... There is no place to go... to acquire the authority of connection... And yet, in matters of the heart, to make things happen, you must let them happen" (PH 109). We must let ourselves be loved and acknowledged, even if incomprehensible to others, and not let anxiety silence us. Cavell notes, "To let yourself matter is to acknowledge... that you want the other to care... that your expressions... are yours, that you are in them." We must not let anxiety leave us in exile but see gaps in language as opportunities for communion. He continues, "This means allowing yourself to be comprehended... to acknowledge your body... to be yours, you on earth, all there will ever be of you" (CR 383). Moving through anxiety into community, individuals allow themselves to be known and others to care for them. They move past divorce to freely chosen remarriage, turning tragedy into shared comedy, as Cavell says, "to be [our] own dowry," to "give yourself" (PH 104).

What Wittman and Monk's stories of racial struggle show is exactly how hard this admission of worth, and giving of self can be, and how anxiously dislocated one might feel, in a world where both individuality and relation feels utterly compromised. In a world where both local and national communities demand racial minorities to perform to external expectations, the anxiety of belonging and being authentic run up against each other. This schism of outsiderness and in-betweenness, according to *Tripmaster Monkey* and *Erasure*, creates a divorce both within the individual and between them and their community. Without a sense of being able to authentically be a part of any community, communication seems to fail. Individuals, uncertain and anxious over who may speak for them and who they speak for, who may represent them, may withdraw either literally or in attack, from communal engagement. Yet this withdrawal can never be complete, and individuals must act in a world deemed fallen and contaminating, both by necessity, but also if they are to make sense, to have a voice. Thus, while the world may prove corrupted, individuals must anxiously find their way back to some sort of community. It is an anxious condition consisting of the break, through which individuals must pass, if they are to reintegrate into true relation. Though America may still threaten to crush them in its palm, Wittman and Monk have at least begun the efforts of finding their way back to a sense-making community, of finding some sort of home. Perhaps, at least, they have begun to allow themselves to matter.

# CHAPTER 4

# "...I MEAN IF THE WATER'S BAD, THE HELL WITH IT: EVERYTHING ELSE IS BAD": COMMUNAL COLLAPSE AND DEMOCRATIC ANXIETY IN *THE LOST SCRAPBOOK* AND *FLEE*

## Introduction: "What will become of… Of everything that I—?"

"I have laid in wrought-iron trusses for miles, many miles of pipeways underneath this city's streets. I have helped replace literally hundreds of traffic lights all through these interchanges [...][59] And that anti-radio noise initiative, and I have three children… I do not need to list further," ruminates one voice amid the slow draining of the New England college town Anderburg in 2008, "…And now? What will become of... Of everything that I--? Does it mean noth--" (F 81). In Isaura, Missouri two decades earlier, where the groundwater has been poisoned by its patron photo chemical manufacturer, Ozark, a mother panics over her decision to breastfeed. "—Blame myself, but I did it, I wanted to," she despairs,

> I thought it was right and natural and lovely, that it would forge and seal a closeness between us that could not otherwise be reached, and just the image of it was so beautiful, so tender, so moving, when I thought about it, his smallness and my giving, and my holding him to me, against me, and the tiny tugging, the essential giving—*but what was I giving?, what was I giving; I have been drinking this water for twenty-two years so tell me what was I giving*—(LS 368-69).

These two voices, respectively from Evan Dara's *Flee* (2013) and *The Lost Scrapbook* (1995), express minds churning in anxiety. These citizens, having intimately given themselves, either infrastructurally to their communities or nurturingly to their families, find to their horror that their certainty and worlds are voided, their contributions alienated or tainted by unease. Faced with the erosion of stability and community, each voice anxiously stammers in their attempts to make some new sense of the world out of the wreckage of communal collapse. In the angst-laden broodings of *The Lost Scrapbook* and *Flee*, we find voices attempting to reason their way out of the collapse of reason itself, painfully realizing that they have grounded their lives in a conception of the world that is both unstable and devastating. Their contributions lose meaning, or cause unintended harm, as their communities crumble when the entities they trust ultimately demean and betray them. Seeking belonging, they are left with shame, despair, and noise. Thus, both novels foreground anxiety as citizens grapple with the disintegration of the systems they once trusted, offering a panoramic view of society where this dread becomes the common currency of a tragically shared, anxious existence.

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[59] Since Dara makes frequent use of ellipses and dashes, I have noted in brackets when I am eliding text.

However, while this dread may be common throughout Dara's societies, this anxious spirit is both sparked by and generates atomization of each town's citizenry. As already demonstrated by Kierkegaard, and later Heidegger, anxiety is founded predominantly in our and as "entangled freedom," a freedom that depends upon its responsiveness to the world even when without reason. Anxiety's entangled freedom accordingly also signals a social entanglement as much as an existential one. The entangled freedom of anxiety marks it as a *social* anxiety in as much as we must act socially, fated to expression even in our attempted withdrawal. Thus, our anxious entanglement in the social world is at once an anxiety of interdependence on and interpenetration with others and our angst over their claims upon us. Dara demonstrates that societal fragility corresponds to an anxiety of interdependence and interpenetration embedded in the social fabric. Here, interactions are marked by suspicion, avoidance, and a refusal to acknowledge each other or our shared vulnerability.

This mistrust and avoidance underpins the fragmentation of society, as individuals withhold and withdraw into themselves, further eroding communal bonds. If without community, we are without reason, then the fragile communities marked by social atomization in Dara's novels provide only precarious grounding for sensemaking. Though of course part of a "form of life," each citizen's tacit or explicit denial of the communal weakens the stability such a "form of life" could provide. This state, Dara's novels suggest, is part of the fragility of the already anxious state of democracy when this anxiety drives us to mutual mistrust. An anxiety of interdependence fuels individual atomization, eroding the ethical and economic foundations of communal life. As anxiety intensifies, it creates a cycle of distress, amplifying the strain on social structures.

Paradoxically, in their anxious pursuit of liberation from mutual dependence, individuals ironically surrender their agency to vast, impersonal systems and/or embrace cynical forms of economic and biological scientism that remove their own responsibility to others. Such abdication and withdrawal play into a "clockwork" of "perverse incentives" (Kolb, *Financial Crisis* xii) that poison the communal, economic, and ecological "hidden currents" (Keynes 16) that flow beneath and through each citizen. When these once seemingly untouchable systems give way, they expose how our fate is bound to others, instilling a deep, inarticulable dread. As the picture of the world we held, upon which we staked our stability, deteriorates in the aftermath, we anxiously scramble to re-ground and reorient ourselves. Unfortunately, we can only do so with the very tools that have lost their meaning in this deterioration. Dara's characters, as the bottom falls out of their worlds, discover that the mechanisms they trusted consume them, and carry on without them, leaving citizens adrift. Hence, when the world bottoms out, we are not suddenly plunged into nothingness, but rather, as "anxiety reveals the nothing," we are forced to confront the "groundlessness of our grounds" (WIM 101; Braver 11). This dread-driven need for reconstruction compels us to recognize the social nature of our constructs and face the unsettling reality of our interdependence, a reality we frequently attempt to hide through what Stanley Cavell diagnoses as avoidance.

Dara's work illustrates how the anxiety over our responsibility and consequence to others herd individuals towards self-insulating exile that fragments community. Further, Their[60] novels present how individuals, in anxiously avoiding responsibility to each other, would rather embrace dehumanizing systems that undermine both their agency and democracy as a whole, leading to the destruction of both. As these systems break down, they trigger a new panic that underscores our interdependence while deepening isolation, thrusting citizens into a realm of uncertainty, not just about their fate, but about others as well. Anxiety magnifies the terror of daily interactions, from a trembling handshake to the incalculable unknown in our neighbor's mind. Accordingly, the question is not what a correct view of the world should be. Rather, Dara's work engages with Cavell's insistence that the critical issue is not merely the skepticism and uneasiness we feel toward others and our shared reality, but why we feel this way and the consequences of feeling so. The problem is not in proving or disproving our inner separateness, but why we cling to this confusion and conviction. Dara's style of primarily constructing Their novels out of paratactic and interrupting voices, aesthetically mirrors this sense of societal fragmentation and atomization. As these separate voices tend not to make sense by themselves in their breaking off, but only when joined to the statements of other separated voices (by the reader), Dara shows that our experience of separateness, while encouraged by society, is ultimately a false picture that holds us captive.[61]

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[60] As I discuss below, we immediately run up against an anxious ambiguity with the author Evan Dara in terms of their identity and how to refer to them. As "Evan Dara" is a pseudonym and very little is known about the author including what their gender is, I will be referring to "Evan Dara" in the capitalized, singular-plural They/Them/Their.

Within the context of Evan Dara's novels, this chapter illustrates how anxiety generates and is generated by itself as avoidance, denial, and separation in democratic societies. In doing so, it specifically tackles the questions of: How does anxiety change our relations to each other and democratic society? How does anxiety relate to interpersonal skepticism and avoidance in democratic societies? And though anxiety may be the heart of democratic fragility, can the beginnings of a renewal emerge based upon a shared understanding of anxiety? I begin by looking at the critical reception of Dara's work, identifying how often critics betray a critical anxiety in the way they repeat the same inability of Dara's citizens to fully listen when faced with the ambiguity and the weight of responsiveness. The second section outlines how each town of *The Lost Scrapbook* and *Flee* are constructed around logics of anxious avoidance and isolation. These societies embody the precarious, anxiety-ridden nature of democracy and the social contract, and in turn, show our ties to each other can be easily undone. We then move on to two contradicting but entwined forms of anxious avoidance, both of which give an illusion of absolving responsibility, or having no impact ("no thesis"): first, the subliming of systems that take responsibility off the individual and second, the fetishization of independence that remove individuals from intercourse. Accordingly, the third section looks at how individuals in these societies, in anxiously trying to avoid their responsibilities to each other, choose forms of inaction or self-diminution.

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[61] See PI See Wittgenstein PI §115.

By either putting their faith in sublimed systems, whether economic or evolutionary, or denying their own power to affect anybody, citizens try to avoid their responsibility. Dara's citizens do this often by refusing to put forth a Hegelian thesis, that is, a movement that necessarily has a counter effect or elicits response. This idea is further explored in the fourth section, where conversely, citizens assert their absolute individualism. Such assertions of individualism expose an anxiety of interdependence, and the "anxiety of exposure" that comes with it, that lead citizens to enact the violence of what Cavell calls "soul-blindness." Dara's novels show that people, unable to respond to one another's humanity, operate in a climate where reliance on others is viewed as a threat. Section five examines the disorientation that occurs when all of these anxious attempts at denying interdependence and asserting individualism fail and catastrophizing panic sweeps over in disaster. In this way, Dara's narratives capture the tragic outcomes of Cavell's "avoidance of love." By the end of each novel, David's realization in *Call It Sleep*, to "Never believe. Not anything," echoes throughout the ghost towns of Isaura and Anderburg, where citizens learn that "Everything shifts. Everything changes," and that "the whole world could break into a thousand little pieces" (CIS 103; 55). By attempting to create sublimed grounds only to see them fail, they repeat the anxious cycle of construction, de-construction, reconstruction found in *Call It Sleep,* though hope of fruitful reconstruction remains uncertain.

Nevertheless, while in each novel's world society crumbles in the overwhelm of panic, a certain anxious poetry emerges that, while a product of societal dissolution, also hints at, however dimly, a possible way in which anxiety can also lead to a stronger bonding. As anxiety reveals how easily our world may de-construct, this chapter argues that this very anxious need to reconstruct in that de-construction's wake has the potential to rearticulate both self and community, forming a fragile but vital foundation for democracy. The shattering of the world, while filling us with dread, compels us to reconstruct out of that anxiety. It requires a movement from and through Heidegger's sense of anxiety's "possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all," of death, to Kierkegaard's vision of anxiety as freedom's "possibility of possibility" (BT 307; CA 42). However, in Dara's novels, this renewal is not found within the portrayed communities, but rather requires readers to actively engage with his fragmented narratives and embrace shared responsibility, by rejoining atomized voices into communal coherence.

## I. "Fungibility and Replaceability": Critical Response and the Anxiety of Listening

"Listen to me," demands the first voice we hear in *The Lost Scrapbook,* a small plea to be understood (*LS* 6). Such pining could be said to be that of Dara novels themselves and functions as their general slogan. "…Yes, you are listening…" crackles another voice over a car speaker, through the page, against and through the grain of other voices, its driver seeing how far his radio signal will travel:

> …You are there…
>
> …And I am here….
>
> …And that, for you, is the problem…
> …that is *precisely* the problem… (LS 75)

Evan Dara's novels expose how our inability to listen and respond ethically reflects the societal breakdowns They depict. Yet They also place a demand on the reader to confront the problem of this distance between people–as well as between author and reader–through developing a more attuned sense of what one might call "anxious-listening," like one of Isaura's nervous mothers (LS 344). Anxiety permeates Dara's works, as both characters and readers alike stagger in disorientation and fragmentation in their quest to find a steady foothold. Dara's own fragmented and radically paratactic aesthetic that thrives on ambiguity and insists upon close attention and even vulnerability from the reader in making their interpretations. As such, Dara's work sparks both admiration and critical anxiety, as readers strain to make sense of the scattered voices and perspectives. Indeed, Dara, prodigiously elusive and using a pseudonym, provides no authorial grounding for readers upon which readers might anchor their readings. All of which leaves critics in the uneasy position of ambiguous not-knowing.

For we know nothing about Evan Dara aside from Their work and Their own proclamation that They are an "American writer living in France" (LeClair 1996).[62] Dara uses a pseudonym and is associated with Their privately owned press, Aurora, *potentially* run with one other member (LeClair 2008). Surpassing even Pynchon and Gaddis in reclusiveness, Dara's avoidance of media attention and interviews may explain why Their work has been largely neglected by the image-obsessed American media, despite garnering an online following. An author of four novels and a play, Dara's work only maintains a budding academic audience. Indeed, all of this not-knowing makes our relationship to Dara particularly fraught, as it brings to the fore Levinas's understanding that of our relationship with others, that we are in a "relationship with a being infinitely distant," who in their mystery, "overflo[w]" any totalizing conception. As such, Dara, like the Other, confronts us with our own limitations, "put[ting] the spontaneous freedom within us into question," by challenging our interpretive authority yet calling us to ethical and engaged responsiveness (Levinas 47). Certainly it is an anxious demand that may make us recoil into ourselves, withdrawing ourselves from the conversation, the text, or dominating and dimiuating the other to fit our expectations.

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[62] Though even this may be outdated as Dara's press appears to be run out of Italy.

Dara's career, as far as we know, began in 1995 with *The Lost Scrapbook*, a novel of ecological disaster hailed, perhaps by itself, as "arguably the most highly praised, but least known, American debut of the last several decades" (LS, backcover). After reissuing this debut, Dara released *The Easy Chain* (2008), a novel "told with a certain 'gee-whiz' earnestness," blending a Horatio Alger tale with a satire of the hollowness of early-2000s entrepreneurial culture (Roth 2021). In the novel, the central character, "capitalist superhero Lincoln Selwyn...everyone's indispensable conduit, connector, influencer, adman, and pal," exists only as the novel's silent absent, mirrored disco ball-center around whom the lives of those surrounding him revolve. We receive the story of his rise and fall in Chicago high society through piecing together through refraction in the constant pitching, gossiping, and reminiscing of others (Roth 2021). In 2013, Dara returned with *Flee*, a paratactic parable of the 2008-2009 financial crisis, focusing on the bleeding out of a college town, Anderburg, following the dissolution of its centralizing college, narrated primarily in real time primarily through cascades of voices. 2018 saw Dara experiment with drama in *Provisional Biography of Mose Eakins*, followed by the

2021 novel *Permanent Earthquake*, an enigmatic story about an perpetually quaking island. However, as *The Lost Scrapbook* introduces and educates readers of Dara's techniques and concerns, it is useful to briefly discuss its reception and aesthetic.

In spite of being chosen by William T. Vollmann as the winning entry in Fiction Collective Two's annual novel contest, and sporting "fulsome praise" from Richard Powers across its first edition backcover, Dara's debut novel (that we know of) initially came and went unnoticed.[63] Upon publication, *The Lost Scrapbook* received only one notable review, a positive, if patronizing, article by Tom LeClair. Nevertheless, despite its "praise," LeClair's review can be seen as a guide on how *not* to approach Dara's work. Dara's debut, writes LeClair, while "push[ing] the bar back upward towards *Recognitions*-height," is ultimately a foolhardy attempt to "vault" readers "into an insistently bookish book, a dangerous and courageous attempt in an age of Web browsers and Net servers." It is fitting for a review of a novel where themes of blindness and reductionist zeal permeate each overlapping voice, that LeClair both praises and attempts to rein in Dara's experimental narrative. "I'd hate to see *The Lost Scrapbook* lost for 30 years, as *The Recognitions* went unrecognized," sighs LeClair, "because Dara is a consummate ventriloquist of our times voices and a remarkable ringmaster of our culture's circus acts […] two kinds of live performers [that] are a little dated [as] are scrapbooks."

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[63] Powers wrote, "Several kilos of transatlantic, boat-rate typescript arrived on my stoop without prior warning of contents, and I've been grateful ever since. Dara shows how a novel can be experimental, yet moral, rule breaking but emotional, and post-humanist while still remaining deeply human. This scrapbook builds in stretches until the whole police blotter cum family album lies open in aerial view. Monumental, unforgiving, cunning and heartfelt, it lets no one off the hook, least of all the reader." Bizarrely, unnecessarily, and almost certainly wrongly, at least one blogger has tried to identify Dara as Richard Powers (Steve Russillo 2008, "Steve's *Easy Chain* page").

Yet more than anything, LeClair seems to reject the novel's unconventional structure, particularly its "bifurcated" nature, arranged temporally in inverse order. *The Lost Scrapbook* narrates the downfall of Isaura, Missouri, a town predicated upon the Ozark photo chemical company, which ultimately destroys the land and water supply.[64] However, this "conventional" storyline begins on page 327 and concludes less than 200 pages later. The majority of the preceding pages consist of vignettes and voices blending together in the aftermath of the disaster. "If ecology had preceded psychology in *The Lost Scrapbook*," writes LeClair, "much of Dara's self-consciousness would have been unnecessary." Consequently, LeClair argues that in order for readers to "fully appreciate" Dara's novel, they needed to be supplied with "more substantial and earlier help." Indeed, LeClair barely acknowledges Dara's debut as a novel at all (LeClair 1996).

However, critique is shortsighted. Dara's novels are not mere experiments, but are responsive novels of listening. In other words, Dara's works demand that we find a mode of listening that reconstructs a world, a story, a person out of such scraps of language. Only if Dara's work focused solely on tracing trauma's cause and effect would LeClair's criticisms of over self-consciousness be valid. Yet characterizing Dara's novels as excessively self-conscious overlooks the significance of the novel's careful treatment of consciousness itself. Before the "story" can begin, to understand the novel, we must understand the game(s) Dara's novel plays. Before encountering any traditional narrative, readers must be taught how to read *The Lost Scrapbook,* something that in turn serves as a gateway to understanding the rest of Dara's corpus.

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[64] Perhaps inspired by Times Beach, Missouri, poisoned by North Eastern Pharmaceuticals and Chemicals Co. and evacuated by 1985, the name "Eye-Sore" references the land's degradation by Ozark, a photo-chemical company, the initial symptoms of chemical spillage, and the blinding power of a picture.

This education is not delivered by an omniscient narrator but involves learning to listen to and put in dialogue the atomized voices that carry the novel forward. As Jeremy Green writes, "The novel's strategy of textual flow effectively wages war on discrete and sealed particles of meaning," presenting itself paratactically, instead of in "self-sufficient units," and thus "always pressing the reader to comprehend in ever-widening, if fractured contextual frames" (Green 191). That is, Dara never allows us to simply rest upon one voice to ground our interpretation, but requires us instead to fight against our impulse towards "discrete and sealed off particles of meaning" by linking the seemingly disparate voices and interpretive lenses that They blend together. This is what accounts for the novel's experimental form, which Kirkus Reviews described (though mainly only the first part of) as like "watching television, with someone else in command of the remote control, flashing through stations, sometimes long enough to get involved in a narrative, at other times the image just a wash of color" (Kirkus 1995). While there is some truth to the assertion that the novel progresses through a sort of "literary-channel surfing," to understand these *television* channels misses the mark (Publisher's Weekly 1995). Instead, Dara's debut novel, riddled with critiques of "unstoppable scorched-earth campaign" of the eye—that "stupid [...] organ," "stealer of sense"—and the ear's exile, signals a closer affinity to the voiceful, "living medium […] of exchange" that of *radio* (LS 51).

As Green succinctly describes it, *The Lost Scrapbook* "is an immense collage of voices, a heteroglot and decentered assemblage of speech in various modalities—minilectures, soliloquies, anecdotes, rambling conversations, official statements, interviews, jokes, gossip, speculation, and more" (Green 190). This polyphony of mostly anonymous, few clearly recurring voices, flow unhindered by anything but their own individual limitations and drive the novel forward in a radically democratic manner. Each voice is integral and has weight, contributing uniquely to the narrative's fine-grained progression, regardless of our immediate comprehension of the speaker or storyline. The constant breaking off of individual vignettes and fragments of dialogue "before their significance is revealed," highlights both the autonomy and isolation of each voice, while disappointing the reader's voracious scrutiny (Green 191). Green, in contrast to LeClair, views Dara's techniques as imposing an obligation on the reader to engage with the particularity of the novel's multitude of voices on their own terms if they are to comprehend the whole. "Since Dara builds [Their] novel out of voices, fabricating a seemingly unedited soundscape," explains Green, "the reader is obliged to sort and select, to draw signals out of noise, identifying, for example, repeated motifs, structural patterns or thematic figures" (Green 190). Instead of simply disclosing meaning, Dara's work requires us to re-cognize, re-conceive, and re-negotiate our expectations and interactions with reading and listening. As readers, we are challenged to reconstruct each character from their voices and their interweaving. And this sense that voices are both isolated from and threatened by a greater design is in fact the central conflict piloting and shaping the novel.

Evan Dara's third novel, *Flee*, is "half the length but no less ambitious," though to some extent, more straightforward in its narrative and satire compared to *The Lost Scrapbook* (Strecker 2013). In many ways, *Flee* serves as a financial counterpart to

Dara’s ecologically-minded debut. Heralded as “[m]aybe the best novel to aesthetically and philosophically address the economic collapse of '08,” Flee portrays the decline of Anderburg, a small New England college town, as it gradually disbands in the aftermath of the closure of Pitkinson college that sustains its economy (Turner). The novel primarily unfolds through a weave of atomized voices, interspersed with the more traditional story of the opportunistic ventures and ill-fated romance of the couple Carol and Rick. It is capped by an extended “last man alive” story of the landscape architect Marcus, struggling to maintain a meaningful life in his now threadbare community. *Flee* tells the story of how the entire town of Anderburg the entire town is built around a hollow center as it comes to be known that the college’s existence relies solely on an accounting ploy (with no accountability) of the provost's office.[65] This scheme, involving the creation of an entirely nonexistent, “ghost,” Sociology department and major, is exposed by a clever yet myopic student who, upon discovering its absence, plans his coursework and college experience around majoring in the non-subject (F 19). In the wake of the college’s closure, the town’s bustling lifeworld is uncovered as hollow, as its leaders, industry, and citizens incrementally, and then rapidly flee the community.

The critical response to *Flee* was similar to that of *The Lost Scrapbook* in its paucity. Most substantially, at printing it garnered a brief, but warm review from Trey Strecker in the *Times Literary Supplement*. Strecker praised *Flee* as an “innovative meditation on the nuances of home and community, individual and social responsibility,” especially emphasizing Dara’s use of “evocative language” to “compassionately documen[t] the dissolution of Anderburg” (Strecker 2013). Eight years later, however,

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[65] This is not unlike the hollow center of *Easy Chain*’s Lincoln Selwyn.

Marco Roth presented a more detailed, yet tempered assessment of *Flee* (and Dara generally). Roth, though expressing admiration for the novel, overall, took umbrage with its technique. On the one hand, Roth concedes the significance of Dara's work, noting that "these novels constitute a rather rare sustained effort in contemporary American fiction to chronicle the atmosphere and feeling of the 'creative destruction' of the American economy and its accompanying depersonalization, the extraction of human dignity from American life." On the other hand, Roth nonetheless finds that "individually… none of these works is entirely successful." Attributing this shortfall to Dara's ambition and technique, Roth finds the issue particularly evident in the compressed version of *Flee*. "The scope, the profusion of different voices who never quite become full characters," argues Roth, "...all end up inhibiting the climate of feeling that Dara often evokes before blurring out." Without fully formed, full-blooded characters, claims Roth, ideas overwhelm the storytelling, plunging the novel into the realm of "that dread adjective 'conceptual'" (M. Roth).

That said, Roth strangely argues that "too often the critical overbears the literary," not due to Dara's constant frame breaking, "didactic" preaching, or exegetic discursions, but because in essence the author's prose achieves its task and critique too effectively. Roth laments that *Flee* "manages to represent one of the hallmarks of our economic system—the fungibility and replaceability of any voice by any other, any experience by any other experience—on the page" (M. Roth). *Flee*, along with Dara's first two novels, "share the same relentless quality of hopeless repetition with their subject matter, performing what they try to resist" (M. Roth). However, this paralleling of form and subject, rather than a flaw, is one of Dara's strengths. Furthermore, as with LeClair, such criticisms can seem somewhat lazy, as they desire a comprehensive critical lasso to corral the work's competing voices. While some voices can be interchanged, others remain distinct within and from each other throughout the novel. If we read and listen carefully, we see that many voices in *Flee* (as well as in *The Lost Scrapbook*) reappear, as tagged by their idiosyncrasies, quirks, and interests. Even within *Flee* itself, especially as the town dissolves, we encounter voices mourning the loss of other voices, individuals grieving over the absence of others, engaging in a conversation without actually conversing.

Ultimately, these flattening interpretations and disparagements leveled by critics at Dara's works may betray an anxiety over the disorienting lack of explicit guidance the novels provide, not unrelated to the author's own deliberate elusiveness. Dara's narratives, and Their own reclusive public persona, resist easy categorization, offering only subtle hints rather than outright directions. Against such ambiguity, we may feel the anxious notion that "we do not know how to go on." Certainly, some critics, such as LeClair, frustrated by Dara's resistance to conventional narrative structure, treat their novels merely as epistemological puzzles, grumbling for the "substantial and earlier help" they feel is needed to "vault" readers into comprehension. This becomes even clearer in LeClair's criticism of Dara's second novel, *The Easy Chain* where he builds upon his earlier reservations about *The Lost Scrapbook*, redoubling his stance that Dara's narrative techniques often veer into incoherence. He suggests that Dara's second novel falters in the second half, dissolving into a "highly literary mess." Just as he argued in his review of *The Lost Scrapbook* that Dara's readers needed greater assistance, LeClair now contends that *The Easy Chain* would have "profited from an editor" to address the "slackness and missing links" that disrupt the novel's structure (LeClair 2008).

This approach parallels the stance of Cavellian skeptics, who attempt to establish or deny interpretations based on the need for a certainty that always seems just out of reach. As Jonathan Havercroft notes, critics often shift toward treating all problems as "epistemological problems," while downplaying the necessity of personal responsiveness. Instead of asking, "How do we know?" Havercroft, summarizing Cavell, suggests we should consider, "How do we respond?" (9). Critics cast an all-encompassing analytical net in their efforts to contain the work's diverse voices, failing to recognize that Dara's novels invite a different kind of engagement, one that is open, receptive, and champions an intimate education through the act of reading. Marco Roth, for instance, when he contends that Dara's novels might blur the emotional impact through each narrative's "profusion of different voices," exhibits a common critical discomfort with the deliberate evocation of dissonance and ambiguity (M. Roth). By seeking certainty and clarity, these critics shy away from the active listening and interpretive responsibility Dara's work requires. In turn they miss the transformative process Dara's fragmented polyphony offers, where meaning is constructed by the reader, piece by piece, voice by voice. As Cavell's philosophy suggests, this shift from knowing to responding is essential. The anxiety critics feel when engaging with Dara's texts points to the difficulty of embracing a more responsive mode of literary participation.

In this way, readers and critics echo the tendency towards avoidance and self-assurance in the face of the uncontainable "Other" that leads to the tragedy of Dara's characters. Dara's writing leaves readers grappling for direction, a theme that resonates with each novel's narrative structure. As Simone Beauvoir suggests, a reader can "fail a book" by refusing to "participate sincerely in the experience the author is trying to involve him in; he does not read as he demands that one writes, he is afraid of risks, of adventure" (qtd. in RO 220). *The Lost Scrapbook* particularly can be seen as a *bildungsroman* where the reader is the protagonist, actively taught how to read the novel through the pedagogical process of *attempting* to read it, beginning from a stance of not-knowing.[66] Dara's writing thus aligns with Toril Moi's view that "to give an account of a reading is to give an account of an experience, an adventure" (RO 196). In doing so, Dara foregrounds that reading, while pleasurable, is often an uncomfortable form of participation and acknowledgment, one that can provoke anxieties about taking responsibility for our readings and how our readings will be received when voiced.[67]

Critics may often retreat from responsibility, as Cavell identifies in the "Avoidance of Love." In their critical anxiety over responsibility, they may retreat into suspicious, detached interpretations to avoid the intimate, vulnerable engagement Dara's narratives require. This comprises an anxiety over the exposure and admission of not-knowing and the demands of genuine responsiveness, accentuating the very human anxiety of exposure and self-confrontation that Dara's works compel us to face. As Blanchot writes, every text, particularly fragmentary ones like Dara's, threatens an emptiness that induces "anguish," demanding that readers anxiously jump–perhaps make a Kierkegaardian “qualitative leap”--to “cross an abyss;” for if we “do not jump, [we] do not comprehend” (WD §52). Critics’ responses display how Dara’s work produces an anxiety of ambiguity, challenging we as readers to actively piece together meaning from an initial position of dizzying discomfort and uncertainty. In turn, we readers must anxiously take responsibility for how we have put those pieces together.

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[66] Throughout *The Revolution of the Ordinary,* Toril Moi does an exceptional job at showing how we are responsible and accountable for our readings and criticisms in ways we often as critics anxiously obfuscate with theories of all shapes and sizes.

[67] See particularly Chapter 9, "Reading as a Practice of Acknowledgement: The Text as Action and Expression" of Moi's *Revolution of the Ordinary*.

## II. “Contracts’re just pieces of paper”: Anxiety, Individualism, and the Breakdown of Democratic Contracts in Dara’s Towns

Dara’s novels suggest that there exists a particularly American anxiety about our dependence on and responsibility to others. This anxiety springs from the belief that others are mutable and ambiguous, or simply a threat to our doing as we like. This drives individuals to withdraw through self-exile under the name of “independence.” *The Lost Scrapbook* and *Flee* critique the fetishized, and ultimately anxious, picture of American exceptionalism and independence that holds modern society captive in stagnating atomization. Both novels exhibit how the necessarily anxious foundation of democracy, that is trust and reliance on the choices of other people, may lead citizens to derive ways of being that provide the illusion that we do not hold claims on each other.

This desire for unimpeachable autonomy and fetishized self reliance, rather than supporting liberty, encourages citizens to deny communal responsibility and towards mutual avoidance. In turn, this turning away from each other triggers anxiety and exacerbates vulnerability. This anxiety and instability, tragically, becomes taken as the status quo, with citizen citizens “making a real commitment to non-attachment” (F 138). This section examines how Dara’s novels, through their amalgam of voices, present a society in and of denial, one that avoids responsibility of recognizing shared humanity, instead opting for isolation, while refusing the truth of interdependence that lies at the heart of both democracy's fragility and its potential strength. First, this section briefly examines the anxiously precarious foundations of democracy and the social contract, particularly in the neoliberal age. Then, turning more explicitly to Dara's novels, the section introduces how these anxieties express themselves in the tension between individualism and commitments to community, tensions citizens try to mitigate through denying the legitimacy of contracts and obligations.

In Isaura, there is a foundational belief in an implied contract, not between citizens, but between industry and town. The citizens hinge their stability on the Ozark photochemical manufacturer's patronage, crediting their existence to the institution even after carcinogenic chemicals have been found in towns soil and water. As one citizen asserts of Ozark and its response to the chemical spill, "where would we have been with*out* their help, is what I say; *that's* how it should be looked at; they saw the situation, they recognized it promptly and assessed it reasonably and then they acted in good faith" (LS 340). Isaura's economic dependency upon Ozark creates a sense of implicit contract. And yet this contract exists only in so much that Ozark itself profits from Isaura, as there is nothing binding Ozark to the town if the town becomes unprofitable. This being the case, the citizens' calm is attached to a whim of a far greater entity. As the situation worsens in Isaura, Ozark's acts of "good faith" are shown to be merely performative, transforming the town's "mutual" dependency into a one-sided liability rather than a reciprocally binding and profitable relationship. The "800-pound gorilla" is not on the town's "side for once in this life," but is a too-big-to-fail weight on its chest (LS 335).

In Anderburg, the concept of contracts, legal and social, are more explicitly questioned. Often the deterioration of societal contracts is observed with anxiety and callousness. Following the bankruptcy of Anderburg's Pitkinson College, contracts are broken with faculty, students, and suppliers alike. As one worker exclaims, "—So what am I supposed to…? I have a half a truck of bread to deliver to the university three days a week. And my suppliers–I have a contract—!" (F 13). But this breaking of contracts hits deeper, causing one citizen to bitterly remark, "Contracts're just pieces of paper, they [the shadowy powers that be] own the world before there's laws …" (F 76). As these legal contracts unravel, so too do the social contracts upholding the community. The claims citizens have on each other are swept aside.

The cynical-skeptical questioning of contracts is accordingly both symptomatic and cause of the breakdown of the social contract itself. As Cavell explains, the very idea of a social contract is vulnerable to skeptical critique. Since we were not present for the contracts' original creation, and so therefore cannot speak for or perhaps even accept the validity of such a contract. We certainly do not understand why we should consent to it. This skepticism over the authority of the social contract is only reinforced by the way in which large, powerful, and often hidden entities—like, say, the banks and Wall Street after the 2008 Financial Crisis or certain political figures—eschew responsibility or evade punishment when they fail to uphold their side of the contract.

Without a clear sense of a firm authority to ground its demands, social contracts become framed as both an "epistemological mystery" and a hollow promise. Finding its origins and authority an enigma, and having not been present for "signing," we may be tempted to do away with the concept of the social contract entirely, as "how can I have consented… since I am not aware that I ever asked for it or gave it" (CR 24)? So, as the authority behind legal contracts lose their meaning, they in turn seem to also unveil the fragility and arbitrariness of the social contract. Without a solid foundation, seen as merely words, the social contract becomes yet another "groundless ground" that fuels anxiety in our inability to stake claims upon one another. Thus, the temptation towards denying the social contract also becomes a temptation towards denial of responsibility to each other, as we have no *solid* foundation to justify these claims.

When contracts become seen as just "pieces of paper," there is accordingly, a wearing away of the foundations of both the environment and societal trust. The skeptical citizen's bitterness not only encapsulates this deterioration of mutual trust; its evocation of the spectral powers who "own the world before there's laws" remind us that without genuine consent and shared accountability, society defaults and is reduced to mere mechanisms of domination and control. Society becomes an empty, if constraining, shell of itself devoid of shared values or vision. The anxiety generated by this understanding of social and domestic groundlessness dissolves any strength that mutual trust and responsibility might provide. We instead act by and "obey the logic of conspiracy," and in our anxious defensiveness project "this to be true only of others" (CR 26). Relationships are considered either flimsy and nonbinding, or conspiratorial and instrumental. The corrosive poison that seeps into societal structures, toxifies the internal lives of individuals, whose sense of home and community corrupts and dissolves along with the contracts that once bound them to each other.

Except this anxiety is not merely a product of catastrophe, but is imminent in logic of neoliberal American society. This society is inherently vulnerable to such disasters, as it is deliberately structured around precarity and atomization. The unwinding of collective bonds in modern society manufactures a fragile system in as much as it prioritizes individualism over communal responsibility. In her work *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*, sociologist Jennifer M. Silva persuasively argues that it has become near impossible to find stable footing since neoliberalism's fetishized individualism and market deregulation effectively voided the "social contracts forged in the decades following the Second World War." More menacingly, societies built contactless, contractless neoliberal logic to reduce the idea of freedom to "freedom from government intervention," often meaning the demonization of programs that financially bound companies to citizens and citizens to each other. Yet this "freedom from" does not stop at government intervention but constitutes "a radical re-envisioning of social relationships at the deepest level of the self," where social responsibility and interdependence are framed as, not simply contraining, but contaminating (Silva 14).

Under this rationale, the possibility of a nation bound by some uniting vision or ideal is nearly nullified, exacerbating feelings of isolation, anxiety, and alienation. Neoliberalism, by dissolving social contracts and safety nets, replaces a sense of security with a competitive, market-driven ideology, where individuals are left to fend for themselves. All of which creates a precarious, stunting world, where "work is unpredictable, families are fragile, social safety nets are shrinking, and the future is uncertain." Here, individuals must navigate the "absence of choice," where people must "make a real commitment to non-attachment," and are "prisoners to the present" in their lack of security for a future (Silva 29). In a world built upon a premise of uncertainty and a logic of conspiracy, others become no more and no less than competition and contaminants. Citizens in turn are trapped in a stagnating, self-defensive individuality, where the pursuit of radical, anxiously protective independence comes at the expense of community and collective care.[68]

In excavating the degradation of societal contracts and the negating of shared realities, Dara's works raise the pressing question: what remains to bind us together in the absence of these foundational structures? Without shared, *binding*, conceptions of the world, what shared reality can be said to exist? In what sense can a society function? What common infrastructure can we fall back on? Without the supports of a shared vision and collective responsibility, democracy itself is endangered by the unchecked individualism of "freedom from." Michaele L. Ferguson, in her critique, *Sharing Democracy*, indicates "a *familiar anxiety* about democracy: that without some kind of commonality unifying the people, democracy will fail" (Ferguson 4, my emphasis). Political claims to commonality, "seek the agreement of others, seek to persuade others, and seek to shape the way others see the world that we share intersubjectively" (51).

Cavell similarly warns of the danger when a society lacks an intersubjectively shared understanding of criteria, that is to say, those tacit agreements that undergird truth and communal belonging in a "form of life." "When we can no longer agree on what is true, we do not just lose shared understandings of truth," explains Cavell, "we also lose our shared sense of community" (CR 29). In this way, the social contract becomes not just political consent but an epistemological compact, a shared agreement on how we determine truth and meaning. The "familiar anxiety" of democracy turns into an anxiety about the familiar (what Cavell might call the ordinary). It is an anxiety of each other and our togetherness. Dara's work points to the false centers that, in attempts to take advantage of or assuage our anxieties of interdependence, have replaced the interpersonal and interpenetrative "binding conscience" necessary for healthy societies (Feldman 4). Without such ties, the world, the "weave of our life," unravels, leaving us in the anxious state of alienated, atomized existence. This is partly what makes the scenes of even the most hectic and futile town hall meetings in Dara's work so exhilaratingly moving and virtuosic. Such moments, notwithstanding their usually chaotic outcome or contradictions, give rare glimpses at the nervous attempts of precarious communities to maintain any semblance of shared reality in the face of disintegration.

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[68] Silva asserts that neoliberalism's "cultural logic" is most profoundly and notoriously conveyed by Margaret Thatcher's proclamation, "Who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first" (qtd. in Silva 14)

Nevertheless, Dara's work suggests that under current atomized conditions, any coming together almost inevitably ends in disappointment, competition, and fragmentation. Without this binding and without a sense of commonality, anxieties manifest in what Sianne Ngai calls the "disconcerting" feeling of "affective indeterminacy"—a state of not being "focused" or "gathered" (14). While Ngai understands this feeling as a specific affective state, it also describes a facet of anxiety, responding to the disoriented, ungathered conditions of modern existence. Indeed, it both describes the feeling of the state and the state from which the feeling arrives. Dara's narrative style, with its paratactic weaving of separateness, foregrounds how citizens fail to come into *concert* with one another in the tinning of our collective ability truly listen and gather together. This inability is illustrated beautifully in *Flee*, where a strand of recurring voices portrays a shrinking church choir. Instead of hearing each other more clearly, as their numbers dwindle, the choir members grow increasingly unable to hear each other, as their sound has become "flimsy and timid," their voices "too close" to detect (F 40, 142). David Antonini, in his study of public space and political experience, affirms that, with "no sense of a shared world together," we are "alienated from that which binds us together: a common world" (1). Or in Hannah Arendt words, when people are "deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and being heard by them… they are imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience" (Arendt 58). Without a sense of binding commonality, we are not liberated into flourishing difference, but instead suffer from Arendtian "world alienation," where society fragments, with isolation and atomization infecting nearly every facet of American life.

The fragmentation of individuals into separate particles, each motoring on its own trajectory, decomposes the public body, making collective, responsive action impossible. Antonini argues that a shared world is essential not only for the creation of a public sphere but also for the development of truly human, independent subjectivities. He writes, "if it is true that contemporary citizens do not recognize anything like a shared world, …we are estranged from that which makes it possible to have a unique perspective at all" (2). Ferguson paraphrases this anxiety, summarizing that "if the people who share a democracy are too divided, they will not be able to identify as one self-governing people, to cooperate and trust one another, or to accept the decisions of democratic institutions as legitimate if their own group has been outvoted" (4). Without a true belief in a shared world, or at least trust in our fellow citizens, hostility and tribalism emerges and events like the anxious and angry violence of January 6th, 2021 are almost to be expected. As Antonini further contends, without a shared world, "our deep hostility toward one another in the political realm is unsurprising" (2).[69] This absence of commonality does not just signal political fragmentation, but our very inability to form a collective body capable of addressing shared concerns.

Embracing the importance of commonality does not mean that we are all to be mere drones.[70] Rather, as Antonini maintains, commonality is necessary for both plurality and individualism, as "without a common world between them, they cannot be situated in human plurality... There is nothing against which modern subjects can experience themselves as distinct" (2). Some shared understanding is essential for any meaningful conversation or reality. The lack of mutual recognition threatens the foundation of democracy itself. As Erin Greer glosses Arendt, a healthy commonality can turn "conversation" into a "form of life [that] thinly, vulnerably, ward[s] off an 'abyss'" so familiar to accounts of anxiety (Greer 17). Consequently, commonality cannot be discarded for dissent or the illusion of greater freedom. Instead there must be a balance between diverse autonomy and the shared ground required for democratic participation. That being said, if the only common ground we have is poisoned, if we are united only by our shared toxification, then we must challenge "our commonality in favor of a more genuine commonality" (WU 174). That said, this task cannot be taken up if commonality and a binding social contract as a whole are denied. The dissolution of contracts and conversation go hand in hand, corresponding in Dara's novels to a denial of binding commonality and consciousness.

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[69] To play on Cavell, without community, we are not only without reason, it seems, but unreasonable.

[70] There is not enough space here to fully discuss the other side of Dara's work, which is sensitive to the crucial need to prevent consuming uniformity from overriding individual expression and particularity. Nor is there room to explore the legitimate concerns raised by agonistic democratic theorists. For more on these distinctions, see Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, Lee, *A Body of Individuals*, Ferguson, *Sharing Democracy*, and Chambers, *Contemporary Democratic Theory*. For an extended overview of agonistic versus normative democratic theory in relation to Cavell and Wittgenstein, refer to Havercroft, *Cavell's Democratic Perfectionism*, particularly chapters 2 and 3, and Noval, *Aversive Democracy*, particularly chapters 1 and 2, and Zerilli, *Democratic Judgment*.

When citizens cannot agree on a regenerative and unifying ground for community, no contract truly binds them. "We have collective experience–a shared, public world," writes Greer, "only as long as we converse, and unfortunately, we are least likely to converse when our common world is most vulnerable" (Greer 18). Without a sense of this common world, we fall out of conversation with each other, isolating ourselves into our caverns. The anxiety that follows from this move is not simply individual but systemic; society as whole is no longer capable of functioning as a unified body. Yet, with or without an ethical community, whether we act like it or not, we are connected, entangled in each other, in our society, despite our denials in a "form of life." *The Lost Scrapbook* and *Flee* illustrate how crisis throws our interconnection in our face. These crises, ignored or denied or shrugged off as someone else's problem, spread rapidly like chemicals in the soil across communities, through what Keynes termed "hidden currents," which, when neglected, "invite... [our] destruction" (16). While Keynes directly referred to the aftermath of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, Dara's novels, whether in terms of financial crisis or chemical spill, show how one group's crisis can quickly become another's. These upheavals reveal how "deeply and inextricably intertwined" we are by "hidden psychic and economic bonds" (16). *The Lost Scrapbook* further literalizes these hidden currents ecologically through the Ozark's poisoning the water system. The central issue in Dara's novels is whether a society can exist which honors both individual autonomy and collective belonging, allowing for mutual flourishing. Yet, the towns in Dara's works cannot achieve this as long as they are built on a denial of interconnectedness.

From their opening pages, each novel depicts the complementary urges of individualism and community, and the anxieties that fuel and contradict those same strivings. *The Lost Scrapbook* begins with an avowal of particularity and individualism. In a one-sided conversation between a runaway teenager and, perhaps, guidance counselor, the novel asserts itself into being, declaring: "— I am, yes; certainly" and a moment later, "Listen to me: Yes; I am; *absolutely…*" (LS 6). Self-assertion here, in the form of self-certainty, absoluteness, and affirmation, aligns with and opposes the idea of choosing a path. Like the novel itself, which does not and will not take on a single vantage or thoroughfare to tell its story, the speaker tries to navigate a way of entering public life that does not limit their particular self-identity in favor of public pressure. They resist modes of being that not only stop our wanderings but also shove us into a political public world of interrelation, under atomized conditions. "It's a bizarre enterprise, this deciding what 'to be,'" ponders the teen,[71]

> mostly it feels like negotiating what *not* to be; so spare me your solicitude, my dear diminishers, for I can already hear what you are going to say: that before long I'll need to be realistic, and to acknowledge the inevitable and that eventually I'll recognize the subtle majesty of moderation; after all, you'll tell me, children can only make purposeful movements after they've learned to rein in their fitful, neonatal fluttering; learning to reach is actually a process of learning *not* to do everything *except* reaching; but let the watusi continue!, I say; think how we might move if all that innate waggling could be harnessed[…]" (LS 6-7) .

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[71] We can say *The Lost Scrapbook* is asking this of itself.

Here is the teenage dream to prolong unrestrained possibility against societal "diminishers" who smother potentiality through their advocacy of "majestic" moderation and realism. Instead, the speaker yearns for the continuous "watusi" of uninhibited expression and the untapped potential. Nevertheless, the desire to "harness" such spontaneous energy reveals the paradox of radical individualism. Even the speaker, seemingly inadvertently, realizes the value of the full potential of this energy paradoxically requires its harnessing, imposing control and direction. Though the speaker longs to remain free and unbounded, there is an inevitable need to channel that energy into something purposeful. Individualism cannot exist without constraint, exhibiting a tension in the desire to "harness" our freedom, even in our most rebellious impulses. In other words, some common, constraining force seems necessary for individualism to have any meaning at all, if we are not simply to "waggle" in "fitful fluttering." Yet, how this occurs without leveling or destroying freedom remains unclear, perhaps unfeasible.

*Flee*, alternatively, begins with a sweeping view of a community, Anderburg ("A-Burg"), vibrant yet questionably constructed. "Something always going on—" comments a voice opening a novel (F 3).[72] What follows is an interlocking cacophony, where we begin to see a community emerge in a vibrant mundanity. We flow through public life, from kitchens to concert halls, sporting events, and grocery trips. Weaving through the psyches of seemingly immaterial entities, we see how such lives are part of greater intersecting systems—of transport and trade, of dates and obligations. From this bubbling of voices froths forth a city. But the city, and the voices that comprise it, are themselves mere foam floating atop an unpredictable sea. Such networks are not local but globalized, dependent upon complex structures and our integration into them. Yet we rarely take note of these happenings, being too keyed into their sanitized, commodified outputs. City voices clamor for seasonal fruit, shipped swiftly from afar, to savor its brief ripeness before rot. Others seek bites of other cultures, scheduling henna appointments and yoga classes in their day.

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[72] Depending on how we read it, *Flee* begins in a certain ambiguity. This "something" is unclear, as is the valence in which that "something" is being cast. Is this the paranoid workings of a Pynchonian mind: that "something [is] always going on" beyond our ability to observe it, behind the curtain of our reality and out-of-touch? Should we be afraid of such clandestine and continual "going on[s]?" Alternatively, should we take such a statement as not nefarious, but rather a celebratory assessment of vitality? But then vitality of *what*, and further by *what* measurement? Or is "something always going on" simply a statement of fact? Of *course* something is always going on as "things" *must* always churn and chug forward in the course of time, regardless of towards or away from other things or events. In other words, the best we can say, without reading forward, is that the statement means nothing at all in its simultaneously self-contained

Yet this picture of community is built around a sense of, not so much community but self-assertion. As a college town, Anderburg's citizens sigh with relief when the students leave and the world is packed away for holiday, "the city comes back to itself." "It regains something," an inhabitant reflects, "All that litter? It's, like–gone. You can get a sesame bagel at Bruegger's at two thirty in the afternoon. Hank at Shanty's–at the bar there–he'll talk to you again. That constant, constant double-parking in front of City Market, and the cars always crawling around in town...Finally! Space!" (F 4). Space is reclaimed for the city's "true" inhabitants. No longer does one walk down the street "getting bumped and twisted and—" by the out-of-town crowds. The city in Winter becomes contained and private. This idea of there "finally" being space enough for one

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and contextless existence. From such frictionless words, we as readers at this juncture have no sense of what is "going on," nor any right to project meaning beyond the dash.

reflects a central tension in *Flee*. The economic forces that sustain the city also, according to its citizens, alienate its inhabitants. By remaining in Anderburg year-round, they believe they have an indissoluble right or claim to the city; that they are themselves part of its "com[ing] back to itself" when the out-of-towners depart.

However, this "return" also betrays the self-centered, self-certain, self-reflexive (though not self-*reflective*) modes by which the Anderburgians perceive and justify their claim to ownership. But, in all of this roll-calling of economic activity, there is little sense of communal activity and interaction. At least not meaningfully human communal activity and interaction. With outsiders gone home away from Andersburg, there is merely more room for its inhabitants to stretch out, regardless of their fellow townspeople. Freedom here, regardless of their shallow exercises in commerce and habit, is found in Silva's "freedom from," not just of intervention, but of *others.* This "from," is not simply seen in the moments of school breaks when strangers leave and the town "comes back to itself." On the contrary, the dissipation of a timeshare population merely leaves more "space" for A-Burgers to more effectively take up space and extricate themselves further from others. There is no sense that a community emerges outside of the flow of cash. And of course, in reality, what ensures the town's survival, is the commitments of the out-of-towners to the college, not the citizens themselves.[73]

This is made clear in the wake of the Pitkinson College's closure. As the college, "the U," buckles, Anderburg's dependency is starkly revealed, destabilizing the town's economy and its residents' lives (F 15). Pitkinson, "there for what, two hundred and fifteen years?" the center of economic life "then suddenly–" shutters (F 20). When the college closes, the town unstitches along personal, economic, and institutional contracts, and citizens, overwhelmed by the instability, begin to "upstake" and flee. The communal hub of the university reaches a "stripping point," as rumors of "liquidators" and auction houses bid to sell it off in pieces (F 15). With the fall of the college, the town itself, and the lives of its citizens, has hit their own "stripping point." With each chapter, the population dwindles as the town itself begins to liquidate.[74] "Will I have to give up the house? Its faculty housing," worries one voice, "–and Anna just now stuttering her first steps—?" (F 13). As any sense of home becomes uncertain, the population stumbles upon uncertain ground. Like every character we've met throughout this dissertation, without a sense of home, they anxiously feel in their own stuttering steps and speech as if they do not know "how to go on," what grammar would make them and their world make sense. They have become children, anxiously overwhelmed and without form, not knowing what "ground we may occupy" and direction to take (CR 125). So in Anderburg, students, and citizens, are left "to gather up their pasts—and [...] see how these aforementioned pasts are seriously futzing their futures" (F 15). What remains in the wake of contracts is an anxious disillusionment. The imploding of sense-making structures—institutional, contractual, and social—leaves citizens staggering, stymied simultaneously by the past and yet stuttering forward, disorientingly projected into an uncertain future.

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[73] It is perhaps important to note Carol and Rick are not saints, and citizens perceive their "opportunism" in the project (F 13, 27), a trait which resurfaces with the creation of their unemployment agency, "Hire Ground," as the economy worsens.

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[74] Each chapter is titled by a fluctuating though mostly depleting, population count.

As opposed to Anderburg's residents who are blindsided by the knowledge of their reliance on external institutions, the citizens of Isaura, in a different but equally precarious position, fully acknowledge their dependence on a single monolithic company, convinced it works solely for their benefit. They are merely blind to the precarity of their lives, captured by the picture of free community and prosperity the photochemical company develops. The citizens of Isaura, in fact, see the company as the ground that connects them all and sustains their town's livelihood, believing with childlike faith in the nurturing protection of "Mother Ozark" (LS 332). One voice contemplates,

> — And I'd be driving down Ridgeway Ave., you know, over by the turnoff onto 390, I'd be out doing some shopping or bringing in food, or I'd just be on my way home from work, and see all the smokestacks scattered around Ozark Park, rising up over all the buildings and the piping and the conveyor systems all around the miles of the facility; and they looked so familiar, tapering up like that, just part of the landscape, so silent and familiar, always there, just reaching up and kissing the sky; they were part of the neighborhood, what you came to expect, and so they gave you a sense of things continuing, of industry, but industry in the other sense of the word— of work being done, with high organization, by lots of people all together; and you'd see the stacks' smoke, pluming gently or drifting out, and then you could keep driving, imagining all the things going on underneath them, all the people working, as usual, harnessing their efforts together; and you had the sense that the seeping smoke was the sign that things were all right, that it meant prosperity— (LS 356-57)

However, their faith in the company willfully ignores its toxic impact. The above voice, while seeming to convey connection, merely discloses how the industry displaces the necessity for citizens to create community by claiming itself as the center of commonality. Ozark is "part of the neighborhood," something natural that you "came to expect" and that "gave you a sense of things continuing, of industry." This is not simply "industry" in terms of things getting made, but of a communal and regimented "work being done, with high organization." Although Ozark is seen as the linchpin to Isaura's community, its centrality displaces the impulse to build genuine connections.

This indicates a troubling dynamic, where the community's cohesion is contingent upon an industry's prosperity, while the industry itself is not contingent upon the individual citizens at all. Though Ozark ostensibly needs the town as a location, and does not wish for ruckus, it only needs the town for workers and land.[75] The community is not held together by a "binding conscience," but by a communal propping up of an industry, of maintaining a position in the mechanics of the economic system. As the source of the town's troubles is unveiled as Ozark itself, the facade of a unified community cracks. Those who dare speak out against Ozark's detrimental impact on community health, we will see, are met with hostility and ostracism, cast aside as threats to the community's well-being. The anxious need to maintain the status quo spurs a defensive reaction and a deliberate ignorance by the townsfolk that stunt steps towards taking collective action.

So, on the one hand, the relegation of the public sphere to a mere extension of individual self-interest, quells anxieties concerning the unsteady foundation of human communities. Yet, on the other hand, it is symptomatic of a broader cultural malaise, where an anxious individualism overtakes common consciousness and feeling, forsaking the act of conversation that sustains a healthy society is increasingly devalued. The defaulting of contracts, both legal and social, threatens the foundations of a shared reality, causing society to lose its fragile equilibrium. As citizens reject their shared vulnerability and collectively avoid responsibility, they fail to recognize the hidden currents of interdependence that tragically bind them. The concept of community itself becomes detached from the individuals who inhabit it as the community is held hostage, captive by a larger industry. Citizens are no longer anxious over the disruption of community itself but, as we will see, over the necessity of living in a community built upon *contaminating* responsibility to and influence ofothers. As Cavell suggests, "the effect of the theory of the social contract is at once to show how deeply I am joined to society" and to help me "know with whom I am in community" (CR 25). Accepting the social contract is neither simply a legal compact nor a vow of obedience. "What I consent to, in consenting to the contract, [is] membership in a polis," that is, an affirmation of membership within the community (CR 23). Nevertheless, as learned when disaster strikes, we cannot simply extricate ourselves from the community, our "form of life," through terse denial, for we are always already bound up, entangled in it.

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[75] Certainly, when it is revealed that they are taking in chemical waste to dump, we come to understand they do not even explicitly need the town itself.

## III. "No Thesis": The Avoidance of Responsibility and the Subliming of Grounds

The societies of Dara's novels are societies of anxious paralysis, where the contradictions between individual autonomy and collective responsibility remain unresolved. Anxiety becomes more pervasive as the position of citizens in their world becomes more precarious. Yet the ubiquity of anxiety fails to show interconnection, but, on the contrary, perpetuates a dread of that interpenetration. Accordingly, Dara's citizens are caught in cycles of avoidance as they hope to absolve themselves of responsibility and impact. They do so primarily through adopting two ways of clinging to their own soft constructions, those complex, but inherently man-made fabrications citizens build for themselves in order to maintain a sense of stability. While the second method, discussed in section four involves the fetishization of absolute, but impotent, independence, the first way, discussed here, involves abdicating of responsibility to external systems to deny personal responsibility. Here, Dara's citizens elevate systems like capitalism, corporations, or pseudoscience to unquestioned truths. These constructs provide the illusion of stability, convincing individuals that they bear no responsibility towards each other or for their own fate. In fact, they quell their anxiety through refusing that they themselves are true actors at all, viewing even collapse as natural, inevitable, and even affirming the health of the system. Under such circumstances, paralysis is not viewed as deadening, but ironically as a form of desired homeostasis. Thus, Dara critiques not just the precarity of external systems, but also their citizens' anxious pursuit of stasis. The more they try to extricate themselves from interconnectedness, the more they sink into mutual annihilation. Their anxious avoidance perpetuates a cycle of disengagement, paralysis, and disintegration, where each citizen retreats into anxious denial rather than confront the uncertainties of genuine engagement.

The fall of Anderburg's Pitkinson College, representing the global financial system, illustrates this shortsightedness. Pitkinson College fails when a student (himself a stand-in for Wall Street financiers), at first inadvertently, exposes the institution's fraudulent financial schemes and structural deficiencies. The institution is revealed to have relied on a fictitious, "ghost" Sociology department, as part of an accounting trick to remain financially viable. The student, seizing upon opportunism, takes advantage of the college's deception by crafting "the perfect college experience" through declaring a major in the non-existent Sociology department (F 19). Once the college's charade is exposed, the entire operation falls apart, undermining its legitimacy and triggering a domino effect of institutional and communal collapse. One professor, Wally Gray, of the now defunct university goes as far as to say that its termination is not only a product of the lie exposed by the would-be ghost sociology student but is in greater part due to the shortsightedness that blinds the student from predicting the self-laceration of his actions. As clever as his plan may be, such "taking advantage" believes in action without consequence. Gray explains of the student's mischief, "Yet maybe the plan was too crafty for its own good [....] Both overly and insufficiently subtle." Like financiers (alongside other players) exploiting the corroding financial system, the student capitalizes on loopholes and blind eyes. Nevertheless, as Gray surmises, "The [...] kid had not anticipated how fragile the balance [...] How tenuous the superstructural perch. Pull one red thread and the sweater ravels" (F 19).

However, such behavior is not isolated to the student alone but is endorsed by the perverse logic of his society. "Inadequately far-seeing," the self-interested student, symbolically akin to Wall Street financiers, sees his behavior as natural and correct (F 20).[76] This blindness is not incidental but rather a key component of the "perverse" clockwork of the system itself. As Kolb writes in his study of the 2008 Financial Crisis:

> [T]he perverse incentives of all of the participants in the new world of mortgage finance …fit together in a manner that constituted an intricate mechanism or clockwork. The unique feature of this system was that the various participants, simply by responding individually to the incentives that lay before them and pursuing their narrow personal interests, participated in an elaborate mechanism that led to disaster. Unlike clockwork, however, there was no overall architect or designer for the system of housing finance that led to ruin. Instead, the system was an unhappy organic production of many individuals, groups, and forces. (Kolb, *Financial Crisis* xii).

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[76] Today, we need only look at how lauded as "smart" Donald Trump was, by himself and then others, for tax evasion.

In a cruel reversal, where the citizen looking at Ozark sees a soothing, assemblage of "people working, as usual, harnessing their efforts together" beneath the smokestacks, Kolb highlights the ironic and tragic nature of the financial crisis, where a complex system emerged not from deliberate design but from the self-serving actions of countless participants. Such siloing self-interest ties directly to the society's underlying structure, which thrives on a Cavellian avoidance of responsibility.

These actions reflect an ingrained, anxious desire to act without facing the consequences, encapsulated in one voice declaring upon the closure of the college: "—No thesis! No thesis!" (F 13). This sentiment embodies an anxious wish for, as Pynchon would call it, "perfecting methods of immobility," or as Dara describes it, "standing waves" or "movement without movement or progression" (Pynchon 572; LS 18; F 112).[77] Nothing can, or to be done. In essence, the decisive movements, much as in Wittgenstein's "conjuring tricks," have either been made before us, like those spectral figures before the law, and therefore absolve us of choice and responsibility, or these movements are our own but are self-contained and detached from consequence (RMF 1.45; PI 308). Such an attitude is afforded and encouraged by a system that simultaneously, if seemingly contradictory, 1) removes the burden of action and choice off the shoulders of individuals and places it onto "natural" and inevitable systems; while also 2) allowing individuals to view their lives as detached from a social context. To the latter, it is as if somehow we could without consequence extract a particle from its waving, in essence performing the conjuring trick poofing away the social reality mechanisms that define that individual's life in the background. In doing so, the systems in place deflate anxieties of dependence and consequence, which of course, due to the hollow ruse of such reassurances, lead only to Cavellian tragedies of avoidance. And to take the word "thesis" in yet one more way, without a thesis, in music (especially the fugue), we are left without a stressed, grounding down beat, with merely a lifted, removed, raising foot, or ársis lingering about to drop (Liddell-Scott). Without grounding, the action itself becomes frictionless, sublimed action and the music stops, and the dance cannot continue, *ársis* in the air.

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[77] Compare elsewhere in *The Lost Scrapbook*: "and this is what is called progress, this is considered advancement: putting one foot after another, putting one step after another; this is considered achievement, this is supposed to be movement…; but no: this is not progress, this is not achievement, it is much the opposite: I am a figure on a treadmill, and my steps are delivering me nowhere: I can displace nothing;" (LS 8).

Citizens collectively retreat into "internal exile," confusing "means of avoidance" as "methods of escape" from anxious responsibility and uncertainty (LS 86). Anxiety thrives on futurity, on anticipatory imagination and forward momentum. To wish for "No Thesis" is a wish for stasis, where our actions are self-contained, and do not trigger more actions towards uncertainty. Dara's citizens, by trusting corporations and "natural" processes to guide them, believe they are free from responsibility. Citizens of both Isaura and Anderburg, in order to avoid mutual responsibility, place their faith in grander, sublimed systems—be them natural, economic, and legal systems—as solid, absolving guarantors of their lives. In *The Lost Scrapbook,* as the chemicals are found in the groundwater in Isaura, Missouri, one citizen in denial dismissively snaps, "[the chemicals] have *always* been there; [...] the soil naturally neutralizes their negative potentials; of course such safeguards exist: that's the reasons the world's hanging together; there's an equilibrium that takes care of them, and, by extension—" (LS 351).

This belief in the naturally cleansing soil indicates a desire for an immutable framework that precludes the need for our action and responsiveness.

Instead of acknowledging our responsibility, as Cavell was aware, we attempt to defuse “uncertainty, which is an inevitable feature of human finitude, by seeking out procedures that permit us to know with certainty” (Havercroft 2). Yet since all of these actions are blighted by human fallibility, then attempts to neutralize uncertainty with certainty will always fall short, tainted by this mortal contamination. However, determined to quell their anxiety, citizens seek an “equilibrium” that keeps “the world hanging together” that passively by extensions denies any need to act, and further, act *together*. This anxious denial of agency, combined with a fetish for self-determination, erodes communal obligation through collective, if isolating withdrawal. The push to sever connections to others heightens this anxiety, creating incoherence as citizens place faith in systems that legitimize avoidance. By surrendering their power and shared humanity, the citizens accept a pathological community, abdicating agency to unapproachable systems. This submission to fate, while absolving self-interest, allows systems to remain unchecked and beyond accountability. In avoiding responsibility and outsourcing agency, citizens retreat into “internal exile,” becoming their own “dear diminishers,” perpetuating a cycle of detachment and self-diminishment. This of course, simply re-cycles the anxiety they wished to soothe.

This denial of shared vulnerability and accountability paves the way for the inevitable collapse of communal structures, accenting the tragic isolation of individuals. Responsibility shifts to systems too vast and complex to control, reinforcing a narrative that discourages questioning or critique. Kolb notes that there is no grand architect for the disaster, leaving citizens vulnerable to chaos from systems driven by unchecked incentives. These systems, even when failing or destroying us, persist without us, like chemicals lingering long after a spill. However, to relieve ourselves of responsibility, these systems are treated by near-divine authorities, elevated above human influence and contamination. Dara's *Easy Chain* clearly voices the dangerous compromise made in *The Lost Scrapbook* and *Flee* through the discrepancy between two consecutive but isolated voices:

> —But all these difficulties would be corrected if we would just use, if we would *lib*erate the forces of the *free market*—
> —O Stop. That's irresponsible. Those guys aren't blind, or stupid. And – come on now – the situation ain't that bad. It's only gotten to the point where it's easier for us to imagine the destruction of the world than the changing of our economic system— (EC 170-71).[78] [79]

The "free market" is treated as a near-divine authority. This deification shields it from scrutiny and intervention by creating a seductive picture of the world that discourages questioning the system's validity. As the second voice proclaims, the almost total authority of our capitalist world obscures any potential escape routes and severely limits our ability to imagine alternatives beyond our own annihilation.

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[78] These two voices fall in the middle of a cascade of others bookended by discourses on automatization. Another voice in the mix makes the claims "personal or social reasoning abso*lute*ly is monotonic," that is, not open to alternative information and redirections (EC 171).

[79] This sentiment has three supposed origins: Fredrich Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), or "Future City" (2003), Mark Fischer, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative* (2009). Most succinctly and beautifully is H. Bruce Franklin's critique of J. G. Ballard (whom Jameson is probably echoing): "What are we to make of J.G. Ballard's Apocalypse" (1979) in *Voices for the Future,* Vol. 2, edited by Thomas Clareson. Claiming that Ballard "mistake[s] the end of capitalism for the end of the world," Franklin concludes by asking: "What could Ballard create if he were able to envision the end of capitalism as not the end, but the beginning, of a human world?" (Franklin).

More anxious to maintain a sense of false, even dehumanizing equilibrium, than face the anxious and uncertain reality of each other, or responsibility, or our world, citizens withdraw into illusory pictures that maintain toxic relations. As Auden lamented in *The Age of Anxiety:*

> We would rather be ruined than changed
> We would rather die in our dread
> Than climb the cross of the moment
> And let our illusions die. (335)

We are captivated by a narrative, taken "by a picture," which dehumanizes and restricts us, perpetuating a singular logic that prevents us from considering alternative perspectives. Under such dehumanizing conditions, neither soil nor society will "naturally neutralize their negative potentials." The belief that a natural societal equilibrium will somehow peacefully self-correct without confronting the underlying contamination proves to be an act of repression. However, this dehumanization, inherent in neoliberal capitalism, persists because we anxiously accept it as a safeguard against uncertainty. In this embrace, we define our ability for growth and adjust our expectations according to the system's limits. The singularity of the system's logic becomes reflected in the singularity of our view from the chinks in our caverns. The appeal to naturalism is a blinding force in both, and denial of agency or issue takes on the air of enlightenment.

Hence, as the first rumbles of anxiety over burst chemical pipes shake through Isaura's residents, the initial reaction is not panic, but angry refusal of the situation. "— I am now seventy-eight years old, and have lived at 808 Rand for forty-six years," asserts one resident., "I raised five children here, three daughters and two sons, and I'm now awaiting my ninth grandchild; we're all fine, and I've been very happy with Ozark, and very, very happy with Rand Street—" (LS 336). A few pages later, as the situation worsens, another voice shuts down further conversation, interrupting, "—Oh, no, no—*nonsense*; you're talking foolishness now; I've lived here my whole life and I don't have cancer—" (LS 354). Such denials are combined with demands for proof, to be *shown* that contamination has occurred, something both impossible due to its invisibility, though also obvious in the general worsening condition of the residents. Again, appealing to personal experience, a resident impatiently argues,

> — Then call me a traditionalist: you know, Show Me; I've been here all along, I grew up on Platt and then we moved to Emerson, and I want to tell you that I haven't seen nothing, not before or since; my life is here and my life is fine; I haven't missed a day of work in eight years; so if anything's happening it's happening to someone else, not to me; you know, with all the fracas it's sometimes good to just keep clear sight of your traditions; so OK then: Show Me— (LS 336)

Resistance to the emerging situation is skewed as simple resistance to change or "traditions." However, such traditions are built upon a faulty model of misplaced faith, and such change does not wait for shifts in policy or attitude. To have "clear sight" bluntly becomes impossible when the chemicals that sustain the quotidian, not only remain hidden underground but are literally blinding the residents.

In anxious denial of a problem, the so-called "alarmism" of concerned citizens is painted as absurd and reactionary. The concerned denizens of Isaura are slandered as those who simply fight against nature. They themselves are painted as greater threats than the dangers they are concerned about. On the contrary, Green points out, in Isaura, Ozark and the powers that be "use a language of community as a way of making the properly anxious townsfolk feel that they are attacking themselves, attacking Isaura itself" (Green

201). Ozark, as part of their damage-control strategy “adopt[s] the rhetoric of community, of belonging, togetherness, shared history, stability, care, and concern” (Green 200). As one voice in *The Lost Scrapbook* confidently interjects,

> —Look here: it’s all set out in black and white, clearly and simply, all what you need to know; it’s in today’s paper, in a special box, so you’d see; so, here—start here: here’s what you want to see: […] Alarmism in any of its guises or expressions is entirely unjustified; fear can also be leaked into a community, with consequences that are, at the very least, unwanted and disruptive; indeed, overreaction to rumor will certainly hinder the more substantive efforts of research and discovery now underway by diverting attention and resources away from where they may be needed; in a world fraught with unknowns, the responses of our community—to concerns, it is wise to bear in mind, that are certainly temporary—should not be unknown; like the scientists and specialists at work on our behalf, we, too, must act responsibly; and we best can do this by heeding their advice and battling against undue alarm; otherwise, the consequences for Isaura—both social and economic—may become the foremost of our unknowns…—and that’s where it ends; so you see, that’s it [...] (LS 350)

Claiming in “black and white” clarity, articles like this construe “alarmism” as a corrosive injection of skepticism. It infects the community, “our responses to our community,” with toxic uncertainty by questioning the “substantive efforts” and benevolence of the greater, patronizing force of Ozark. Industry and its spokesmen provide all “you need to know,” while “unknowns,” social or economic, are in fact not present but for the care and concern of “overreacting,” questioning citizens. However, such efforts at dampening skepticism is, of course, propaganda. Not only does Ozark not truly address concerns as much as dismiss them, but the corporation is also what removes true responsiveness to community and our neighbors; far from quelling uncertainty, it merely refocuses uncertainty and skepticism on our neighbors rather than industry. Thus maintaining, Green asserts, community as a “rhetorical term” only rather than any kind of reality independent from a corporation (Green 202). In claiming to save citizens from anxiety, it merely generates anxiety and resentment in citizens towards each other, while reducing their claims on each other.

If in Isaura there is at least a false belief in neutralizing properties of the poisoned soil upon which each citizen stakes their life, the residents of Anderburg prove no better equipped, even as the focus shifts from poisoned groundwater to toxic "hidden currents" of revenue streams. As one voice asserts after a satisfactory lunch meeting, the panic conveyed by newscasts and the government's response to the financial crisis is unmerited when weighed against his personal experience and perspective. They exclaim,

> —It's all nonsense. All of it. Everything they're saying and doing, meaningless nonsense. I cannot imagine what they're working themselves into a lather about. There's no proof, there's no hard evidence, everything here is functioning just fine –just take a look– within usual parameters, small and even not so small fluctuations are to be expected in any dynamic human arrangement. That's natural. And some of these alarmists are proposing steps or remedies that are so drastic, so Draconian, that they would disrupt everything, really wreck this craft. The cure would be far worse than any alleged problem. And who's supposed to pay for these guesses, because that's all they are, guesses, and wouldn't that money be better used for— (F 63).

The speaker sees only what is in their immediate view, and only sees this view because it conforms to their immediate experience and desire for status quo. The supposed "natural[ness]" of this system depends upon the perception— "just take a look–"— that what we see is all there is to be seen, that the "dynamic human arrangement," "within usual parameters," both allows for and calls for "small and even not so small fluctuations." To act upon these natural fluctuations is to impose a draconian order on necessary freedom of the system. To "cure" is to harm, to act is to fall whim to the "lather" of anxiety and "meaningless nonsense." But this false equation of the economic with the socio-political and the bioecological with the economic denies the human handiwork which makes the "human arrangement" dynamic and therefore unstable in the first place. With our free actions subsumed by greater dictating systems, these systems in turn, falsely release us from belief and our own actions and our ethical obligation and arrangement.

This is not unlike how the spokesperson for Ozark would paint the chemical spill. Speaking of failures in the system, he contradictorily casts such failures as necessary parts of the design. He soothes,

> Indeed, such systems, inlaced with free parameters, must inevitably face periodic stresses, or what I call inbuilt risks; such dynamic systems, linking uncountable components, human and mechanical, will unavoidably encounter elements unforeseen to design, and will then exhibit maladaptive responses to such variables; this occurs primarily because of what I call the interactive "tightness" engineered into the system—there is insufficient "give" or "looseness" built into system procedures, either for self-correction or for phasic compensation; the resulting response is characterized as an accident, though it is inevitable, and indeed, in a sense, predictable— (LS 342)[80]

The spokesman makes contradiction seem not only natural, but comforting. On the one hand, sure, there may be due cause concerning the "linking of uncountable components, human and mechanical […] elements unforeseen to the design" that lead to "accident[s]."

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[80] As Kolb points out, government intervention and public anxieties, leading to financial "contagion," both contributed to not only the disaster of the crisis but the potential devastation of the next one. Indeed, government intervention such as bailouts and assisted mergers of large banks (notably different from aiding citizens and small businesses) not only acted of anxiety that those entities were "too big to fail," but created the even more future anxiety-inducing situation of *making* them so through its actions. See Kolb, *Financial Contagion: The Viral Threat to the Wealth of Nations* (2011).

Yet on the other hand, these accidents remain "predictable." In fact, these risks are simply "in built" into "dynamic systems," much like dynamic human arrangements, and in that sense show that they work. They are both an intrinsic part of systems "inlaced with free parameters, must inevitably face periodic stresses," and at once a consequence of the secure "interactive 'tightness'" of the system that allows for "give" or "looseness." In other words, the system, beyond understanding of mere citizens, is both tightly bound, yet loose and free, its accidents unforeseen but entirely predictable. But this is all natural and we should really all stop talking about it. For "We are convinced that this situation has created no risk for Ozark employees or our neighbors, though we recognize and regret that it has caused anxiety and uncertainty" (LS 341). The anxiety generated is regrettable, but really the fault of wandering, small minds, not internal—necessary!—contradictions to the system.

Accordingly, if such contradiction is natural, there is no need to be anxious, and no need to act. In both novels, the compulsion towards the dream and nightmare of "no thesis" arises not just from self-interest but from a sense that the towns' fates are beyond residents' control. Yet this sense of powerlessness is not felt as something awful, but as reassuring, quelling anxieties over uncertainty. While the residents of Anderburg deny their dependence on the now-defunct college and Wall Street's antics, those in Isaura cannot imagine a world uncradled by "Mother Ozark." "Always reliable, always responsible, they take care of things and look out for their people's benefit," praises an optimistic voice, "Mother Ozark is how people put it around here, and that's how I feel; I have a guardian, a protectress, someone who is concerned for me; when I wake up at night I can go back to sleep, knowing that; it keeps me warm" (LS 333). The town and the factory are inseparable, growing together since the 1880s into an entwined, seemingly reciprocal organism. Isaura's citizens view their dependency on the factory as natural, equating the health of the town with the health of the corporation. This trust, however, is inseparable from their economic reliance.

Such normalization of industrial dependency balms anxiety as it allows citizens to avoid facing the horror of their situation. The smoking, polluting stacks of Ozark are not seen as distressing but rather as intimate and comforting sights, "so familiar [...] just part of the landscape, so silent and familiar, always there." Another voice dismisses any concerns, stating, "— There would be a lot of starving sons of bitches in this town if them stacks weren't smoking; it's a damn fine town to live in; I mean, the economy is good because them stacks make money." Another citizen asserts, "[W]hat I know is that there would be no Isaura, period, without them; they're our bread and butter; almost everyone here benefits from them; it's a way of life with us—." To act against Ozark is viewed as unnatural and irrational, going against life itself. As one resident bluntly puts it, "[P]ut it this way: why should we bite the hand that feeds us—that's what I want to know; you have a life, you make a life for yourself, and that's it: goodbye; *goodbye*—" (LS 335). The absolute economic dependency on the company is seen as a way of life, integral to the community's existence rather than just a source of income. Economically chained to the factories, such chaining becomes the source of identity.

To Isaura's citizens, Ozark's production and propaganda present "the seeping smoke [as] the sign that things were all right, that it meant prosperity," "imagining all the things going on underneath them, all the people working, as usual, harnessing their efforts together," while hiding it under an impenetrable poison cloud. Respectively in *The*

*Lost Scrapbook* and *Flee*, environmental and economic collapse are anxiously spun as not simply natural but positive. While the companies, particularly Ozark, will use rhetoric that "co-opts genuine anxieties, even making use of what would, on the face of it, be an ecological and political argument," this is fairly unnecessary as the citizens themselves will lean into these bad faith arguments unprompted (Green 200). In keeping with the nod towards Hegel's dialectic in the sentiment "no thesis!," one citizen of Anderburg warmly evaluates the town's depleting population and economic tragedy as the dawn of a new, better age. "I can taste it now, I can *feel* it," they swell, "we are flexing petals in the flowering of spirit, riding, realizing Hegelian freedom, both catalyzing and incarnating its inexorable ascension—" (F 66).

This voice is not alone and *Flee* presents us with a cascade of justifications for both the collapse and lack of panic, all of which simply underscore such mental gymnastics as they embrace anxious chains of reasonings, comforting formulations in their avoidance of acknowledging disaster. Another exhorts, "—Call it reason. Call it eros. Call it the appetitive soul. Whatever: what's driving this is the human need for progress, for development, our irrepressible, history-spawning instinct to make things better, to push towards—" (F 66). Much like the businessman who sees any interference by the government in the local economy as alarmist nonsense, so too these voices will themselves into complacency by applauding their own destruction as good and natural. While some citizens do recognize the danger at hand, referring to the situation, be it the increased "upstaking" (moving out and away) or uncapped capitalism itself, as a form of self-mutilation akin to an "auto-immune disorder" (F 58), most view the self-annihilation of the public body more as a natural "auto-correction." "—Of course, man, of *course* …

What do you do with a mistake …? You fix it, you abort it, you brutally remove – you cut your losses and put the fucking thing to rest…" reassures one voice:

> Don't you see the *logic* ...? This – this town – is the microcosmos on auto-correct, curing itself, cleansing itself, perfective processes are taking hold … Taking over to accomplish what we, selfish dusts, will not – can not – do on our own … It's perfectly, inhumanly humanist, a great leap forward … So truncate this shit, truncate *all* of it, of course this is happening, it is the earth's song of *affirmation*— (F 72)

Another interjects, "—Reducing, cutting, rendering leaner, meaner, *tough*er – that's the route of advancement, that's the way of the world. And not only in terms of blind efficiency – there's a deep-seated human urge to get to the essence, to strip away the unnecessary, to delacquer, unvarnish—" (*F* 66).This collective delusion reveals the citizens' inability to recognize that in their embrace of destruction as progress, as affirmation, they ultimately hollow the ground they stand upon.

This destruction is cast not as a threat but as a natural, inevitable part of a "dynamic human arrangement" or destruction, like planned obsolescence, inbuilt into a "dynamic system." Such a stance is rooted in a perverse belief in a world that embraces benevolent destruction and contradiction.[81] Citizens in Isaura comfort themselves with this notion, as one exclaims, "Relax, will you?" before reassuring others that the carcinogen methyl chloride "has always been with us and […] always will […] for [our] entire life," claiming it is "naturally found in groundwater […] naturally occurring in every drop of water you use" (LS 348). Or more cynically, "I don't feel that anything they have there is any more dangerous than any of the other things we're exposed to; everything you do these days, it's all bad for your health" (LS 335).[82]

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[81] So as not to come off too Randian here, contradiction in itself is not false or inevitably devastating; complexity exists in the world. A Galtian A=A is not the final solution and equation of an actually dynamic world. However, when the contradiction that leads us towards annihilation is promulgated and popularized by politicians and corporations is sold to us as comforting and logical (and suspiciously in their interest), we ought to think twice.

Similarly, Carol in Anderburg, whose burgeoning startup unemployment agency, Hire Ground, capitalizes on the economic downturn, naively reflects that everything is working according to some greater plan. "I mean, our thing is seriously falling into place," concludes Carol about both the state of collapse and her own opportunism before she self-corrects, "No. Not falling. Assuming its natural position, its inevitable one" (F 93). Crises are cast as necessary for progress. In reality, both the ecological and financial crises depicted in Dara's novels—the deterioration of health, nature, markets, relationships, grounding, of *lives*—are deemed "inevitable" by the citizenry merely to avoid confronting the ethical burden of their inaction. This narrative advances a "pseudo-Darwinian," "scientifically backed" fatalism that legitimizes atomizing selfishness, inaction, and even tragedy (Midgley 3).

Dara's citizens embrace a view of evolution or dialectic where consequences are depersonalized, leaving them with clean hands and a world that moves forward without action, without a "thesis," and thus without an antithetical, negating counterpoint. "One component here, of course, is the alternate energy, the going solar," interrupts a voice at one of Rick's town halls about solar energy, "But widen the viewfinder: what about the energy used to construct the cells – and to install them—" (F 28). To "widen the viewfinder" here means to see that beyond every action is the potential of harm. To attempt to act upon a problem is to merely cause more damage, and so best to leave things be, in stasis. And yet, whether such a voice is right or wrong, such comments point to an inability to see the whole. No individual can with certainty find the wider view, from which any answer or understanding can be truly founded. By avoiding action, Dara's citizens believe they can escape recognition and consequences, preserving their autonomy while shirking communal responsibilities. They assume they face no counterpoint, becoming autonomous but ultimately impotent particles. They reduce themselves to "minima" while "architecting evanescence" (F 124). This belief blinds them to the "hidden currents" that flow beneath them, enabling their escape from the "toxic" threat of interpersonal recognition, obligation, or consequence. In their anxiety to have *some* sense of certainty and control, they paradoxically abdicate agency in exchange for a cynical "knowingness." However, the citizens' embrace of this pseudo-Darwinism and Hegelian negation may seem natural to them, but what they fail to comprehend is that what is being negated is not merely an abstract concept or a flawed system, but themselves—their own lives, communities, and humanity.

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[82] This is not unlike how Greer discusses Willoughby in Meredith's *The Egoist.* She writes, "The *anxious*, unethical sceptic exploits the conventions that give language meaning in a way that erodes confidence in meaning as such" (66, my emphasis). The anxious individual, with their understanding of the groundlessness of our claims, can take advantage of this secret knowledge of mutability and "nothingness" to their own end, to sow discord and further skepticism.

## IV. "I am my own man": The Anxious Violence of Soul-Blindness and Illusory Independence

While Dara's citizens place their faith in external systems to quell their anxiety, they at once place themselves as utterly independent of each other. In doing so, they do not project strength, but rather betray an anxiety of mutual responsibility and the "shame," or "anxiety of exposure" (AL 57-58; Laugier). Ironically, this denial of interdependence accelerates communal collapse, as it isolates individuals in a world that cannot sustain their imagined autonomy. They are thus left suspended, “hovering” in anxious uncertainty (WIM 101). Dara’s novels emphasize how anxiety’s tendency towards avoidance of intimacy, communal or otherwise, destabilizes us. Worse, in our desire to insulate ourselves from the anxious discomfort of introspection, acknowledgment, or exposure, we fall into what Cavell terms “soul blindness,” that is, a rejection of others’ inner lives, turning human connection into an insurmountable “intellectual difficulty” (CR 378, 493).

Cavell argues that denying our understanding of others, convinced our claim of “we” cannot reach their inner life, is really to “withhold the source of my idea that living beings are things that feel. It means “to withhold myself, to reject my response to anything as a living being.” In this state of being “soul blind,” uncertainty about the existence of other minds becomes hollow, as “there is now nothing there, of the right kind, to be known.” The body ceases to express anything, becoming, “not dead, but inanimate,”[83] offering no signs of consciousness or feeling or humanity. When we refuse to acknowledge the inner life of another, “there is nothing to read from that body,” no privacy or depth, not even surface, just an empty shell of interaction (CR 83-84). But this says more about us than those we project onto, laying bare our own anxieties about being seen, being understood, that would also indicate that the other has a claim on us. In Dara, this soul blindness that is the stripping away of mutual acknowledgment accompanies a society hitting its stripping point, where citizens flee from others, driven by anxiety over shared responsibility. As panic escalates, this blindness turns to resentment and violence.

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[83] Not unrelated to Wittman Ah Sing’s discomfort of taxidermy (or being taxidermied).

In Dara's portrayal, society becomes one of avoidance, to the point where "we do not now know what there is to acknowledge, what it is I am to make present, what I am to make myself present to" (AL 116). Like Cavell, Dara suggests that claiming the naturalness of a collapsing system masks an underlying anxiety about our own powerlessness and avoidance of responsibility for our situation and for others. As Cavell observes, avoiding recognition indicates "the shame of exposure" (AL 57-58). Yet, "[r]ecognition of the self and allowance of the self's recognition by others need to occur beforehand in order to recognize and receive others" (AL 45). However, this process is impeded by the desire for absolute independence from both people and events, a desire individuals are often anxious to maintain. Anxiety over dependence on others causes individuals to shun communal engagement in an "aversive turn from the very occasions of the subject's aversion" (Ngai 246). Dara's citizens anxiously contort their reasoning to avoid contamination by others, by justifying even the most destructively selfish acts of their revered corporations and systems, as well as the supposed "absolute freedom" of their own unrestricted autonomy. Yet, as Dara's novels make abundantly clear, this anxious distancing does not bring resolution. Instead, it exposes the artificiality of this "freedom from" and leads to further moments of anxiety and self-deconstruction.

In an anxious and desperate bid at "freedom from," tragically misguided citizens in each town view themselves as self-sufficient to the point of having no impact at all. "—I am a member of a democracy, a free country" declares a voice in A-Burg, "I am – legally and ethically–a free agent. What other people do is no concern of mine. It has no significance for me, save the immediately practical. And what I do that is within the law should have no bearing on anyone else–on *any*one, do you hear this? Do I make myself clear?" (F 78). By extricating themselves from community in the name of liberty, citizens ironically diminuate themselves, making themselves "clear," not as understood, but rather as ghostly invisible. In the process they deny their own significance.[84] Citizens mistake the false liberty of "freedom from" for the collective freedom democracy needs.

Such statements, instead of asserting individual authority, mark an accidental embrace of being non-essential. These voices inadvertently play into the logic of the "fungibility and replaceability" of interchangeability, that Marco Roth identifies as both a problem and an achievement of our economic system and Flee's aesthetic. Individuals attribute their forced decisions to personal choice. As one citizen professes, "I am *my* own man, and I am going because I want to go, because it is my choice to ups[take]—" (F 66). The anxious efforts of the citizens to assert control and disavow mutual responsibility lead to a severing of horizon and figure, annihilating both. Such severance grants them license to ignore the horizons against and only against which individuals find meaningful context. "Patterns" "dissolv[e]…into particles" as individuals remove themselves from communal circulation, dissolving them into "bland assemblages" walking gray light, or made small and written off as one of many, without connection to any greater whole or contextualizing and communalizing arrangement (LS 9).

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[84] It is worth noting that the citizen here appeals to a "contract" both social and legal that allows him this independence from others, while not recognizing any claim to and by others that such a contract necessarily evokes. Even the necessity, the dependency on others to *recognize* his independence is made ironically present in his question, "do you hear this?"—not too far from Dara's general "are you listening?"

Dara's narrative style, characterized by voices that rarely engage in direct dialogue, but in isolated fragments, accentuates the surreal and unnerving nature of avoidance. In Anderburg, one citizen considers avoidance not only melancholic but essential for the functioning of society. Conveying a visceral sense of rejection and disconnect, the voice laments,

> When, somehow, through some impossible chance, my glance happens to tap upon the glance of someone else, someone else turns away. Always, always, every time […] no matter who, no matter where, I look and I am dodged: their eyes shoot away, a dollar on a sidewalk, there and shoom, gone. The very second I offer my light, I receive eclipse. So I console myself, I tell myself perfect stories: that there is no news in this, that this is necessary for the world to function, the mechanism is working perfectly: nightlights shut off when they see sunshine. But the consolation works as it always does: it doesn't work at all. My stories must be for someone else, perhaps the person who wrote them. So I withdraw, I disperse myself, I look everywhere except where I most want to look, and I miss these people even without meeting them— (F 50)

A mere tapping glance on another, reduced to an unwanted intrusion, reveals the anxiety of vulnerability haunting these interactions. The citizen's attempt to rationalize the rejection as necessary for the world's functioning, that "nightlights shut off when they see sunshine," fails to console. Their self-consoling "perfect stories" fall apart, leaving the speaker to withdraw into further isolation. In *The Lost Scrapbook*, a runaway teen observes fellow transient figures in the "muted night" of the "silent park" he calls "home," a world reduced to automatic reproduction. They watch an "ever-replenishing succession" of "shadow-swept," "self-involved" figures, "raked by headlights" and "gauzed by the yellowish glow of lamps," moving like "turbulent standing waves" (LS 17). Each figure moves in isolation, never intersecting with another. Life has been reduced to an atomized existence of "simulat[ed] being-there-edness," akin to automatized lights winking in vacant houses to deter squatters and intruders with feigned occupancy (F 201). The inhabitants of these towns lack a communally binding system; they adhere to “no harmonies, no regularities.” Like these lights, “not one” individual “seems linked to another,” with perhaps the only pattern being that “no two windows facing each other, from adjacent homes, shine at the same time” (F 202). Patterns have indeed dissolved into particles, with the only commonality being a common avoidance and lack of attunement.

The anxiety over exposure to others, or the rejection of others, cause citizens to insulate themselves. In Dara’s novels, readers are often the sole recipients of characters’ thoughts, with statements rarely directed at anyone in particular, making each response private and inaccessible to others within the narrative. Dara’s aesthetic of often self-enclosed, fragmented confessions follows their characters’ anxiety about exposure to both harsh elements and each other, stressing the sense of vulnerability and apprehension that pervades their self-perception. This self-imposed isolation leaves them vulnerable to the external world, lacking a sense of the greater atmosphere that surrounds us. The wind “[s]hocks you anywhere you don’t cover up.” You are ravaged by “nicking, prickling” of discontented Winter, in “[a]nything you’re forgetful, trusting — stupid—enough not to totally cover—” (F 4). Despite attempts to insulate themselves, they remain exposed to the relentless intrusion of these forces. This anxiety of exposure extends to others, as most evidently seen in A-Burg’s growing fear of a fictional illness. While having no basis in reality, the wandering “sickness” amplifies paranoia-laced angst, isolating citizens rather than uniting them. Amid the unfounded health scare, one A-Burger spirals into anxious hoarding, reminding themselves to “stay calm, don’t be obvious, don’t be seen loading up." They reassure themselves that "no one will know, no chance, no way anyone will notice" (F 50), as they secretly stash canned goods and bottled water to avoid detection and competition from others.[85] The fragility of community bonds, exposed by sickness rumors, reflects a deeper societal fear of contamination, not just of food, but of each other. As community collapses, people retreat into anxious self-preservation, viewing others as competitors rather than allies.

In Isaura and Anderburg, anxiety over deteriorating conditions, and the anxious impulse to ignore those conditions, ostracizes those who attempt to address the issues rather than uniting citizens. The public sphere turns into a battleground of self-interest. For Isaura, the equating industry with community frames dissent as anxiety-inducing nitpicking that threatens the fabric of the community. The town's denial of Ozark's toxicity alienates dissenting voices, perpetuating ignorance and deepening dependence. As Antonini explains, when society reduces the public sphere to self-interest, "public discourse about… shared concerns" becomes "toxic or…partisan bickering" (1). This is as if acknowledging the problem is more contaminating and dangerous than the contamination itself. The president of the Isaura Homeowners Association sharply declares, "—That's right, no way; [...] I am not going to take this lying down: because you see the complainers, these complainers are destroying the peacefulness and harmony of the neighborhood over a bogeyman that just does not exist—" (LS 361). Concern itself becomes shunned as a contaminating force. This sentiment is echoed by another citizen, whose frustration boils over as he discusses his neighbor's response to chemicals being found in Isaura's soil. They fume,

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[85] One need only be reminded of the great toilet paper rushes of the early Covid-19 Pandemic days.

> — Aw, who the fuck talks like that, I says to him; but he don't hear, and then he just continues going on and on about it—Jesus, the way the damn guy keeps *yacking*; it's *enough* already, I says to him, you made your point—so a pipe burst near the school, what's the big deal?; be glad you weren't there when it happened—and he ain't got any kids neither; sometimes, when I'm out on the porch, I hear him through the window, going on about it on the phone to someone—I mean, the fucking guy's creating his own hardship: he's fucking *obsessed*; now he's saying he's gonna move […] let him go; as it is, yesterday I didn't answer the bell when I saw him coming over; I mean, so what if he knew I was home—what of it?; maybe I was busy; maybe I fell asleep in front of the TV, OK?— (LS 344-45)

Those who accidentally overhear such efforts, despite their alleged detachment, become infected by the unwelcome knowledge and concern, which triggers intense repulsion and anger. People turn against each other, especially targeting those who attempt to unearth or make sense of the imminent disasters. "And my neighbors are goddamn mad because I called the Health Department," laments a citizen of Isaura,

> but I only called because I had a few questions, I was just looking for a little information, but the Health Department couldn't tell me much and now my neighbors aren't talking to me—they see me on the street and they turn the other way; and I tell you, it makes me mad as hell to see that, and furthermore I want to ask them how the hell they know, how the hell did they hear that I had called— (LS 366).

Initiatives to understand and confront dangers are perceived as more anxiety-inducing than the disasters themselves, cultivating an environment steeped in nervous tension.

These antagonistic attitudes towards communal action and care nurture the fantasy of independence, uncontaminated by communal ties. The world becomes one where the human becomes uncanny and others are cast as automatons or strangers, with little regard for our interconnectedness. Human interactions are viewed as corrupting and repugnant. When this occurs, people begin to live “out of relationship,” to use David Derezote term in his discussion of religious conflict. Citizens live “in denial of their interconnection,” basing their “interactions… upon such motivations as gratification, obligation, or power,” often leading to behaviors and responses of “defensiveness, retaliation, and avoidance” (Derezotes 30). Citizens of each town collectively withdraw into “inner exile,” and soon they “don’t say anything now, not a word ; […]*no* one does, no one says a word to anyone” (LS 366). In A-Burg, violence and aggression increase as citizens, in their denial of interconnection, fall “out of relationship” and lose their sense of responsibility to each other. The breakdown of community goes hand in hand with a loss of facade in caring. In A-Burg, car accidents and collisions multiply, signaling the growing instability. Citizens are driven out of anxiety to flee the town and each other. As one citizen growls, “—I am through. I am out. I am getting out of here. I do not want this anymore! This is something I do not need to know about. Now the only thing I want is *get the fuck out of my*—” (F 62). As the town continues to fall apart, the everyday interactions between its citizens make an alarming shift towards explicit disconnection and disregard for one another. Increasingly, they navigate their lives with a sense of distrust and detachment, prioritizing personal safety and self-interest over community bonds.

As people start to leave or consider leaving, their connections to those they once lived with weaken, while their reverence for outsiders, whether corporate or individual, grows. One citizen observes,

> —Why, did you see – was that Henry Jenkins over there? [...] just knocking into a man passing in the other direction, and I know that passing man [...] I think his name is Don – just *knock*ing him out of the way and clobbering him and spinning him down til he had to grab a sharp wire wastebasket so

> he wouldn't hit his face into the pavement …? Then Henry just continuing on without looking back or saying any kind of pardon me – where's his manners?, where's what all he learned around here? – and then just keeping moving forward until he stops – *then* he stops, he stops when he's about to pass some man wearing penny loafers whom I don't believe is from A-burg, I've never seen him here, and then Henry pulls himself and his sack to the side and lets this man walk by all easily? (F 75-76)

This selective engagement and recognition reveal a community where long-standing relationships are disregarded in favor of self-preservation. Jenkins and others display Cavell's "soul-blindness," losing the ability to perceive others' humanity. When individuals become mutually soul-blind, they fall "out of relationship," signifying a failure to maintain "the right internal relationship to others" and, as a result, the same *Weltanschauung* and shared world (CR 378). We feel we are "dealing with ciphers" (F 111). This behavior is both a product of and a driver of anxiety. Soul-blindness appears increasingly as a response to the uncertainty and anxiety permeating the communities of Dara's novels. In Anderburg, one voice rationalizes the relentless escalation of a self-perpetuating, self-protective panic,

> —But maybe, you know, maybe this just feeds on itself. Maybe with fewer cars on the road the other cars just go faster – they see they can, and they *want* to go faster. Go, get out, the way is beginning to open, use it, use it before it closes up again, before even this non-opportunity dims. So hit the gas, gush it down, slake your engine's throat, and look, horrid, horrible, behold the consequences. It's panic squared, panic creating more panic, panic gone exponential— (F 113)

The increased physical and social violence depicted in both *Flee* and *The Lost Scrapbook* is a literal manifestation of this foundational splintering, where a breakdown in empathy and recognition fractures the community. In such an environment, anxiety distorts our capacity to connect with one another, making the erosion of shared understanding and common values painfully clear, deepening the divide and intensifying the potential for conflict.

However, this is not new but rather the most visible manifestation of underlying violence in societies defined by avoidance. As Dara suggests, the subtle violence embedded in everyday interactions is magnified by rising anxiety. Disconnection, whether in a dodged glance or withdrawal, is a quiet violence that accelerates destruction. The more citizens succumb to this anxiety and exhibit soul-blindness, the more they retreat inward and become indifferent to others' humanity. The runaway in *The Lost Scrapbook* acknowledges their own role in perpetuating indifference, admitting: "as I look at them, [...] I wonder which of these figures, too, are runaways, which of these scudding clumps are the moving forms of runaways […], but runaways whom I don't recognize, whose rightfulness I don't acknowledge" (LS 17). As Cavell warns, when the internal relationship between citizens falls out of attunement every interaction becomes a potential site of conflict or indifference.

Much like the voice decades later in Anderburg, whose stories fall on deaf ears and who craves merely recognition, the teen understands the power of a "glance." "Because it would take, I am sure, only a glance, only one shared eye-shudder, for all this to end, for their circumstances suddenly to reverse; [...] this, then, would be interpenetration, genuine interpenetration, a real refutation of figure and ground…" (LS 17). Yet, they melancholically conclude, "but this does not seem likely" (LS 17). Instead of pursuing such a reversing glance, the teen locks themselves away and uncommunally joining the others. "I clamp my Walkman onto [his] two good ears," shrugs the runaway, and "continue on": "one flung footfall after another, into deeper darkness, [...] walking, just walking, forever walking, just continuing, walking and continuing, they continue, they continue, they just continue, the endless succession of rushing cars just continues on, one car after another, entirely oblivious, entirely indifferent" (LS 18-19).[86] The teen joins a melancholy procession of atomized others, "I" turning almost imperceptibly into a self-alienated "they," not we, people merging into machines. These silhouettes anxiously avoiding each other's gazes, refusing to recognize one another's "rightfulness," and despairing of connection, reduced to mere existence, "entirely indifferent" to each other.

While in *The Lost Scrapbook* this succession is dirgelike, the multiplying car crashes in *Flee* suggest the presence of an anxious violence underpinning this indifferent progression, a violence born from the anxiety of violation by the claim of others. Dara suggests that this violence, always present even in our most intimate relationships, is horrifically magnified by mounting anxiety. The violence and anger that erupts in Isaura and Anderburg during catastrophe are both symptoms and causes of a deeper societal malaise—an anxiety-fueled blindness to the humanity of the other. When recognition fails, when citizens cease to see one another as part of a shared community, the potential for violence—both literal and figurative—intensifies. The world appears to close in, leaving little space for escape, with neighbors viewed only as obstacles to safety and refuge. Without this community, there proves little to fall back on when in panic the world bottom out.

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[86] This is a point where, so to speak, the radio dial of vignettes has been spun, where one scene seamlessly into the next vignette.

## V. “I can’t even control my head”: Disorientation in the Wake of Community and Reason

As the towns hit their stripping points, Dara’s novels depict the anxiety and disorientation of characters trapped in atomization. Bound by impersonal systems but disconnected from each other in any genuine, responsive relationship, as they confront the collapse of their autonomy and the chaotic forces of a fragmented society. Alone and free floating in their anxiety, citizens act like the concerned mother of Isaura, who “spin[s] noises out of silence, tweezing strands of sound from the night’s nothingness” (LS 344). This section shows how citizens, with their soft-constructions deconstructing, stammer and stumble through bankrupt forms of thought as they attempt to reconstruct some form of stability to stake their lives on. However, such falling back onto shaky grounds of thinking is not merely naïve but is tragically necessary as they innately have no other means available to them. Finding themselves projected into the air in their anxiety, citizens must find their way “back to rough ground,” even as this ground continues to quake (PI §107).

Amid the winding narrative of *The Lost Scrapbook*, a hitchhiker named Archie recounts to his driver an epiphany sparked by Einstein’s theory of relativity during a dizzying moment at a fairground. Archie reflects that special relativity implies “*every* point has a claim to a kind of centeredness,” and, “free” from “any larger architecture,” each point can see itself as "the center of everything […] claiming that the entire cosmos is actually centered around” the individual (LS 305). Disturbed by this conclusion, Archie decides to test the theory on the Spinning Tilt, a ride with a huge spinning platter and spoke-like black lines radiating from its center. Along with the other passengers, Archie stands along the outer wall, and when "the circle had been entirely inscribed with humans," the disc starts to turn and the ride begins. Archie describes,

> […]I'm, you know, moving around the circle with it, going around and around, […] going quicker and quicker; but special relativity says, you see, that another perfectly valid way of looking at this is that I'm stationary and it's the world that's moving, that everything is just spinning around immobile *me*—and I wanted to see if this could be the case; so the disc continues turning, and getting faster, and as I look out the fairgrounds are dissolving into blurry colors and streaks of light, and I begin to feel myself being pushed back against the ride's metal wall; and by then I'm getting a little nervous, you know, I'm feeling it in my throat, because it's already going really fast, and then all of a sudden the ride *really* takes off—I mean, it just gets faster and faster, unbelievably fast, and I can only see speckles and bleary smears of color and hear the racing of the engine; and then I close my eyes because they're tearing so much— and then I notice that it's becoming hard for me to move, and then that I really can't move at all—in fact, I can hardly budge a muscle, I'm pressed back into nearly total paralysis against the wall; I mean, I can't even control my head, everything feels heavy and leaden—[...] not strapped in but just powerfully pinned into position, you even feel it in your jaw, and the whole thing is going unbelievably fast, and you have no idea what the fuck is going on—and then I forced myself, I forced myself to do it, to open my eyes, and I did it, I managed to do it, and all I could see was a teary streaking of lights and little bubbles of color before I had to close up again, to shut myself in; so it couldn't be, it couldn't be the case, there's no way that all this was moving around me, Einstein was wrong— (LS 306).

Archie descends into silence, "brac[ing] himself" on the car's dash. Dara's citizens cling to the illusion that they are the center of the world, believing in their own importance and knowledge. Detached from others, they see themselves as unimpeachable, viewing their subjectivity as rooted in self-interest and certainty. However, the whiplash of the ride's relentless rotation uncovers a flaw in this perspective as all attempts at movement or escape become vain as everything blurs and we are pressed into the wall of the unstoppable whirl. Though we view ourselves as independent centers, our "whirling vision" shows that we are simply trapped (CIS 20). Citizens of Isaura and Anderburg feel as if held hostage by and with our fellow passengers, bound together yet unable to reach out.[87] When catastrophe strikes and panic consumes us, we find ourselves tragically linked by hidden currents of relation, prisoners to an unacknowledged mechanism, at the mercy of uncontrollable forces. Like Archie and all of Dara's citizens, we realize that our perceived centrality is a falsehood: we are all trapped in the same container. Though we may attempt to escape this reality by retreating into ourselves, the dread following disaster inevitably forces us to confront the lie of our solipsism.

Stuck spinning without hope of stable ground, we find ourselves unanchored and in a state of constant anxiety. As Kierkegaard noted, whatever freedom we have is an anxious, entangled freedom. The nothing exposed in anxiety, when the world bottoms out and ceases to make sense, is immediately confronted by the necessity of acting. It is that need to act, and act *socially*, that proves dreadful to Dara's citizens, and it is the desire for an unentangled freedom that generates an anxious withdrawal into self. So, Dara's citizens ignore their entanglement and responsibility to others. The search for grander, justifying frameworks stems from a disparaging and anxiously distrustful view of humanity itself. Our dissolving panic divulges how deeply the human aspect defines our existence and how repulsively fragile its foundation is.[88] We must painfully learn that "we cannot divest the world of the human, that we cannot escape ourselves—whether it be into logic or Hollywood Westerns;" and "this realization can be terribly disconcerting, bringing on great anxiety" (Braver 77-78). These disconcerting facts drive us away from both humanity and each other, as we begin to see each other as potential sources of pathogen or poison rather than support. In our anxiety about being contaminated by the lives of others and our dependence on them, we poison ourselves. *Flee*, despite its satire, remains a tragedy, as is *The Lost Scrapbook*, despite its supposedly "utopian" vision of collective action. Such tragedy, Cavell suggests, forces us to recognize, "we are responsible for the death of others even when we have not murdered them," revealing that what "we have come to regard as our normal existence is itself poisoning" (AL 103). The groundwater has been poisoned, not simply by chemical spills or financial malfeasance, but by our attitudes that have allowed for such poisonings and framed them as inevitable and worthwhile risks in our pursuit of freedom. Our attempts to mitigate the vulnerabilities of American democracy and collectivity have only exposed us more to the elements.

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[87] Dara has two hostage scenes in *The Lost Scrapbook.*

[88] Braver notes that the appeal to crystalline logic stems from this recoil.

The anxiety driving this denial of interconnection does not just poison our external environment, but permeates the structures of society, making every relationship we depend on feel tainted. The poison, these "imperceptible fragments," already flows through our systems, giving the water its "sweet taste you like and have come to expect" (LS 348). As one voice in Isaura points out, "...I mean if the water is bad, the hell with it: everything else is bad—" (LS 349). Just as "everybody all over Isaura [...] depend[s] entirely on [the now poisoned] groundwater from the wells—" (LS 357), Dara suggests that all the "hidden currents," financial or otherwise, that run beneath and connect the seemingly atomized citizens of the US are similarly contaminated. The depth of these hidden currents and groundwater, and the reassurances of "official statement[s]" claiming "no exposure," do not lessen the harm. On the contrary, the deeper the poison, the more impossible it is to simply “purify,” as it is deeply intertwined with the essence of life on the surface. We have allowed this contamination through our denial of our place within a “perverse” clockwork, neglecting to recognize the “hidden currents” whose source has been contaminated for some time. Poison flows through us because it flows through the logic of our relations, which, though we may neglect to acknowledge them, have never neglected us.

Anxiously falling “out of relationship” with each other, Dara’s citizens lose their ability to orient themselves. Without community, they lose reason, left free-floating in their anxiety. Failure to unite betrays panic as the dominant force. Once safe havens become liabilities. If, as Heidegger contends, the home, or dwelling amounts to the ability “to remain, to stay in a place,” “in peace,” “preserved from harm and danger” the invasion of chemicals or contagious anxiety nullifies the idea of home (BDT 147). One voice in Anderburg laments the situation as an unnatural disruption to an otherwise healthy ecosystem, decrying, “—It’s like this animal's been let loose that has no predators—” (F 58). More intimately, home no longer offers protection but transforms into a site of danger and invisible invasion. In Isaura, the paradox of water—a vital resource that simultaneously brings contamination—heightens this fear. One resident “freezes” in panic as their neighbor’s six-year-old daughter fills a glass of water, explaining, “I stop talking and my muscles tense and I don’t know if I should jump up or yell out to stop her” (LS 360). Another resident equates the presence of chemicals in their home to an invasion, feeling exposed and unprotected in their own space. “—And sometimes, after I get out of my car, and walk down my driveway to my front door,” they relate, “[...] I think: I will be in there [...] longer than any chemical worker remains in any factory—and without protection [...] and I am afraid, I am terribly afraid—.” Another cynically wishes for their house to burn down to escape the burden (LS 363). In Anderburg, the town’s citizens are increasingly replaced by transients; anxious citizens are horrified by the rumor “Anderburg, our Anderburg, is going to be re-zoned for projects – for low-income housing. For more of them” (F 57). Others dread the entire town might be taken over by the government through eminent domain, resulting in panic over the upheaval. They fret, “—Do you really think the whole city can be seized under eminent domain? That can’t be true, there’s no way that could happen, where would – I mean, what does that even mean? Seized by whom – to achieve what? To ram a road right through our …our everything? Where would we be in all this?” (F 57). As uncertainty mounts, even the most basic assurances become precarious, leading to a collapse of reason itself. The question of where we are becomes existential.

Amidst the dissolution of once-stable foundations, reasoning becomes an anxious process of “re-zoning,” a quest for stable ground to regain orientation, which is essential for thought. Anxiety not only projects internal disturbances onto others but reveals our “thrownness”—our existence already situated in the world, yet also as if propelled into the air, suspended in a void as the ground beneath us shifts or disappears. In this instability, characters project their internal disorientation onto others, externalizing their unease. Simultaneously, they are projected into an uncertain future, where negation is the only certainty, leaving them without stable ground, denying responsibility, and avoiding action. Ngai observes anxiety as a disorienting “dispositioning,” the mood’s “affective grammar” merging temporally and spatially into dislocation. (Ngai 212). Anxiety, as Ngai declares later, thus “emerges as a form of dispositioning” that may “paradoxically relocat[e], reorien[t], or repositio[n] the subject thrown" (Ngai 247). Yet anxiety's optimistic success in Ngai is far from a given or the norm. More often, we stammer as we attempt to articulate our position to ourselves and others, staggering in our efforts to find or redefine the ground upon which we can steady ourselves and gain a clearer perspective.

Without this stable ground--and here the "future orientedness" of anxiety comes to the fore—the future itself draws out in front of us horrendously uncertain. In their anxiety, citizens of A-Burg are left projected into uncertainty, finding no grounds upon which they can move forward and orient themselves in terms of choice and being:

> —Do I just surrender everything that I, and just—?
> —But, you know, which one—?
> —Which—?
> —Which direction …?
> —And like what – what if I choose – if it isn't the best—? (F 65-66)

Accordingly, at least in Dara's estimate, this ongoing state of anxious anticipation prevents any Heideggerian "individualization" (for better or worse) that might "restor[e] and…validat[e]" ourselves and our "trajectory," leaving us and our world in a state of discomforting, potentially annihilating suspension (Ngai 247). As one potential grandfather in Isaura ruminates in terror, "what will be born?; do you ask your kids not to have kids, or do you tell them that I, that they may be—" (LS 367-68). Another decries, "— Tainted forever with something that may strike or may not strike or may wait another eight generations to surface? —but when I tried to deal with this, to pull this into a form that was in any way manageable, when I—" (LS 368). Disoriented by the overwhelming uncertainty of the future yet to be born, we find ourselves unable to shape the present into any manageable form, losing grasp of both our environment and our identities.

Through the tragedies of Isaura and Anderburg, Dara suggests that our avoidance of interpersonal dependency and embrace of "natural" pictures from above lead to our atomization. However, this anxious avoidance destabilizes us, merely putting us "out of relationship" with each other and our world, rather than granting independence. Our avoidance of responsibility fills a vacuum, distributing shame democratically. This state emerges not just from hubris and greed, but from our self-denial and self-hatred. And yet avoidance cannot be sustained. Our collective groundlessness is inevitably thrust back upon us in repudiation of our technological and psychological apparatuses. As our world melts into air, our cognitive tools lose their firmness and clarity, plunging us into groundlessness. In this deficit, our meaning and reason depletes into seeming arbitrariness, exposing the abyss that is the real. And yet we have no other tools but those now shown to short-circuit. "Dread," writes Blanchot, "challenges all the realities of reason, its methods, its possibilities, its very capacity to exist, its ends, and yet dread forces reason to be there; dread itself is only possible because there continues to exist in all its power, the faculty that dread render impossible, that it annihilates" (GO 6). Anxiety's disorientation of reality and challenge to reason forces us to reevaluate how we make meaning and sense, while leaving us with no other resources but those broken down.

Nevertheless, this is exactly what the citizens in Dara's novels try to do when they fold into panic. In *Flee*, as individuals attempt to find meaning in their concrete contributions to a crumbling community, one character stammers, in a parody of theoretical grasping:

> —What is the preceding unsaid, the imposed premise in whose conditions we rattle, the implicit postulate that, with our every whim and volition and gesture, we continue, modify, extend, affirm, even through *de*-affirming it? What is that statement, that referent, that no one will say, or *can* say with rigor and conviction? The central and determining predicate that can no longer be brought forth? Why can we never *get* to the one organizing proposition that, in no uncertain terms, will— (F 154)

Faced with precarity, individuals must ground themselves in their inherent groundlessness, yet they avoid acknowledging this reality, anxiously chasing a false picture of foundational stability that no one can rigorously or convincingly articulate. As Braver explains, this atomization produces "an atomistic conception of entities" where relationships become "secondary, accidental" to a static core (105). Captivated by this impulse, Dara's characters anxiously pursue stable ground, though the "groundlessness" of these foundations feels futile and dehumanizing. More concretely, such sublimely theoretical grasping hides the deeply infrastructural, worldly parallel. As earlier reflected in *Flee*, even the builders of miles of infrastructure—those who laid pipeways and replaced traffic lights—are left questioning the value of their contributions as the community crumbles around them, asking, "Does it mean noth--?" (F 81). Such catastrophe, no matter how universal, is faced alone in each citizen's atomized state, with signals never reaching each other and noise multiplying, despite any "anti-radio" initiatives. The citizens in Dara's novels face this isolation, as they attempt to articulate the unsaid premise and yet are confronted by their inability to do so. The "groundless grounds" of our condition are not merely the limits of our understanding, where our "spade has turned," as Wittgenstein might suggest (PI §217); they are also places where we confront our inescapable entanglement with others—and dauntingly our responsibilities to them—if we are to maintain or regain any footing.

Yet, Dara suggests that we obscure this realization so thoroughly that finding a way out of these metaphorical woods back to each other, seems nearly impossible, even if we were inclined to try. We anxiously seek out *deus ex machinas* like natural processes (evolution), corporations, or even Reese Witherspoon (F 77), desperate for systems to absolve us—new gods to ground our lives. This desire for such systems shares an avoidance quality of "logical bad faith," which “attempt[s] to divest oneself of freedom in order to escape accountability and the uncertainty that haunts all things human” (Braver 76). One voice observes citizens in A-Burg spinning a posted Tibetan prayer wheel installed at “King and Church”—an act as anxiously self-soothing as it is baselessly appropriative, prompting them to leave their cars to engage with it. They recount, “But the people here [...] What do they think they’re doing? They, or most of them, can’t be aware of the background. Do they know what they’re participating in? Do they feel a need for circular movement…?” (F 141). Ungrounded by King or Church, this act contrasts sharply with the Spinning Tilt's obliteration of individual power, as people desperately grasp for both solace and a semblance of control in their unstable lives, despite the act’s inherent impotence.

By the end of both *Flee* and *The Lost Scrapbook* any semblance of a “referent,” an “organizing proposition,” or a “preceding unsaid” or “imposed premise” that could ground their citizens has been stripped away or revealed as arbitrary. Acts of creating foundations—literally laying infrastructure of pipes and circuitry—along with tender acts of intimacy and care, have at this point become meaningless or corrupted. As one citizen puts it concretely,

> [M]y whole life is in this house … For eighteen years I have given and replaced and maintained, first the back-porch roof then the Tamaracks when they had their run-in with the porcupines then the foundation slippage then everything else I've done. I've brought everything I have into this house, piece by piece, everything that I've acquired over nearly twenty years […] oh it took years, enough big pillows for my bed. And now that I am comfortable in my bed, my inner shoulders have finally learned to relax, now I can't— (F 82)

Just as foundations are made firm and beds made soft enough to relax, assurances dissolve, and with them the lives made upon those assurances. If dwelling intimately and fundamentally marks "the way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth," then our place on earth becomes uncertain as our foundation slips and we fall "out of relationship" with the world, except in its angst-inducing miseries (BDT 145). The quills of porcupines, once subdued, prick up. The systems we relied on are revealed to disregard what we value, as they may carve a road through "our everything" (F 57), and the history we revered turns out to be meaningless. As one A-Burger ponders, "And where are we in all this? What weight do we carry? We are a city that, over years and decades and centuries, [...] contributed to the nation's richness [….] Here, we made things, and futures, and fairness, and prosperity. Here, we worked and put down roots." They conclude,

> Here, we made lives.
> No: *here* made lives. (F 45-46)

Voices grapple with anxiety as the once-significant community confronts the insignificance of their efforts, realizing the systems they trusted have failed them. Like the porcupine's dilemma, their attempts at self-protection only lead to isolation. The yearning for connection now brings suffering, trapping them in a cycle of self-preservation and loneliness.

If our identity is solely defined by the physical space we occupy, then the collective “we” inhabiting this space becomes almost insignificant, as vaporous as our relationships with each other. As Cavell notes, the break in mutual understanding leads to existential and “intellectual tragedy,” where individuals find that there is no “we”—no collective sense of belonging (CR 34). Without this weight of community, our search for solid ground seems futile. Everyday imaginings become depressingly utopian, revealed as frictionless wheels attempting to find acceptable ground. “And I’m trying not to split, I’m really trying,” assures one voice seeking solace in the thin population during the early upstaking of A-Burg, “and now maybe I can find some kind of position somewhere, a position where I can stand thinking about it when I think about it – in construction, maybe doing truck repair, anything but office maintenance” (F 44). In the dissolution of the ground beneath our feet, we desperately look for some vantage point from which we can see clearly. Once lost on our own “cognitive map” (Ngai 14), reasoning becomes a re-zoning, an attempt to redefine space to repair the rupture of reason. Nonetheless, these attempts merely illuminate the abysses that have always existed, spotlighting that reason itself has always emerged from attempts to zone out solid ground where there is none. When the world slips away we are alone with ourselves.

Except, the world does not simply slip away, but also drifts in. Dread-inducing disaster is not an overwhelming absolute, Blanchot reminds us, but is what “disorients” any sense of an absolute, through “intense suddenness of the outside” (WD §14). In our dread, we do not merely struggle to find footing in the world; we also confront the harsh reality of the abysmal groundlessness that is our world. Similar to how we only notice infrastructure when it breaks, we confront not just our own groundlessness, but also the stark truth that something, even if abysmal, exists and cannot be escaped. Despite our desire to view our lives as private, we ultimately believe that everyone follows a similar path, and when the bottom falls out, we realize our representative thinking was simply our own idiosyncrasy. This does not cast us beyond the world's reach, but paradoxically plunges us further into it in our freefall. In essence, there is something abysmal in what it means to be human and to experience the anxious state of being human.

Dara's citizens anxiously seek higher grounds for purification and security, yet refuse responsibility, clinging to the false picture of freedom they would have to relinquish for safety. This paradox drives their unique tragedy, leading to self-destruction and perpetuating what Dara would later term a "permanent earthquake" of constant disaster. They try to reason this out, yet they never quite get there, to the point, never quite understand that their tragedy, and their salvation, is not an epistemological issue, but a responsive one of recognizing the very "condition" of "we," however fragile that "we" proves to be. Cavell sees our tragedy as a crisis or responsiveness, writing,

> Our tragedy differs from this classical chain not in its conclusion but in the fact that the conclusion has been reached without passing through love, in the fact that no love seems worth founding one's life upon, or that society—and therefore I myself—can allow no context in which love, for anything but itself, can be expressed. In such a situation it can look as if the state is the villain and all its men and women merely victims. But that picture is only a further extension of the theatricality which causes it. Our problem is that society can no longer hear its own screams. Our problem, in getting back to beginnings, will not be to find the thing we have always cared about, but to discover whether we have it in us always to care about something. (AL 120)

Dara's work suggests that in a society structured around abstraction and self-interest, we remain too distant from each other to truly hear our collective love or screams. Without this capacity to listen, there is no foundation for caring about anything that could sustain us against the constant interchangeability of individuals within our deified systems. We are unable to care because we reject the very notion of a starting action, a thesis. Instead, we engage in a zero-sum game, where each citizen is both victim and accomplice in their own diminishment. Our neglect of the interrelations and the infrastructure that should support us, renders these bonds fragile.

As the two towns near their final collapse, the remaining citizens are engulfed by consuming anxiety. Voices flood out in torrents of dread, merging in a collective outpour, yet each one eroding its own sense of stability. A townhall meeting in Isaura deteriorates into a sea of fluid angst:

> — And I am in the middle of something that is everywhere and in every direction and in every thing—
> — and without a past and without an end but with—
> — a constancy and an everpresence and a sense that I, that it—
> — will never go away and will never not return in some hidden form or in some hidden way and I want it to just go away and be forgotten and die itself and—
> — just go away, and I—
> — You can't sleep—everything just goes around and around and you get up and it seems like you're going to fly off and it's like this every night, every damn night and I—
> — feel like I'm out on my boat in Irondequoit Bay, that I'm hauling back on the mainsail fighting a killer wind, and it's buffeting my face and whipping my clothes and I'm reaching for the rigging and feeling it just burning through my grip—
> — and I hear the braying and the groaning wood and the groaning metal and the shoving gusts keep whistling and whipping—
> — *and it does not stop and it does not pause and I—*
> — and my burning hands are being *carried* and I am being *pulled* and *being taken—*
> — *and it is like, I mean it is exactly like someone shooting you and then not having the decency to finish you off—* (LS 371)

One representative passage from *Flee* flows:

> —And in town, what do I see …? All over the place …? I see people running—
> —On Maple Street, a man runs behind a CCTA bus—
> —There, in front of the parking building across from the cathedral, a girl, in yellow pants – she looks foreign, Asian – she's like charging over to the—
> —And—
> —And he, *they*—
> —I mean, what I'm hearing is—
> —What they're *saying* is—
> —It can't be avoided—
> —Nothing can be—
> —They – they say they're going because—
> —My friends are upstaking because—
> —They say there's too much—
> —Just *too* much—!
> —That nothing's being—
> —That no one's—
> —*Ev*erywhere, just everywhere there are far, far too many—
> —*That* the city doesn't—
> —And there aren't enough—
> —That everybody's—
> —The whole things—!
> —That the problem is—
> —Until they—
> —That no one—
> —*No* one—!
> —*That* no one in any position to—
> —No one who's supposed to—
> —That the system always, always—
> —That the structural, the systemic—
> —The instinctive—
> —I – I must not *be* here—
> —I must not *be*— (F 83).

Amidst the tide of "something that is everywhere and in every direction and in every thing," citizens find themselves "without a past and without an end," engulfed in torment where "no one is in position to" grasp the "structural, the systematic." In Isaura and Anderberg, pervasive dread, and an undefined current, pulls the inhabitants along, sweeping them as though out to sea. The force that "will never go away and will never not return in some hidden form or in some hidden way" points to the "hidden currents" subtly guiding their actions and connecting them. Whether out of economic downturns or environmental degradation, a toxic influence propels the community into a state of babel. Metaphorical and literal "hidden currents" bind citizens to a shared fate, as they remain victims of existential threats. In turn, the annihilation of space, "I must not be here," morphs into the existential "I must not be." Not able to fully communicate before, in their disaster, "losing what [they] have to say… [they] speak," striving to speak in "the loss of what we were to say; weeping when tears have long since gone dry" (WD §88). Their expressions, flowing in an anxious stream, take on a poetic dimension, yet these words offer no solace. United only by their shared dread and despair, their voices merge into a collective lament.

## Conclusion: Together in "[tears]"

*The Lost Scrapbook* and *Flee* portray a world where our anxious avoidance of interconnection weakens American society and democracy, leaving us with no foundation. Our anxious drive for self-sufficiency and rationality compels us to avoid contamination by others, but this comes at the cost of weakened security. Anxiously avoiding the limitations and tragedies of their responsibilities to themselves and others, citizens of Dara's America dehumanize, diminish themselves, and ironically delimit their potential to the point of tragic self-annihilation. In doing so, they unwittingly follow Cavell's bleak prescription, that "[i]f you would avoid tragedy, avoid love; if you cannot avoid love, avoid integrity; if you cannot avoid integrity, avoid the world; if you cannot avoid the world, destroy it" (AL 120). This tragic progression reflects the underlying collapse of genuine community in Dara's America. In a particularly American fashion, we anxiously flee from one another. We retreat into quarantined identities that provide the comfort of heat without light, abandoning the difficult work of sustaining a shared reality. In our anxiety and reluctance, we have diminished the "weight of we," all the while surrendering to the systems that will consume us. Isaura may fall, but corporations endure; A-Burg's population shifts, but larger industries persist. Fittingly, the endings of the central stories of each novel (in Flee's case, before a long epilogue and short coda) culminate in streams of anxious and despairing abandonings and farewells. Anderburg ends in tears:

> —And so I—
> —And so, what.
> —*What?*.
> —What is there to—
> —What can I, except—
> —Goodbye, Libby—
> —Bye, Libby—!
> —And say[…]"
> —And say goodbye to Sam—
> —Hey, Sam … Good—!
> —And Pittsky—
> —Pittsky—!
> —Good—
> —Goodbye—
> —And Mané—"
> —But what I'm—
> —[with tears] Goodbye, Mané—
> —But what I'm trying to say—
> —And Steven—
> —[with tears] Steven—
> —What I'm trying to *say* is—
> —[with tears]— (F 168-69)

As the town floods out in [tears], Anderburg settles into a new reality. Dogs rifling through the remnants of the town now replace the residents. Life has been reduced to survivalism. Yet, even as citizens flee to other "ports" in search of shelter from the economic storm, it remains unclear whether this movement signifies any real change.

Isaura, in a beautiful, unremitting dirge as citizens collectively prepare for their removal from home made a wasteland, reflects the inevitable unraveling of a society. The citizenry have been reduced to their "fear." They despair,

> — Why should I even think that—
> — Why should I even think—
> — I mean, what is there to accomplish by thinking?—
> — I mean, I can do nothing, I can accomplish nothing by thinking—
> — Nothing will change, nothing will get better if I—
> — Nothing will become any clearer if I—
> — Except fear; except that; when I think I fear—
> — I mean, my thoughts have become fear—
> — I only bring fear—
> — I am only fear—
> — What I am left with is fear— (LS 431).

As a town become fear dissolves, the echoes of a fractured community fade into the silence, the remnants of human attachment are swept away, leaving behind only the hollow vestiges of what was once a vibrant, interconnected reality (LS 471). Thus, it is no surprise that Dara seems to end their novel with a vision of unity only in deathly silence. Isuara flows out in voices, signal and sound,

> […]flickering and lost to the definitive regathering, the comforting regathering into continuity, into continuousness, into abundance, into that abundance that is silently and invisibly working on every variation, into full and enfolding abundance, into the extreme abundance of silence, yes into its opulent abundance, its sweet unity and opulence, this definitive regathering into willed abundance, into the sweet abundance of silence, of unity and silence, yes this definitive reclamation, this grand extreme regathering and reclamation into silence, for where else could this go but silence, yes silence: silence. Silen (LS 476)

Chaotic attachment to material memories nervously swirls alongside an uneasy acceptance of loss, reflecting a meditation on what it means to be whole. This points to a "definitive regathering" into silence, a transformation of the fragmenting noise into a potential unity of "sweet," "opulent" abundance, while simultaneously holding the shadow of annihilation through silence over our heads. To simply see this silence as healing is undercut by the inability to listen and connect illustrated by voices throughout the first, chronologically, later half of the novel. The descent into a non-annihilating silence, angst soothing enfolding, is tenuous at best. It is far from certain that in flowing of anxious shards that a "final suture" to society has been uncompromisingly achieved in the "definitive regathering" Dara presents (Laclau and Mouffe 114, qtd. in Lee 11). Instead, Dara's novels dissolve in unheroic, apocalyptic whimpers, whose tragedy is in part their middling capacity for tragedy itself.

Nevertheless, despite this mixed and grim outlook, Dara's novel also suggests that in such "gathering" and "silence," we may also find an anxious hope. While here silence may be annihilating, if taken not as death, but a sleep-like pause, not unlike David's, it may also provide space, if we allow it, for necessary listening and regathering. Dara suggests hope lies in our inevitable dependency on each other. Archie, whose vision of Spinning Tilt provides the supreme example of our finitude and obsolescence, provides another image from his time at the fair. He relates,

> you know, I was kind of feeling like shit at that point, and I needed to reassemble myself a little; [...] and I happen to look into the midway and there's this couple doing something really cool: [...] both of them have something the matter with their legs; so they've rigged this system whereby they move by linking one of their arms and using a single pair of crutches to hoist themselves forward—that's together, in one movement, like a big swing; and it worked, it worked really well, with the two of them between the one pair of crutches: they took big lurches forward, and really got where they were going, moving very quickly; I tell you, it was pretty cool… (LS 308)

Archie's vision embodies the idea that our strength lies not in independence but in embracing our human frailty and interdependence—not through certainty or isolation, but through mutual need and trust. Although this reliance comes with anxiety, we cannot progress meaningfully outside the context of others. We must open ourselves to mutual recognition, as our only certainty is our reliance upon one another—or face mutual destruction as the alternative. Dara's works suggest that against despairing to the "possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all," that is death, that embracing the "possibility of possibility" exposed by anxiety may revitalize democratic communities through faith and mutual engagement (BT 307; CA 42).

If Dara's work carries a utopian message, it is that within the possibility of destruction lies the possibility of collectivity. We must rebuild ourselves, knowing this process will need repetition; we must lay the infrastructural supports of "wrought-iron trusses for miles" beneath us, with a deeper awareness of the "hidden currents" that connect us, to "forge and seal a closeness" otherwise unreachable. The fact that this infrastructure, forged from such "crooked wood as the human being," will perpetually need maintenance and reconstruction is not a sign of its failure but a testament to the freedom that comes from our ability to repair (Kant 8:23). By recognizing our mutual dependency, we find freedom and strength not as the "freedom from" of isolation, but in our shared ability to repair and rebuild. This recognition is not only a matter of practical necessity but also a foundational requirement for the sustenance of democracy itself—a democracy that thrives not on the anxious avoidance of others but on the active acknowledgment of our shared conditions and responsibilities.

The poisoned water system of Isaura and the corrupt financial hidden currents of A-Burg reflect a pervasive contamination infiltrating social fabric. In this way, the citizens' dread of each other becomes a reflection of their awareness, however subconscious, of the deeper pollutants that threaten not just their health but their very capacity for community and democratic life. Dara illustrates a world where people "retreat into internal exile" to "resis[t] the pressures of social objectification" (Green 202). Yet this self-isolating and diminuating both renders each into "social particles" while "reduc[ing] individuals to the status of hostages [...] held purely for their exchange values in a quantitative trade-off" (Green 202). To avoid condemning ourselves to be to some perverse, halting clockwork, we must embrace this continuous process of renewal. As anxiety-provoking as this thought may be, it underscores the central feature of our shared humanity. In the long collective swelling at the end of *The Lost Scrapbook,* Dara's voices arch toward the empathy, mutual acknowledgement, and understanding that can be found in our complex, interconnected existence:

> […]where else could it end but here—at the away, the definitive away, the conclusive away, for this is our classicism, our contemporary classicism, this is our willed determinism and sought-after structure, the nostalgic dynamism that strumpets fractal consciousness, that totals the holomovement, that goes beyond the Encompassing, beyond the reaches of distributed memory and even beyond these exercises in extended empathy, bringing to crib death even the babies satisfactorily born, putting to rest even the catcalls of misplaced Millenarianism[…] (LS 476)

Engaging in "exercises in extended empathy" marks Dara's utopian task of constructing an ethical, non-totalizing whole from the shattered pieces. The shattering of the world, though dreadful, compels us to reconstruct out of that anxiety.

Our tragedy, and our hope, is that we are together, if not in communal joy, then in tears. As Cavell notes, both sanity and skepticism involve a "repudiation of language (or reason) by itself" and, if possible, the recovery from this repudiation marks a "return" from "tragedy" or "the community's expulsion" (CT 64). In this anxiety, instead of succumbing to despair, we find the impetus to respond to the world—a re-membering of sundered limbs, insisting on reconstitution. Though disorienting, this anxiety can fuel the drive to rebuild, creating a new collective grounding that acknowledges interdependence and mutual responsibility. This may not be possible in Dara's worlds, but as readers, in our privileged position to the anxious, fragmented thoughts of their citizens, we may begin the act of re-membering a social body that has been fractured in anxiety. Against an anxious skepticism that drives individuals apart, through an "anxious-listening" for the other in our reading, we may perform the "world-disclosing," world-building "work associated with conversation" (Greer 61).

This conversation, in reality, can feel anxiously impossible. In the United States, many feel in our daily blues forever fractured, seeing our neighbor as the enemy and viewing communication and empathy as contaminating and futile. In the wake of January 6th, 2021 Cavell's observation that the Civil War "was not a revolution; the point was …secession and union, the point was its identity" feels darkly relevant (AL 115). Havercroft notes that "post-truth politics" reveals the inherent fragility of American democracy as "opposing sides of a political community… operat[e] with different sets of facts," resulting in disagreements, not just over policies, but over the criteria of truth. This epistemological schism leads to anxieties that generate "fantasies" of "political exit and rebellion," with both red and blue states indulging in secessionist reveries (Havercroft 33). Since 2016, countless articles advise severing ties and communication with "the other side." Yet this is also all symptomatic of a broader societal atomization marked by anxious hesitation to interact. To justify our lack of responsiveness, we create new logics of avoidance. Dara addresses the existential crisis of forming community in a world driven by avoidance.

In fact, Dara contends alongside Cavell and Auden, we willingly embrace our own destruction before confronting these profound challenges, welcoming open-armed the ash of Vesuvius rather than pivoting our course (F 118). As Cavell observes, "despair, always a mortal temptation, is now a mortal danger," a "world-destroying …despair [caused] by an illusory hope—a radical process of disappointment with existence as a whole, a last glad chance for getting even with life" (CHU 130, 131). Such despair comes from our "fear of life, and avoidance of it" (130). The cycle of denial and despair described by Cavell echoes the tragic self-deception in Dara's narratives. In the face of a skepticism of others and our discomfort of our entanglement with them, we may fall out of relationship, out of conversation with them. As "[w]e cannot predict the conversations that will shape and reshape our worlds," as Greer asserts, we may choose to avoid these conversations entirely (18-19). Greer admits that "that the ideal of conversation, as a model and technique in justice and morality, is itself subject to transformation" (62). That we anxiously don't know how to "go on," whether because we have lost the illusion solid footing, found the future uncertain, or because we would rather be silent, even incomprehensible in the face of another, may cause us to reject the world and others to avoid discomfort and responsibility.

Nevertheless, Dara understands the self-annihilating dangers of anxious avoidance, skepticism, and atomization, when we refuse to try and "go on." At first, we may "[find] ourselves on a certain step we may feel the loss of foundation to be traumatic, to mean the ground of the world falling away, the bottom of things dropping out, ourselves foundered, sunk on a stair." However, once past the anxious step and onto another, "we may feel this idea of (lack of) foundation to be impertinent, an old thought for an old world" (NYU 109). We cannot make this step, call it a leap, alone, but must move past our anxious suspicion and swing ourselves together forward. Yet this is a move that can only be completed by initially moving through that anxious moment. Dara's novels depict a fragmented reality where each seemingly self-contained vignette or voice cannot stand alone, gaining meaning only within the larger social context. As Greer notes, it is "conversation as a response to scepticism" which in turn requires as Dara might say, an "anxious listening" to bridge the gap between us (Greer 2; LS 344). It is an uncomfortable exercise, yet one that is necessary to survival. In catastrophe and panic, the shattering of our hedged world may reveal that our anxieties bind us together more deeply than we realize—ties that could lead us either to a universal graveyard or to the opening of more expansive, if imperfect, horizons.

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