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**Regarding Suicide: A Textually Informed Rhetorical and  
Psychoanalytic Construct of the State of Disconstituency,  
Disconstitutive Rhetoric, and the Disconstituent as Related to the  
Constitutive Rhetorical Structure of the Vanishing Subject**

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REGARDING SUICIDE: A TEXTUALLY INFORMED RHETORICAL  
AND PSYCHOANALYTIC CONSTRUCT OF THE STATE OF  
DISCONSTITUENCY, DISCONSTITUTIVE RHETORIC, AND THE  
DISCONSTITUENT AS RELATED TO THE CONSTITUTIVE  
RHETORICAL STRUCTURE OF THE VANISHING SUBJECT

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
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in

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by

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This dissertation is dedicated to John, Alex, and always Kryn.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Suicide contagion is a real phenomenon. The stigmatization of suicide attempters, completers, survivors of suicide loss, and the idea of suicide itself is at least partly to blame for these outbreaks. Regarding suicide as an analyst, journalist, witness, responder, or bereaved family member or friend can be a devastating form of metaphorical and literal looking. Through a psychoanalytic understanding of constitutive rhetoric, this dissertation offers a textualized way of considering the difficult process of giving individuals who have completed suicide one's regard. Beyond just suicide, this rhetoric of regard presents the disconstituent as the lost persona that withdraws from identification practices. In so doing, this work offers a methodology which articulates the painting technique known as the "vanishing point" through the Lacanian subject positions of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. This dissertation argues that identification can be understood as a demand for a false confession of a subject that does not really exist through Kenneth Burke's notion of "the negative" and "self-abnegation." The disconstituent is the persona lost to and by the subjective practices of identification. Disconstitutive rhetoric is the false confession and interrogation that creates the state of disconstituency which resides within the regarded disconstituent. This dissertation concludes by arguing for an ambivalent regard which mirrors the disconstituent withdrawal while still allowing for the one regarding to feel for the regarded.

Key words: Constitutive Rhetoric, Kenneth Burke, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Studium and Punctum, Regard, Suicide, Suicidology, Vanishing Point, Identification, the Subject



## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

I was eleven years old when my brother, William Kryn Blaisdell Womesldorf, completed suicide. It is one thing to perceive that something is empty. It is another to perceive that something is missing a part of what it seems to be and thus to perceive emptiness. Kryn's suicide occurred on December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1988, which was both the last day of classes before Christmas Break at my school in Thibodeaux, Louisiana and the day my mother and I planned to move to Lake Charles, Louisiana to reunite with my father. My father had been an Episcopal priest for all eleven years of my life in Thibodeaux, but had recently transformed into an Episcopal priest in Lake Charles. My sister remained in Thibodeaux for the remainder of her senior year.

Kryn had been in college for a couple of years. He initially attended school at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana and transferred to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. It was in Baton Rouge that he killed himself. Here are some things I can tell you about Kryn with some confidence: he liked playing basketball and was a punter/kicker in football, he drove a blue Chevrolet that he called "Blue Thunder" based on the 1980's TV series, he was nine years older than me, he was the one who ran while carrying me home after I injured my wrist, he used to trick me into going to the bottom of sleeping bags where I would be trapped and swung in a circle, and he checked into a hospital in Baton Rouge due to severe depression.

The realities of time and trauma have rendered a great deal of my memories of Kryn, and the aftermath of his suicide, distant if not entirely lost. The shock of a suicide completed by someone you love is extraordinarily destructive to everything that you believe about yourself and the world. One of the memories that sticks with me, though

even it has begun to fade, is the memory of sitting on a bench at my brother's wake across from the room where his body filled a casket with his suicide. My parents asked if I would like to go see Kryn. I declined. I was sitting with my two closest friends, Nikki and John. No one questioned this choice to not go see Kryn one last time. My friends simply expressed dismay at the fact that I was not crying. I remember saying, "I'm all cried out." Over the years, this has proven to not be the case, but I am still good at wearing that mask. The truth is I could no longer bear the weight of mourning Kryn's death. When my parents asked me if I wanted to go see Kryn, the journey was too much for me. I could not bear seeing my brother, whom I still desperately love, because I *knew* that I would *see* his suicide. At this darkest moment in *my* life, I was not prepared to give him my regards. My mourning is still incomplete, and I believe it always will be.

### **Regarding "Regarding"**

This dissertation is not about clinical depression. It is not even precisely about suicide; rather, this dissertation is about regarding suicide. I choose the term "regarding" in the spirit of Susan Sontag's (2003) *Regarding the Pain of Others*. While she never explicitly defines this central term, it seems to mean a type of looking that is studied and respectful, a type of looking that approaches an other with a personal history of looking and feeling, a type of looking that enters the scene with the honesty of being an *I/eye*, and a type of looking that happens in public spaces which risks the possibility of this looking being regarded itself. Sontag makes it clear that "One should feel obliged to think about what it means to look" (p. 95). As she argues, "photographs are a means of making 'real' (or 'more real') matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore" (p. 7). Here, Sontag points to the idea that sometimes a photograph happens to the viewer in

such a way that demands the viewer's regard. In this way, the spectating *I* wagers its *self* in the scene that is regarded, taken and re-presented for regarding, which becomes a site of interactive remembering where the *I* mingles on some seemingly deeper level with its other. It is precisely to "give one's regard" as a witness who has agreed to not take looking for granted. Of course, this type of looking is difficult in any situation and particularly so with regard to images of suffering. We, in fact, often find ourselves renegotiating the terms of our agreement. Sontag observes that there is "shame [...] in looking at the close-up of a real horror" (p. 42). We look as if we are looking intently while we begin looking away.

Sontag's sense of "regard" is somewhat different from Robert Hariman's (1986) usage in "Status, Marginality, and Rhetorical Theory." In his consideration of "status" and its corresponding placements of "centrality" and "marginality," he offers "regard" as an important position within the "complex" of "doxa" (p. 48). Within Hariman's "doxa complex" as a "correspondence with *episteme* [italics Hariman's]," "regard" shares the same *airs* as "ranking" and "concealment" in order to formulate a way of thinking about rhetoric that is no longer caught up in the throes of "rehabilitation" from Platonic subordination in the search for truth (pp. 48-51). Thus, Hariman's sense of "regard" is a matter of "reputation" and "expectation," "the regard in which one is held" that is "both a description of one's being and one's worth" (pp. 48-49). As he succinctly puts it, "One is what one is said to be" (p. 49). Hariman's "regard" is not precisely "regarding." Regard, here, is an end even if it is never fully settled. Instead, it is the "product of ranking," but he also notes the importance of "concealment" as a way of managing this production (p.

49). Like status, one generally attempts to achieve a *higher regard* within social hierarchies which entails discretion.

For Sontag, one attempts to give one's regard to something that has, at least in part, been revealed. For Hariman, one attempts to earn another's regard, at least in part, through the act of concealment. On closer examination, though, it is a similar, if not the exact same, regard that is being considered. Hariman's presenting subject is seeking the regard that Sontag's viewing subject wants to give. Both are contingent on partial revelation. Indeed, both are geared towards a kind of doomed knowingness and knownness. As Hariman (1986) suggests, "No one is known in one's entirety" and "one's exact identity" could "only" be known "as a complex of particulars" (p. 49). In other words, for Hariman, a fixed regard is impossible due to an inherent concealment on the part of the regarded subject and must be either actively maintained or removed. Hariman argues that "regard is in part achieved by the concealment of rank," and that the resulting reconsidered rhetorical concept of "doxa" might be understood "as the mask of meaning" that functionally "activates all the anxieties of displacement" (pp. 49-50). In Hariman's argument, it is difficult to discern whether he is claiming that this "doxa mask" is transforming meaning, hiding meaning, or using the idea of meaning as the mask itself. Perhaps it is an articulation of all three within his complex of rank, concealment, and regard respectively.

If one correlates the idea of "regard" with the idea of using meaning as the mask, "concealment" becomes something a little different. What does "meaning" mask? An important difference between Sontag and Hariman, at this juncture, is that Sontag is discussing "regarding" in the context of looking at pictures of others' suffering.

Similarly, the two discussions are about the others' effect upon one's regard, but Sontag's "other" is a human being that is regarded in a picture, and Hariman's "other" is another human being who does the regarding as a part of an exterior society. Nonetheless, Sontag's regarded other *seems* to also push back. The important difference is that while Hariman's "other" can just as easily be understood as an *active we* within the social maneuvering of constitutive being, Sontag's "other" can no longer actively participate. Thus, it is the constitutive position of *we* who are caught in "all the anxieties of displacement." These anxieties of a *we* may very well be what meaning masks. As Sontag (2003) puts it, "No 'we' should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain" (p. 7).

Hariman (1986) argues that "status" is a matter of being either "central" or "marginal" and that "we empower discourses by imposing social order upon the world that relegates words, writers, and speakers to zones of centrality or marginality" (pp. 38-39). Again, his article is addressing a feeling of marginalization within rhetorical theory, and he concludes that rhetorical theorists need not "resist marginality" nor "endorse authority" because of the constitutive power of being the "other" (pp. 50-51). In other words, *we* can be the constitutive margins of the ontological project without endorsing any particular center. But, what happens when *we* find ourselves both at the center and no longer being regarded ourselves? What happens, for instance, when *our* other whom we are regarding completes suicide? This is along the lines of the decentralizing force that Sontag is after with her sense of "regard." She is attempting to capture the moment when our regard of another's suffering undoes *us*. This is the type of "regarding" that this dissertation is considering—regarding that undoes a constituency of us. Sontag (2003)

notes, “It is felt that there is something morally wrong with the abstract reality offered by photography; that one has no right to experience the suffering of others at a distance [...] the standing back from the aggressiveness of the world which frees us for observation” (p. 118). She concludes, “There is nothing wrong with standing back and thinking” (p. 118). I tend to agree.

I don’t exactly remember the situation, but I remember telling my mother that I had done some reading with regard to depression and that I had concluded that, “Kryn will be okay.” It’s a strange memory because I see it in the Lake Charles kitchen. This isn’t impossible because we obviously visited my father while he was living there without us. Yet, it feels out of time like the certainty of a gasp. It’s a different sort of looking while looking away, one of those memories that are like a parent slowly backing away in the pool to teach the child to swim. It’s *almost* terrifying. It’s also the first time I specifically remember lying about knowing. I was masking something inside of me with meaning. I cannot say whether this mask was successful or not at the time, nor can I say whether the mask was for my mother or for me, but I can say that I was very likely wrong. Kryn would not be okay.

You can imagine the scene of the littler me learning of his older brother’s suicide. I had just arrived at my completely empty home from my last day ever at my school in Thibodeaux excited about Santa Clause and new adventures in Lake Charles only to discover the solemn faces of family friends, my mother, and my sister. We went back to my parents’ empty bedroom and exploded into the very meaning of gut-wrenching sobs. Shortly thereafter, I ran to a friend’s house and attempted to play until my friend’s mother came upstairs into the room with a knowing look and gave me her regards. These regards

were not comforting. They confirmed for me that I was radically no longer the same person that I had believed myself to be for so long. In this way, my friend's mother's regard was not empty, but the moment was rapidly emptying out. The most terrifying thing about cemeteries is the complete lack of ghosts. When your brother hangs himself with the cord from the blinds in his hospital room, that emptiness is simultaneously terrifying and reassuring.

This emptiness is that to which this writer is also attempting to give his regard through this dissertation. This emptiness is also what makes Kenneth Burke's opening of *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1969b) so fascinating for this reading writer. Burke opens a treatise on the way in which people validate one another's connectivity through processes of identification with the example of Milton's depiction of Samson's suicide. This moment is more than a professor sitting on a desk being clever for the adoring students and asking, "But, why suicide?" For me as a reader, it's Robin Williams, the actor and comedian who will later commit suicide in "real life," tearing out the introduction of a book on how to correctly read in an effort to avoid a student's future suicide in a script—a student that wanted to be someone other than who his father *regarded* him to be. It is beginning as failure.

This dissertation is decidedly not guided by the question of what it means to regard suicide as beginning as failure. I do not argue that suicide is necessarily a failure. Instead, there are two research questions at work in this dissertation. First, what does it mean to regard suicide *from the standpoint* of beginning as failure? And, second, what might a method for grappling with the implications of this failed regard look like? To answer these questions, it is necessary to visit the foundational rhetorical theory of

“constitutive rhetoric” in order to best position both my meaning of “beginning as failure” and this dissertation’s contribution to the field of rhetoric. Specifically, constitutive rhetoric offers an opening into understanding *who* regards *whom* from the standpoint of beginning as failure.

### **Constitutive Rhetoric**

Beyond Burke as a general background, the initial foundation of constitutive rhetoric in the field of rhetorical theory can be located in the works of Edwin Black (1970), Michael Calvin McGee (1975), and Maurice Charland (1987), with significant contributions from Raymie McKerrow (1989), Charles E. Morris III (2002), and Philip Wander (1984). The theory of “constitutive rhetoric,” itself, is first coined by Charland in his article, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Québécois*” (1987). In it, he builds upon Black’s (1970) concept of the “second persona” as a rhetorical transformation of audiences and McGee’s (1975) “rhetorical alternative” of “the people.” Black (1970) is concerned with the productive power of a *perspective* that is rhetorically projected onto a potential audience that may become real as a result of this projection. As he concludes the article, “the critic may, with legitimate confidence, move from the manifest evidence of style to the human personality that this evidence projects as a beckoning archetype” (p. 119). Like the second person grammatical position of *you*, Black is suggesting that a rhetor may lure an audience into becoming a particular *you* that is constructed through the rhetorical practices of an *I*. His *I* is the “author” that “a discourse implies” through ideological “tokens” that may be read as “external signs of internal states” (p. 110). Black acknowledges that this rhetorical first persona that he generally labels as an “author” is “not necessarily a person”—what he suggests is “the



distinction between the man and the image, between reality and illusion” (p. 111).

However, his overall point in his treatment of the “Radical Right’s” rhetorical usage of the metaphor, “the cancer of communism,” is that the rhetorical construction of a second persona, an “implied auditor,” can very well become an “actual auditor” with ideological consequences (p. 113). As Black posits, “The quest for identity is the modern pilgrimage. And we look to one another for hints as to whom we should become” (p. 113). His point is that an audience desires the lure because the audience wants to emerge as identified.

Where Black leaves rhetorical theory with an abstract audience that might be or might become, McGee (1975) offers an audience in the form of “the people” who “are both real and a fiction” in that they are real individuals collectively transformed into the identity of “the people” through rhetorical processes (p. 240). For McGee, “process” is important here. He argues that “the people” are “conjured into objective reality, remain so long as the rhetoric which defined them has force, and in the end wilt away, becoming once again merely a collection of individuals” (p. 242). Within an overall context of Marxist “false consciousness” logic, McGee observes that the “political myths” which rhetorically constitute a “people” out of a collection of individuals “are nonetheless functionally ‘real’ and important,” because these political myths articulate “a ‘people’ who can legislate reality with their collective belief” (p. 248). Importantly, he uses the example of the Marxist consideration of class struggle in England to suggest that the “class struggle” was not “made” by the “working conditions,” but by “human responses to working conditions” (p. 248). He defines these “human responses” as a rhetorically constitutive “filter for ‘facts’ which translates them into beliefs” (p. 248). Thus, through this functionally ideological and legislating people, McGee argues that rhetoric is a

powerful tool that makes real conditions for living out of its redefinition of material reality within a complex of the competing myths and realities of collective living (pp. 246-249). In other words, rather than depending on the material of materialist philosophy, rhetoric informs and shapes it. As he concludes, "Pursuing a rhetorical alternative in defining 'the people' leads one to the importance of recognizing the collective life as a condition of being the 'audience' of those who pretend to lead the society" (p. 249). Where Black implicatively articulates the power of the leader, McGee implicatively responds with the power of the audience by bringing *you* and *I* together in the form of *us* that "becomes historically material and of consequence as persons live it" (Charland, 1987, p. 137).

Following in this tradition of the "Ideological Turn" as observed by Wander (1984), Charland (1987) introduces the specific term, "constitutive rhetoric," by combining Burke's concept of "identification" with Louis Althusser's concept of "interpellation" (pp. 133-134). Through Burke's "identification," Charland posits the possibility of examining rhetoric's effect upon "the subject" as Althusser linguistically and ideologically describes it, which is "precisely he or she who simultaneously speaks and initiates action in discourse (a subject to a verb) and in the world (a speaker and social agent)" (p. 133). In short, being a subject is a *structural* condition of being in the world. Charland explains, "the process of inscribing subjects," "interpellation," as occurring "at the very moment one enters into a rhetorical situation, that is, as soon as an individual recognizes and acknowledges being addressed" which "entails an acceptance of an imputed self-understanding," and he notes that "this rhetoric of identification is ongoing" as "part of a rhetoric of socialization" (p. 138). In other words, the individual as

a “subject” internalizes the ideological construct of “the people” over time by way of a constitutive rhetoric that addresses the subject as a structural position within the narrative of “the people.” “The people” and the individual subject are constitutively called into being, thus becoming real. Like McGee and Black, Charland is not attempting to create some monolithic ideal. Rather, he is offering multiple subjective positions within a constitutive rhetoric of lived consequence. In particular, he is offering a “collective subject [...] who experiences, suffers, and acts” (p. 139). But, one’s individual subject position is never fixed even as one is “always already” a subject, because there are multiple roles within the narrative (pp. 140-141). Still, Charland furthers the materialization of a “people” through the subjectifying practice of constitutive rhetoric.

As Charland (1997) observes, entering into a “rhetorical narrative is to identify with Black’s second persona. It is the process of recognizing oneself as the subject in a text” (p. 143). But there is also the possibility of recognizing oneself as the uninvited and intentionally excluded subject of a text. Namely, there are also *they* who constitute *us* through antithetical rhetoric. Wander (1984) explains this “third persona” as the “audiences not present, audiences rejected or negated through the speech and/or speaking situation”—an audience that is spoken to, about, or implied by means of intentional exclusion and not allowed to speak (pp. 369-370). In Burkean terms, the third persona is the unifying scapegoat of division, antithetical rhetoric, that is frequently used in processes of identification (Goehring & Dionisopoulos, 2013, pp. 370-371). But Wander (1984) opens the floor for specifically speaking out of turn and perhaps even *acting out* of turn (p. 370). Wander (2011) argues that “the ideological turn in criticism pivoted on America’s concerted efforts to expand its sphere of influence” (p. 421). In other words, it

should never be forgotten that constitutive rhetoric is also always already a matter of power arrangements, and *we* do participate in its often problematically enforced expansion. As McGee suggests when he notes the importance of being the audience, “the people” as the subjects of ideological interpellation operate as the validating constituent body for those who wield power. But, this ideological reality creates opportunities for resistance. Wander (2011) calls into being his own second persona, his readership, through a direct address to “you” in his articulation of a critical “way of life” beyond a “way of doing scholarship and/or criticism” (p. 427). The reader must resist.

Resistance is a key component of the ideologically driven iterations of constitutive rhetoric and its varying personae. It is present from the very beginning. Black (1970) is pushing back against the Radical Right with his notable derision of their corrosive metaphor, “the cancer of communism.” McGee (1975) offers the rhetorical importance of an awakened people who can act as dialogic companions to Marxism and its philosophical bent towards the revolutionary materialist dialectic of power and production (p. 249). Charland (1987) posits symbolic “tensions” that “render possible the rhetorical repositioning or rearticulation of subjects” (p. 147). Next is Raymie McKerrow. McKerrow (1989), through his concept of “critical rhetoric,” hails into action his own tempered take on Wander’s reader-as-ideological-subject that must resist by rearticulating the rhetorical *critic* as “more than an observer” within the ideological terrain (p. 101). As a practice, he argues, “a critical rhetoric seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power” (p. 91). His correlation between the subject and power is a matter of domination in which a subject is specifically subjected within a “dialectic of control” (p. 94). Particularly, McKerrow argues that the subject is *positioned* through hegemonic

struggles that are reflective of both the “dominant and dominated” (p. 94). Based in part on his understanding of Michel Foucault, McKerrow argues for an “analysis of the discourse of power” in which “any articulatory practice may emerge as relevant or consequential” where “nothing can be ‘taken-for-granted’” or privileged “with respect to the options its analysis raises for consideration” (pp. 96-97). He breaks his “praxis” for critical rhetoric down into eight principles. Of particular interest to constitutive rhetoric, his fourth principle, “*Naming* is the central symbolic act of a *nominalist* rhetoric [italics McKerrow’s],” is specifically “directed against the universalizing tendencies,” which reaffirms his commitment to resistance within a “social reality in which humans are both subject and subjected” (p. 105).

Finally, Morris (2002) presents a more subtle form of resistance with his addition of the “fourth persona.” He defines this persona as an “invisible audience” who is “collusive” with the act of “passing” and is “constituted by the textual wink” (pp. 229-230). Morris does a wonderful job of positioning himself within the other two rhetorical personae. He acknowledges Black’s second persona as the fourth’s “counterpart” by way of the “implied auditor of a particular ideological bent” who “acknowledges the rationale for the closet” as an understanding of “the dangers of homophobia” and intuitively “renders a pass transparent” (p. 230). Beyond Black’s “closet speech” (1970, p. 112), however, Morris (2002) distinguishes the fourth persona as necessarily implying “two ideological positions simultaneously, one that mirrors the dupes and another that implies, via the wink, an ideology of difference” (p. 230). This distinction somewhat ironically ties the fourth persona with the resistance of McKerrow’s *fourth* principle of “nominalist rhetoric” in that it promotes difference above the demand for sameness, but without

interpretively naming the point of constitution for the sake of maintaining the pass. Similarly, what distinguishes the fourth persona from the third persona ties the two together: silence. As Morris notes, where silence “negates and excludes” as a constitutive measure of normative power with regard to the third persona, “silence functions constructively as the medium of collusive exchange” within the structure of the fourth persona (p. 230).

While resistance does appear to be quite central to constitutive rhetoric theory, Kenneth Chase (2009) astutely observes that these moralizing positions of challenging the various dominant regimes “tend to be presumed rather than explicitly defended” (pp. 239-240). It is always assumed, on some level, that *we* should resist. Further, Barbara Biesecker (1992) questions “how transgressive, counter-hegemonic or, to borrow McKerrow’s term, critical rhetorics can possible emerge as anything more than one more instantiation of the status quo” (p. 353). Her point is primarily aimed at observing McKerrow’s misreading and subsequent misuse of Foucault, but the extension of her overall critique is clear. Namely, the ideological resistance in constitutive rhetoric treatises is merely caught up in a false liberation narrative that is an effect of power itself (p. 353). In other words, the rhetorical critic that operates the tool of critical rhetoric is still a subject to the dominant code and still signifies the vilified and repressive power regime by way of being the marginalized representation of the repressed.

This does not mean that resistance is entirely futile. Biesecker’s reading of Foucault suggests a recalibration of resistance. She seizes upon Foucault’s “‘stylized practices’ of the self” as a way of re-tasking rhetorical critics “to trace new lines of making sense” (B. Biesecker, 1992, pp. 359-361). But, beyond the critical *I* as

constitutive critic, the individual self seems to be problematic within the universe of ideologically driven constitutive rhetoric criticism. Theorists of constitutive rhetoric are more concerned with an audience of “people” without the complications of “depending [...] on the observed behavior of individuals” (McGee, 1975, p. 238). To be clear, the individual *is* present in these works. As McGee notes, “In purely objective terms, the only human reality is that of the individual” and that “individuals must be seduced into abandoning their individuality” (p. 242). Black (1970) distinguishes “between the real author of a work and the author implied by the work” in order to arrive upon the very concept of “a persona, but not necessarily a person” (p. 111). And Charland (1987) acknowledges that it is “persons” who “are subjects” to interpellation (p. 147). But, the function of the individual tends to be an afterthought even as the individual is what makes constitutive rhetoric literally matter. The individual is the biological body where the tensions asserted by McGee and Charland play out, and the reader is left to presume that the individual is also the biological body that exerts physical force upon the living conditions of the individual. But, the “givenness” (Charland, 1987, p. 148) of the individual person is largely the most “taken-for-granted” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 93) component with the least agency; that is, other than the individual critic or individual rhetor-as-leader who both seem to have a great deal of agency.

There are some exceptions in which individual subjects become sites of resistance themselves. Kendall Phillips (2006), for instance, presents the “rhetorical maneuver” as “one procedure through which a subject attempts to reconfigure her/his position” (p. 315). Dana Cloud (1999) builds upon Wander’s work and offers the “null persona” as the individual “self-negation” through a directed and resistant silence (pp. 200-201). And

John M. Sloop and Kent A. Ono (1997) offer their “out-laws” who “disrupt operating discourses and practices that always work to enable [power] and confine [individuals]” (p. 66). Sloop and Ono, however, argue that the critic must search for the “out-law discourses” rather than individual out-laws because of the “failure of the individual” (p. 62). Here, they are arguing that just because an individual out-law’s disruptive ways may ultimately fail in procuring him or her the desired results does not mean that the discourses proffered by individual out-laws are necessarily incorrect. But, it is a fascinating move to champion the individual by refusing to allow for the failure of the individual to carry any weight. Phillips (1999) goes so far as to problematize their whole project as putting “everyday acts of resistance [...] into the service of academic criticism” rather than the other way around—which Phillips, like other proponents of ideologically driven constitutive rhetoric, presumes to be bad (p. 97). Of course, Phillips (2006), in his own championing of the individual, spends a great deal of time elaborating on the interiority of the individual only to opt for “a more praxis-grounded approach to the movement of subjectivity,” which means an exterior depersonalized approach (pp. 312-318). He ultimately just needed the body to make his point.

And bodies do matter. Bodies feel pain. Bodies kill and are killed. I do not intend to call into question any sincerity with regard to caring for those bodies that do suffer. But, the material evaluation of reality does not necessarily mean rhetorical theorists must sacrifice individual “persons” for their bodies any more than we should condone ideological regimes sacrificing bodies for their subjects. Cloud’s (1999) “null persona” is the perfect metaphor for my departure from the materialist tradition, because it is the explicit materialization of self-negation (p. 179), which ultimately defies the possibility



of resistance as posited by Biesecker. Biesecker (1992) argues that practices that are “resistant” are “virtual breaks” that are “yet-to-be-materialized” and “antecedent to those subjects” articulated by McKerrow’s critical rhetoric as well as those articulated by the prior iterations of constitutive rhetoric (p. 357). As she puts it, resistant practices *precisely* do not “make meaning” (p. 357). I argue this is exactly what proponents of constitutive rhetoric attempt to do, *make* meaning, and the potential failure of the individual risks the failure of that project. Making meaning is a jockeying strategy to gain the perception of superior exigency.

I agree that the failure of the individual subject is certain. Phillip’s (2006) ultimate avoidance of interiority is understandable when considering the way that the interiority of the individual is fumbled around within a materialist discourse. His series of Stuart Hall quotations regarding the self, identity, and the subject leaves my head spinning with questions as to whether these *things* (self, identity, subject) are the same *thing* and if there is even a body on the premises (pp. 312-313). As Hall (1985) explains elsewhere, Althusser’s notion of ideology was caught somewhere between structuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis with a decentered subject that Althusser could not let “remain as an empty space” (pp. 101-102). Charland (1987) claims to have “circumvented” the “problem” of “the ontological status of those addressed by discourse before their successful interpellation” through his “analysis” (p. 147). His summation of this circumvention is that “Persons are subjects from the moment they acquire language and the capacity to speak and to be spoken to,” and that prior to this presumed “successful interpellation,” there is “more than a set of commonplaces, but is a con-text” (p. 147). I certainly do feel conned by his text because I don’t believe he takes this precise moment

of entering sociality with a sense of text particularly seriously other than, once again, giving his argument a body—a materiality. More explicitly, he writes:

Our first subject positions are modest, linked to our name, our family, and our sex. As we enter the adult world, they become more complex, as different constitutive rhetorics reposition us with respect to such formal and informal institutions as the state, the economy, the church, and the school. Thus, though we are subjects through language, and indeed can only speak as subjects, our subjectivity and ideological commitments are not fixed at our first utterances. (Charland, 1987, p. 147)

It is clear that Charland finds the larger institutional complexities far more interesting than the actual lived lives of the various individuals subjected to ideological interpellation. I find no inherent fault in that preference. But, to refer to “our first subject positions” as “modest” undermines the complexity of those linkages in *our formative years* and underscores the lack of serious theoretical care accorded to the individual bodies prior to, within, or outside of successful interpellation that constitutive rhetoric proffers to make itself hold meaning to hold court.

Eric Jenkins and Josue David Cisneros (2013) go so far as to materialize *love* as a “living labor” that “constitutes the common” in order to make “rhetoric-love” meaningful (p. 96). To avoid a failed individual, they propose their decentering of the subject by “beginning methodologically with the act rather than the subject” (p. 87). Even as they suggest this approach is “beginning in the middle,” the methodological gesture is problematic because to begin with a *speech* “act” of love is to presume a subject and to directly position the individual as marginal (p. 87). Thus, in asking rhetorical critics to pause “before foreclosing on the possibilities of subjectivity,” they have already literally casted the subject to the side and foreclosed on the possibilities of the non-subject (p. 87). More importantly, like Althusser, Jenkins and Cisneros make these moves because they

refuse “the subject as constituted by lack” (p. 96). Specifically, they are taking a swipe at Joshua Gunn’s psychoanalytic approaches to rhetoric, ideology, and his dismissal of rhetorical considerations of love.

Gunn (2008b) does, in fact, argue that “Love is shit” (pp. 143-145). More importantly, he argues “love is failure” because it offers the “gesture of something more,” which is “the deceptive promise that I have the power to produce something more in me than me for you” (p. 138). As he points out, rhetoricians typically refer to this gesture as Burkean “identification” (p. 138). At the core of Gunn’s arguments is the Lacanian proposition that the subject is indeed constituted by lack. But, Joshua Gunn and Shaun Treat (2005) take Althusser’s “pre-ideological subject” more seriously, albeit within the context of the filmic Zombie metaphor, as “the individual who has yet to become self-conscious or called into the service of larger social organization, community, or state” (p. 153). Gunn and Treat’s re-articulation of the Althusserian interpellation of the subject, “subjectification,” puts ideology at the service of the individual as the “realization of the self” rather than the typical zombified, or mindlessly controlled, subjects running around in constitutive rhetoric narratives *realizing ideology* (pp. 153-155). In fact, while Gunn and Treat allow for resistance in their psychoanalytic repositioning of the ideological subject, it is important to observe that they do not demand it. One can take an ideological perspective seriously without standing with or against it. In the context of Hariman’s sense of regard, one does not have to rank or even place a perspective within a system of marginalization. As with the various iterations of constitutive rhetoric, ideology does operate *as an interiority* that does counter overly deterministic logics, but psychoanalytic approaches take the complexities of the interiority of a first persona perspective, even in

the sense of an initial persona, far more seriously even if such an approach does not always advocate for specific political actions.

Gunn (2008b) argues that rhetorical studies have been hostile towards psychological and psychoanalytic (“psychological analysis”) approaches to rhetoric as a territorial threat since the 1970’s (p. 143). While concepts such as ideology and hegemony have strong psychoanalytic roots, Gunn and Treat (2005) explain that American rhetorical critics, in particular, have only begrudgingly accepted psychoanalytic insights and have dismissed even these insights in tremendously watered down variations (p. 158). Gunn and Treat essentially map out the hegemony of *a* hegemony by way of a “postmodern retro-fitting” of ideological critique that ultimately embraces the “Gramscian perspective” of the “exterior work of ideology” in which theories of ideology are “evacuated of interiors” (pp. 157-158). Gunn and Treat propose an alternative route that embraces the psychoanalytic roots of ideological thought. Specifically, they suggest the restoration of the *unconscious* underpinnings of theories of ideology.

Gunn and Treat (2005) break down two typical ways that the “unconscious” is used within psychoanalysis: one that is adjectival and another that is topographic (p. 161). As adjective, they explain, “unconscious” *refers* to those “acts, thoughts, or ideas” accessible to the subject when simply brought “into conscious awareness” through basic observation (p. 161). One might say, “Hey, you didn’t make eye contact with me!” The other might respond, “Oh sorry! It’s an unconscious act I do around authority figures probably based on my history of teachers expecting answers.” In the topographical sense, “unconscious” is more *like* a thing and repository, “the contents of which we cannot

know except in terms of its effects on conscious life” such as suddenly fully formed thoughts and ideas (including dreams), slips of the tongue, or post-hypnotic phenomenon (Gunn & Treat, p. 161). This topographical sense of the unconscious articulates the individual person as much more complex. The initial connection between the unconscious and ideology, or hegemony, is fairly apparent as a sort of symptomatic subjectivity. However, this newly mapped out terrain offers greater possibilities when considering the argument that the repressed material in the unconscious is “constantly and ceaselessly attempting to re-enter consciousness [...] but can succeed in doing so only in disguise” (Gunn & Treat, p. 162). In other words, what is repressed, ideologically, returns in distorted ways. Significantly, Gunn and Treat elaborate that we are not “completely governed by” this repressed material and that this material is not “completely inaccessible” due to the possibility of another person discerning it through analysis (p. 162).

Gunn and Treat (2005) observe that “much of one’s life is led and governed consciously, and our ability to reflect on our lives and make conscious choices certainly means that rhetoric, traditionally conceived, plays a rather large role in society” (p. 162). I agree, but I also do not back away from another adjectival *and* topographical use of “unconscious” in the form of the “unconscious reality.” By this term, I am referring to an overwhelming sense of lack of which my body acts as a metaphor for my self in that the vast majority of what makes up my body is lacking consciousness. That my very consciousness always already seems to come to me in the *form* of subjective interpellation underscores that the lens through which *I* encounter the world fails to directly address that world outside of my interpellation. This constitutive lack, beginning

as “not me” while promising “me” to you *and* me, is what I mean by beginning as failure (Gunn, 2008b, pp. 138, 148).

This notion of beginning as failure offers a way to think about a type of persona that I refer to as the disconstituent as well as a way of thinking about a critic or analyst who might approach this persona. Another assumption that uniformly occurs in theoretical entries regarding the subject of constitutive rhetoric is that of *successful* interpellation. The disconstituent is not a subject of successful interpellation, which is different from being successful or successfully being. Take Cloud’s “null persona” for instance. While this subject position is a marginalized one, it is a position that an individual “knows” itself to be as a subject to ideological circumstance well enough to use silence to push back against ideological forces that seek to further objectify that subject position. Here, resistance is still constitutive in two key ways. First, resistance itself acknowledges the existence of the force being resisted and dialectically engages that force with comprehensible silence. Second, this comprehensible gesture is applied in such a manner as to hopefully reposition the subject relations. The disconstituent does not actually push back even if the critical listener or viewer perceives such a pushing back in *the critical listener’s* or *viewer’s* regard. This is the key separation that I am making between Hariman’s sense of regard and Sontag’s sense of regard as I read them. Hariman’s is still a matter of successful interpellation that involves a two-way event. Sontag’s regard is a one-way event that is nonetheless potentially, even directly, implicated. The interior implicated-ness is what is under investigation in this dissertation. In other words, for the disconstituent to be disconstituent, it must not only do the obvious work of undoing *us* through withdrawal, it must also on some level undo *me*.

The disconstituent is not limited to an individual who is suicidal or completes suicide, nor is an individual who completes or attempts suicide necessarily a disconstituent. However, there are many instances in which they overlap and even become synonymous. This overlapping will be parsed out throughout the dissertation. The underlying concept of disconstituency follows from Jose Esteban Muñoz's (1999) consideration of "disidentification" within the interstice of psychoanalysis and political philosophy—namely, the states of identification, counter-identification, and disidentification (pp. 11-13). I liken these vectors to assimilation, revolution, and reformation, respectively. Muñoz is operating out of a system that also has Althusser's interpellation of the subject as its basis. His use of "identification" is not Burkean, however. Muñoz's "identification" comes from French linguist, Michel Pêcheux, and simply entails the logic of a "Good Subject," or obedient subject, within an ideological apparatus such as a nation-state (Munoz, p. 11). In other words, identification is the interpellation of a subject who largely conforms, or assimilates, to the expectations of the state. Counter-identification, then, is the interpellation of a "Bad Subject" who turns "against this symbolic system" (Munoz, p. 11). This subject seeks to replace the symbolic system with one that is counter to the dominant ideology as is the case with revolution. Within a Burkean framework, one might consider this to also be identification by antithesis. As Muñoz effectively posits it, "Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (p. 11). Thus, it is easy to link this logic to reformation because it is a strategy that seeks to reshape the state of the situation rather than fully maintain or

completely overthrow and replace power apparatuses of the state. Yet, it is substantially more than simply greasing the wheels of the machine and exchanging minor parts in incremental shifts.

Simply put, each point in Muñoz's structure is active, and both disidentification and identification are every bit as much acts as counter-identifying practices. Thus, each point of activity is also constituent activity inhabited by constituent subjects who do the work of the political body whether it comes from a standpoint of difference or sameness. I offer the disconstituent as one who does not inhabit a fourth state but is inhabited by it: a state of disconstituency in which the disconstituent possesses neither a desire for the status quo nor a desire for meaningful change to the status quo. The disconstituent rejects the political body with no obvious desirous movement other than the relinquishment of nominal and existential participation. The disconstituent withdraws. Disconstituency is different from alienation in that the disconstituent is often a positive focal point and locale of the desire for the other's desire, the "objet a," in the making of an *us*, but cannot for various reasons be the reciprocal *I/you* that *it* sees as a successful *I* in the interpellation context of that *us*. The disconstituent may not mean any harm, but the disconstituent exits and leaves behind an exit wound because the disconstituent reflects back, whether conscious of this or not, the unconscious reality of lack that drives our compulsive subjectivity. To put the disconstituent act another way, the disconstituent is not the scapegoat that *we* sacrifice for the sake of *our* redemption; rather, the disconstituent sacrifices *us*.

One cannot, in fact, give one's regard to the disconstituent as the disconstituent has either completely departed from the situation or is no longer collecting such regard.



In so doing, the disconstituent directly undoes the *us* that allows for the *you* and *I* of any given situation. Thus, the effective, or at least respectful, critic or analyst who wants to see his, her, or its way to the disconstituent—the critic or analyst who wants to “get it”—must become undone on some level within her, his, or its approach. Within this schema, the disconstituent is no longer a subject and may never have been. At best, the analyst can express the disconstituent individual as an individual who at one point operated as a lost persona. Thus, for the analyst, the disconstituent *is* a lost persona that can never actually be found and which threatens the same, though nonreciprocal, realization within the analyst’s regard. The analyst must begin as failure.

Additionally, disconstituent artifacts that one might analyze are not sought; rather, they are found. And, what one finds is not always the same as what another might find. A disconstituent artifact *occurs to* the analyst. Just because one image might undo me does not mean that it would necessarily undo you. If I seek it for the purpose of disconstituency, I am both already guarded against it and merely producing a type of regard that confirms my approach. At the same time, disconstituent artifacts are not magic. In his lecture series on the “The Neutral,” Roland Barthes (2005) explains his course preparation process as a matter of selecting texts from his “vacation home”, arbitrarily received through familial inheritance and the “pleasure of free reading” (p. 9). In his “library of dead authors,” he makes “the dead think in myself” (p. 9). In *Camera Lucida* (1981), Barthes searches through photographs until certain ones “provoked” him (p. 16). What Barthes is ultimately referring to in these moments is his photographic concept of “punctum.” I will go into more detail later, but punctum, for Barthes, refers to instances in photographs, and I extend this to texts in general, that disturb the viewer’s

interior sense of subjectivity and/or self. My point is that while one cannot precisely search out the kinds of artifacts that I am after with regard to the disconstituent because of their personal nature within the regard of the analyst, an analyst can attempt to make his, her, or its self available to potential artifacts in places one might expect to find them so long as there is the possibility of forgetting about the search. In the case of this dissertation, one artifact was suggested, a student I coached mentioned another in a speech, and the first one occurred to me based upon my interest in a certain director. What ties them all together for me is suicide.

One final note on the disconstituent: like the personae within constitutive rhetoric theory, the disconstituent is not the biological individual *per se*. Instead, the disconstituent is the lost persona within *our* regard. The term “disconstituent persona” would be largely appropriate, but removing “persona” and leaving the term as “disconstituent” repeats the important performance of the persona being lost. Again, disconstituency does not require biological suicide. Thus, one can refer to a “disconstituent individual” as a living performance of a disconstituent. Likewise, one may refer to a former individually lived state of disconstituency as a “disconstituent individual.” But, the important thing to remember is that the disconstituent is the lost persona.

### **Suicide**

The second term in the title of this dissertation is “suicide.” Discussions of suicide carry with them a greater sense of risk than other forms of death. There is a fear of contamination. And, there is some truth to that fear. After Robin Williams *completed* his suicide, health officials and media members were wringing their collective hands as they

approached the public event of regarding his death (Sanger-Katz, 2014). This is because the phenomenon of “suicide contagion” seems to be a reality, and it is even more prominent in the case of celebrity suicides. A common example for reporters and health officials is the 12 percent increase in the suicide rate after Marilyn Monroe’s suicide in 1962 (NBCNews, 2014). The apparent causal relationship between writing about suicide and suicide contagions goes back to at least Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s 1774 *The Sorrows of Werther* and the subsequent rash of copycat suicides (Laird, 2011, p. 536). Health officials and psychologists agree that journalists are in a difficult situation because of the very real threat of copycat suicides (Spratt, 2009). On the one hand, silence only furthers surrounding stigmatization with regard to suicide while also flying in the face of the journalistic responsibility to report significant events in communities. On the other hand, news coverage of suicides in general has been clearly linked to increases in suicide (AFSP, 2014). For anyone writing about suicide, each stroke of the key can become an ethical dilemma.

But, of course, writing about suicide is not precisely causal even if it can be influential. There are suggested ways for reporting on suicide. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention offers a helpful document to aid reporters in their quest to report without doing harm: “Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide” (AFSP, 2014). For instance, I italicized the word “completed” above as a nod to their suggestions. They suggest this term as well as “died by suicide” and “killed him/herself” in place of other terms such as “successful,” “unsuccessful,” or “failed attempt” (AFSP). This also excludes the commonly used phrase, “committed suicide,” because it suggests criminality (AFSP). Further, the recommendation for those reporting on suicide is to avoid

sensational language such as “Used Shotgun” or “epidemic” as well as language “Describing a suicide as inexplicable” (AFSP).

While the goal of these guidelines is understandable, to avoid accidentally encouraging vulnerable individuals to choose suicide, these guidelines are somewhat problematic. For instance, while one may be able to retrospectively locate warning signs, suicide remains largely inexplicable. As *New York Times* reporter, James McKinley, notes, “each suicide is unique [...] and it’s hard to find patterns” (Dam, 2010). And, it is not just journalists scratching their heads. Even when warning signs are observed, accurate predictors for suicide continue to elude researchers and health professionals. In their study of US Veterans, Finley et al. (2015) found that suicide-related behavior is not particularly predictive of risk of suicide in cases of traumatic brain injury (p. 384). Unsurprisingly, they note that the combination of posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and suicide-related behavior is more predictive (pp. 384-385). While admitting bafflement with regard to any general causation for recent significant increases in suicides in Korea, Lim, Lee, and Park (2014) find that the more lethal the chosen method of suicide the more likely a suicide will be completed. Kvaran, Gunnarsdottir, Kristbjornsdottir, Valdimarsdottir, and Rafnsson (2015) find a strong correlation between the number of times an individual visits the “emergency department” and completed suicides when combined with other typical predictors such as “psychiatric diagnoses” (p. 6). While they offer the caveat that most suicide completers do not find their way to clinical services, they note that their findings point towards a “complex” path to completion of suicide that may go on for lengthy periods of time (p. 7). This finding is somewhat in contrast to the generally accepted logic that suicides are short-term

happenings (NBCNews, 2014). According to Consoli et al. (2015), a history of suicide attempts is not necessarily a highly predictive factor of suicidality, but that high levels of ongoing depression, hopelessness, expressions of a low value for life and “high connection with the universe” are (p. S27). By “suicidality,” researchers mean the transformation of suicidal ideation, or thoughts of suicide, into suicide attempts (Consoli et al., p. S28). In each of these studies, an understanding of that point of suicidality continues to be elusive. While researchers continue to locate statistical predictors, they are still left with the inexplicability of suicide. While researchers are quick to point out that drug abuse issues and mental illness are found in 90% of instances of suicidality (AFSP, 2014), there is still the 10% of instances of suicidality that occur with a clinically clear mind.

The worldviews of “hopelessness,” “a low value for life,” and high connectivity with “the universe” observed by Consoli et al. (2015) points towards the philosophical dimension of suicide. These ideological stances posit the question of whether or not one *should* kill oneself. I do not mean to suggest that suicide is necessarily an “intellectual” pursuit; rather, suicide carries with it a set of ideologies long considered by philosophers from Socrates ingesting hemlock to the Absurdist search for meaning in individual human lives. As for Socrates’s death, there is debate as to whether or not it might be considered a suicide (Stern-Gillet, 1987), but if it were to be considered suicide it would likely fall under the category “the standard Greek and Roman reasons” (Laird, 2011, p. 525). Holly Laird (2011) explains “the standard Greek and Roman reasons” to be what are sometimes considered honorable deaths—“death before dishonor and agent’s choice before patient’s suffering” (p. 525). Seneca is arguably the most extreme supporter of

these types of suicide going so far as to suggest that the elderly should quit wasting society's resources and time (Pasetti, 2009, p. 280). At one point, he considered taking his own life, but thought it would cause his father too much sorrow (Pasetti, 2009, p. 287). As Lucia Pasetti (2009) observes, Seneca's primary argument is for the right to choose one's own death at the right time for the right reason (p. 282).

It is debatable whether or not Seneca valued life considering his assessment that most people probably only truly live up to life's potential for a total of one day over the course of their entire lives (Pasetti, 2009, p. 278). However, the central question in philosophy with regard to suicide is the question of life's value (Matthews, 1998, pp. 107-108). According to Albert Camus (1955), suicide is the only "serious philosophical problem" because it poses the very question as to whether or not life is worth living (pp. 3-4). As he says, everything else "comes afterwards" (p. 3). For existentialists such as Camus and Sartre, *authentic* meaning in life must be found within ourselves because there is nothing in our externally absurd existence—against which absurdity we should rebel—to provide such meaning (Matthews, p. 109). In line with Friedrich Nietzsche's conclusions, existentialists argue that one must throw off the shackles of society and search for freedom through rational self-interest. As Eric Matthews (1998) explains, suicide, for the existentialist, is "inauthentic and a betrayal to "our freedom" and must be rejected (p. 109). Matthews further places the existentialist conclusion about suicide in line with Aristotle's assessment of suicide "as a form of cowardice" (p. 109).

Operating out of a Christian perspective, Søren Kierkegaard also condemns suicide as "mutinying against God" (Stokes & Buben, 2011, p. 83). As Patrick Stokes and Adam Buben (2011) explain, Kierkegaard believed in the notion of "spirit" and that

the human spirit is the self-reflexive self, meaning that the spiritual self is the process of the self “relating itself to itself” (p. 82). One is “spiritless” if one is unaware of being a self and this, for Kierkegaard, is the “most common form of despair” (p. 82). But, for him, “ignorance is no excuse” and suicide remains unforgivable (p. 82). Of further importance to the overall task of this dissertation is Kierkegaard’s idea that the self is defined by its relationship with other selves, God, and itself, and that these individual relationships are also *responsibilities* (pp. 83-84). Thus, suicide is an abandonment of one’s responsibilities. This sentiment, suicide as irresponsibility, captures a great deal of the philosophical perspectives on suicide. At each level, the question is never truly a matter of whether or not life has value or is meaningful. Rather, the question is whether or not we should respect life for the sake of those around us who do find meaning and value in life. To kill yourself is to declare to others that not only is your life meaningless and of little value, but that their lives are also by proxy meaningless and of little value. That is, except in approved cases of sacrifice for others or in ways that validate the sanctity of life that is also for others.

Matthews (1998), for his part, shifts the question of universal value, and the murkiness of Kierkegaard’s spirited morality, to the rational question of whether or not life is *always* worth living which opens up possibilities for departure from the traditional philosophical stances on suicide (pp. 108-110). He argues that while Kant offers a rational approach to suicide, regarding it as irrationally self-contradictory, Kant is still forwarding the very same principle, Kant’s notion of “self-love,” which is ultimately a matter of accruing *things* in this world, rather than nature or God, that make life worth living (pp. 108-110). In other words, Matthews argues that much of the philosophical

tradition with regard to suicide ultimately *disregards* the fact that all suicides are motivated by despair and that the ultimate question is whether or not one can justify the position of all hope is lost (p. 110). Thus, while he allows for a selfish rather than soulful response to despair, Matthews is still caught up in the same knot. He still cannot simply allow a suicide to be apart from *us*.

What becomes overwhelmingly clear is that the act of suicide, and the act of not-suicide, is consistently placed in the philosophical service of *us*. Meaningless suicide is the ultimate betrayal and the most other to the collective understanding of self. Even as it continually baffles both our predictive and prescriptive regard, *we* must continually attempt to explain it in order to explain it away for the sake of *ourselves*. In other words, the regard of suicide is most often the active disregard of suicide. Further, the future-oriented deliberative approach that questions whether or not one should or will attempt suicide can be more so a pretentious reaction. Most people who are concerned with suicide are concerned with how *we* deal with it, or with how *we* might use it, ex post facto. For instance, Laird (2011) argues that Emile Durkheim used the study of suicide as a means to both found the field of sociology and to overtake the discipline of psychology. In particular, Durkheim worked to establish “statistics as the supreme instrument” for understanding suicide (Laird, p. 530). Laird argues further that the contemporary field of “suicidology” emerged out of this competition between the two disciplines as a particular point of modernist contention (pp. 529-531). Sigmund Freud also contributed lasting ideas to this inter-disciplinary discussion, including the causalities of an erotic component to the death drive, melancholia or depression, and “disappointed over-idealism” (Laird, pp. 537-541). Even as research results, like those in the aforementioned work of Consoli



et al. (2015), continues to support Freud's findings, Freud's influence has been largely repressed within the current quantified logics of a supposedly purer science. It is difficult to blame suicidologists considering that they are already in taboo waters as they seek academic legitimacy like so many other disciplines and fields.

Foundationally, however, suicidology seeks to "alleviate moral crises associated with suicide and to open suicide as a topic for rational discussion" (Laird, 2011, p. 531). This is particularly true in the area of suicidology focused on what is known as "postvention." "Postvention," a term currently specific to suicide, refers to organized responses to instances of suicide that focuses on survivors of suicide loss. Specifically, Edwin Shneidman, considered "the father of modern suicidology," coined the term "postvention" and declared it to be "a direct form of prevention of future suicides" (Cook et al., 2015, pp. 4-5). As one might surmise based on the reality of media-influenced suicide contagion, more direct encounters with suicide also have a strong correlation with consequent completed suicides (Cook et al., p. 17). Cook et al. (2015) assert that suicide bereavement is "unique" for the following reasons: suicide is itself exceptional, the ambiguity of fault and volition, the resulting social stigmatization and feeling of blame and guilt further exacerbated by the larger population's perception that suicide is preventable, the depth and breadth of a suicide's traumatizing effects, the lack of resolution coupled with feelings of abandonment and rejection, fear of one's own potential suicide or other family members' and close friends' potential suicides because of the consequent increased risk, and the disturbing feeling of relief if the suicide occurs after a lengthy period of intense relational struggle (pp. 13-18). In short, the suicide of a

loved one, or even just a nearby person, is crushing, and how to handle its destructive wake can be perplexing.

For instance, there is the question of whether or not one should view the body as a part of bereavement because of potential disfigurement or unwanted memories. Omerov, Steineck, Nyberg, Runeson, and Nyberg (2014) find that most people do not ultimately regret either choice, but that parents who do choose to view the body experience more nightmares. From personal experience, I can tell you two things. First, my feelings of regret or non-regret for choosing to not view Kryn's body can be drastically different from moment to moment. Second, my parents did choose to view my brother's body and the nightmares never actually seem to go away. The long-term effects of another's suicide are real. Inspired in part by Shneidman's statement that the "person who commits suicide puts his psychological skeleton in the survivor's emotional closet," researchers seek and find a strong correlation between someone's suicide and an increase in the mortality rates and ill health of his or her siblings for up to 18 years after the suicide event (Rostila, Saarela, & Kawachi, 2014). It has been 28 years since Kryn's suicide, and I believe that I am only just now beginning to healthily emerge from the wake. Regret or not, regarding suicide can be a treacherous and exceptionally life-altering process.

Much of postvention and suicidology research focuses on the sense-making processes of the bereaved. At the current center of this research is Diana Sands' (2009) "Tripartite Model of Suicide Grief: Meaning-Making and the Relationship with the Deceased" in which she outlines three phases of bereavement following from the "walk a mile" metaphor of shoes: "trying on the shoes," "walking in the shoes," and "taking off the shoes." Sands' approach argues that the relationship with the deceased, what she calls

“continuing bonds,” is on going and does not end at the point of the suicide (p. 11). Based upon a body of research, Sands explains that “self-narratives” are particularly altered by suicide events because what socially defines and shapes the self becomes irrevocably unraveled by the suicide of another (pp. 10-11). It is, as she observes, a “betrayal of the fundamental relational pact of trust” (p. 10). Because of the “shattering of their sense of self” that is common in suicide bereavement, the sense-making process of relocating a sense of self occurs within the loss survivors’ regard of their loved ones who have completed suicide (pp. 10-11). In other words, through the narrative identification *with* suicide, survivors of suicide loss seek meaning that might restore their sense of self.

“Trying on the shoes,” Sands (2009) explains, entails “engaging with the intentional nature of a suicide death” (p. 12). Interestingly, she observes that “suicide death sends a message” and that this “message is difficult to decode and understand” (p. 12). In other words, the “trying on the shoes” phase of suicide bereavement focuses on imagining the causal worldview of someone who would complete suicide in order to answer why it happened. The “walking in the shoes” phase extends this type of thinking into a more thorough “reconstruction of the death story” with specific attention given to the message that the individual suicide sends in such a way that recodes the message in order to make the message make sense (pp. 13-14). This phase involves deeper levels of empathetic “suicidal ideation” and a similar state of “hopelessness” (p. 13). The difficulty of this phase, and the probable reason that this is the point of greatest risk for suicide, is getting past what Sands calls the “blind spot” of suicide bereavement, which is the “incomprehensibility at the core of suicide” (p. 13). In other words, it is very easy to remain stuck in the “walking in the shoes” phase. Finally, “taking off the shoes” occurs

as a way of “repositioning” one’s self in the relationship with the deceased and the rest of the world that generally allows for an understanding of the suffering that led to the suicide, and even forgiveness, but typically not for justification (pp. 14-15). Justification risks not foreclosing on one’s own suicide. Sands explains that the repositioning of the self is about placing the suicide in the past and restoring order in the present in such a way that repairs social trust and “personal efficacy” (pp. 14-15). Staying with the metaphor, taking the shoes off is really a matter of putting back on one’s own shoes and learning how to walk in them again.

The actual moment of “meaning-making” does not seem to fully come to fruition until the third phase of Sands’ model. In fact, when looking at bereavement research within the postvention area of suicidology, it is common to use the terms “sense-making” and “meaning-making” interchangeably, which becomes rather confusing. For instance, Katherine P. Supiano (2012) uses the term “sense-making” but not “meaning-making” in the title and “meaning-making” but not “sense-making” in the abstract of her article. In the article’s body, Supiano adequately defines “sense-making” as “the capacity to construct an understanding of the loss experience,” but “meaning-making” is never given the same clarity (p. 490). Yet, there are instances in which both terms are implicitly differentiated such as, “Human suffering in all its forms compels the suffering person to attempt to understand the reasons and meaning of the event” (p. 490). Groos and Shakespeare-Finch (2013) also suggest this differentiation in instances such as, “much of the meaning- and sense-making process for participants in this study included the need to explore some of the reasons why the suicide had occurred and addressing emotions of guilt, blame, hurt, and anger” (p. 18). While the content of this sentence indicates terms

and ideas one might associate with “sense-making,” “meaning-making” is difficult to locate. In the paragraph directly following the one with this particular sentence, “meaning-making” does seem to take place when participants in group therapy become “hypervigilant for other children” and develop “important new relationships and support structures” (p. 18).

This general differentiation and conflation is further problematic when Supiano (2012) seems to place it in the context of Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* by quoting him from that text (p. 490). Much of Frankl’s work is driven towards something along the lines of “meaning-making,” but he never attempts to “make sense” of the Holocaust. He does differentiate between “meaning” as a sense of purpose *in life* or “responsibleness” (Frankl, 1959, pp. 108-109), and “super-meaning” as the “ultimate meaning” which “exceeds and surpasses the finite intellectual capacities of man” (p. 118). While I respect Frankl’s spiritual conviction, the use of his work runs the risk of simultaneously further stigmatizing suicide, as a form of being irresponsible and weak in the face of suffering not unlike Kierkegaard, and giving it unfounded meaningfulness as *the* higher calling for purpose in the lives of the bereaved. A clearer differentiation would help researchers in developing an understanding of the different parts of bereavement with regard to suicide, because attempting to make sense of suicide and giving it meaning can be radically different from one another. In fact, while one might attempt to make suicide make sense, it is possible that one may never do so and that one cannot for the sake of continuing one’s own life. This is Sands’ “blind spot.” Further, a clearer differentiation might better suggest that rather than attempting to give the suicide meaning, the bereaved leave the struggle to make sense or meaning within the suicide

event behind and seek meaning, or purpose, in their own lives as a radically altered and productive worldview that can stand on its own as functionally independent from the suicide event. While none of these points in bereavement are necessarily linear to one another or within themselves as a definite progressive movement, separating these processes may prove critical to understanding Biesecker's call for "new lines of making sense" that resist the forceful demand of meaning.

Another rhetorical issue within the postvention area of suicidology is how to label those left behind in the wake of a suicide. I have largely adopted the term, "survivor of suicide loss," in accordance with the guidelines set forth by Cook et al. (2015, pp. 4-5). The problem arises when one uses labels such as "suicide survivor," "survivor of suicide," "suicide victim," or "victim of suicide." Each of these terms could refer to either the person who attempted but did not complete suicide or those collaterally affected by the attempt or completion. Further, any use of "victim" can be problematic for a number of reasons, including issues of agency and stigmatization. However, this point about the term "victim" is my own. While postvention researchers and professionals offer a thorough breakdown of survivors of suicide loss as "suicide exposed," "suicide affected," "suicide bereaved, short term," and "suicide bereaved, long term" (Cerel, McIntosh, Neimeyer, Maple, & Marshall, 2014), ways of referring to the individual who attempted or completed the suicide is less clear. Disturbingly, albeit somewhat understandable, postvention researchers and practitioners also seem to disregard suicide to a certain extent. While postvention and therapy are not the goals of this dissertation, I certainly hope that my work may offer some insight to researchers and practitioners. As Groos and Shakespeare-Finch (2013) note in their "Limitations" section,

“In common with previous research, we know nothing about people who chose not to be involved in this group process” (p. 19). I offer my own account to their lack.

As I look through postvention research and media struggles, it seems clear that rhetorical theory would be helpful. Unfortunately, the sparse attention to suicide in rhetorical theory also largely falls under the category of disregard. It is possible that this has to do with the “[un]readability” of such an act (Burgess, 1974, p. 229). For instance, Parke Burgess (1974) takes issue with Jeanne Y. Fisher’s (1974a) rhetorical treatment of a murder-suicide event using Burke’s dramatism for this precise reason (Burgess, 1974, p. 229). Fisher (1974b) responds to this criticism by arguing that some acts have more symbolic power than anything found in literature (p. 233). But, Fisher’s and Burgess’s disagreement is not truly a matter of “readability;” rather, their disagreement has more to do with something somewhere between correct and corrective reading. In fact, it is the feeling of unreadability that *is* read in many cases of suicide, which leaves the reader with a sense of corrective anxiety about whether or not a correct reading is even possible. To say that something is unreadable is to disregard it. Fisher’s (1974a) article, even as she defends her rhetorical regard of a murder-suicide act as testing the boundaries of rhetorical theory (p. 182), does the precise work of disregarding the actual suicide that is used in her test (pp. 184-185). An actual suicide does occur. But, Fisher only focuses on the “symbolic suicide” of the *character* in her story by way of his altering his name and physical appearance via surgery (pp. 184-185). The homicide aspect of the case and the life of the murderer are clearly the points upon which Fisher chooses to focus her regard, and the suicide itself is almost completely disregarded. This particular episode in rhetorical theory is endemic of the majority of rhetorical treatments on the subject of

suicide. Namely, everything but an actual suicide tends to be worth the analysts' regard even as their topics or artifacts are directly about suicides. More often than not, rhetorical theorists are guilty of Phillips' critique of Sloop and Ono in that they put the idea of suicide at the service of rhetorical theory rather than putting rhetorical theory at the service of the issue of suicide.

Stern-Gillet's (1987) "The Rhetoric of Suicide" is particularly disappointing for a couple of reasons. First, the title is really hopeful for this dissertation, but the article ultimately does not bear it out as being about either the ways in which suicide might be rhetorical or the ways in which suicide is rhetorically treated. Instead, the article focuses on a "'responsibility-ascribing' function" that might be used to ascertain whether or not a death might be considered a suicide (p. 160). Second, there is further hope for this dissertation in Stern-Gillet's language at the beginning of the article in which she uses the phrase "manners of viewing" and argues that the way in which some writers discuss suicide is a "disregard [...] of the concept of 'suicide'" (p. 160). However, her whole argument boils down to a differentiation between martyrdom and suicide and the idea that because one cannot ascribe the responsibility for Socrates' death to Socrates one should consider his death to be a case of martyrdom rather than suicide (pp. 166-169).

A couple of topic areas in recent rhetorical theory that one might suspect would put suicide in a more central position in analysis are those of female suicide bombers and assisted suicide. Rather remarkably, this is not the case. As for female suicide bombers, Marita Gronnvoll and Kristen McCauliff (2013) and Teri Toles Patkin (2004) offer excellent accounts of their female subjects' agency, but ideological autonomy and, not unlike Fisher, the homicidal component of their acts are what is regarded as worth



investigating. In fact, in line with Fisher and materialist iterations of constitutive rhetoric, the readability of the bodily commitment to an ideological discourse involved with these suicides is what is most valued. Like Stern-Gillet, Patkin shifts much of her analysis to a framework of martyrdom (p. 80). Gronnvoll and McCauliff, though, do offer some helpful insights for this dissertation by using Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject to posit female suicide bombers as a particular variation of the *they* in constitutive rhetoric that is the "jettisoned object" which demarcates a clear indicator of "what we are not" (p. 337). In noting that a fatally violent act upon the innocent is itself perceived as "an act of extraordinary betrayal" when done by women (p. 347), Gronnvoll and McCauliff argue that this allows western audiences to particularize the female suicide bomber as a foreign *they* within an abject "culture of death" (p. 350). While Gronnvoll and McCauliff are more so regarding the homicidal component of a suicide bombing, the descriptive approach of an constitutive abject *they* is salient with much of the regard given to many individuals who attempt or complete suicide in general.

Assisted suicide may very well fall under the second form of "the standard Greek and Roman reasons"—"agent's choice before patient's suffering" (Laird, 2011, p. 525). Robert Wade Kenny's two entries regarding assisted suicide, though, may be the most troubling rhetorical treatments of suicide in general. For one thing, both entries are ad hominem attacks on individuals involved with assisted suicides as much as anything else. In his article, "The Rhetoric of Kevorkian's Battle" (2000), Jack Kevorkian is lampooned as a death-dealing coldhearted researcher. And in "The Death of Loving: Maternal Identity as Moral Constraint in a Narrative Testimonial Advocating Physician Assisted Suicide" (2002), Kenny attacks the credibility of Carol Loving, the mother of Nick

Loving who completed suicide with the assistance of his mother and Kevorkian. Whether or not Kenny's assessments are accurate, his playfulness is disturbing. You can see the above wordplay in the title of the Loving article. In the other article, Kenny (2000) offers another moment of wordplay by turning Burke's "equipment for living" into "equipment for dying" (p. 387). Dark humor is not undesirable to me. I use it quite often as a means of alleviating unhelpful heaviness in discussions or to offer a bit of light in particularly dark moments. However, there is a dismissive quality to Kenny's writing that gives his wordplay a shade of insidiousness. For example, "The Death of Loving" is a too-cute reference to both Nick Loving's suicide and Carol Loving's narrative failure as a loving mother. Kenny (2002) crosses a line when he describes multiple instances of Nick Loving hanging himself in suicide attempts and explicitly blames Carol Loving for her son's suicidality multiple times based on some twisted and implicit form of psychoanalysis regarding her testimonial narration (pp. 259-266). Ultimately, Kenny just attacks two individuals' character and offers no insight into the issue of assisted suicide itself.

There is hope yet, however, for rhetorical theory's engagement with suicide. The final three articles each fall under the category of how suicide has been rhetorically used and each offers helpful insights. I have already cited the first of these. Pasetti's (2009) article additionally falls under the category of putting suicide in the service of rhetorical theory because the goal of this article is to ascertain Seneca's contribution to the art of declamation with specific attention to Seneca's use of the topic of suicide (pp. 274-275). But, in her discussion, Pasetti mentions Seneca's use of "prosopopoeia" aside from suicide texts (p. 280). Prosopopoeia, the personification of an abstract idea or the representative speech of an "absent or imagined person" (Lie, 2012, p. 148), is a very

useful way to think about the disconstituent as a lost persona whom *we* regard but are not regarded in return and perceive as sending a message that cannot actually be sent.

Next, Richard Bell (2009) explains how the idea of suicide was attached to dueling as a rhetorical strategy in anti-dueling campaigns in the early years of the U.S. Particularly, he grounds this observation in the rhetorical usage of Alexander Hamilton's death at the hands of Aaron Burr in which it was reported and documented that Hamilton "never intended to pull the trigger" in the infamous Hamilton-Burr duel (pp. 384-385). Anti-dueling activists used this instance to declare that all duels are in effect "a fatal compact of suicide and murder" (Bell, 2009, p. 384). Bell (2009) explains that suicide was one of the foremost preoccupations in the early republic due to a deeper anxiety about the self-destructive potential within the politics of the American experiment as an "unruly body of constituents" (pp. 385-386). Further, there was fear of an impending outbreak of suicides based on several states no longer "detering suicides by punishing survivors and mutilating corpses" as was the common practice of the British (pp. 385-386). Finally, suicide was considered by many to be a direct betrayal of the constitutional social contract (p. 387). Bell's insight offers an important historical and juridical perspective on suicide as a constitutive concern beyond the respect for life. As Bell posits, suicide was perceived as threatening the survival of an entire constituency.

Finally, Michelle Murray Yang's (2011) "Still Burning: Self-Immolation as Photographic Protest" offers the most direct regard of suicide in recent rhetorical theory. Yang argues that this particular form of suicide, self-immolation, is a rhetorical act that imparts a performative representation of "violence done by an 'other'" (p. 2). With particular attention given to the iconic Vietnam War photograph of the Buddhist Thich

Quang Duc's self-immolation, Yang offers a protestation politics of the photograph (pp. 2-3). In her consideration of the photograph, Yang productively utilizes Barbie Zelizer's concept of the "about to die moment" in certain photographs. Specifically, she investigates Zelizer's articulation of the subjunctive voice found in photography that engages Barthes' "third meaning" (Yang, 2011, pp. 10-14). Zelizer (2004) explains that Barthes' "third meaning" in photography gestures towards a contingency that emerges once the viewer has "depleted both its literal/informational side and its symbolic dimension" (pp. 159-160). The "third meaning" is ultimately a precursor to Barthes' notion of punctum as the element in a photograph, or text, that disturbs the viewer's subjectivity. For Zelizer it invites the viewer into the possibility of intervention, or rather the hope of an impossible intervention, in the action of a photograph (pp. 161-162). This sense of elusive hope in "about to die moment" photographs informs her articulation of the subjunctive voice as the hypothetical "what if" that pulls a viewer into a relationship of contingency with a photograph (pp. 162-163). The event that is captured in the photograph cannot be changed, but the action depicted in the photograph and the elusive hope of intervention can change the viewer. This is almost exactly the type of regard that this dissertation explores. The only difference is the specificity of suicide and the disconstituent.

### **Regarding Again**

Camus' point that everything else comes after the problem of suicide is a matter of philosophical inquiry and the initiation of the examined life. When facing the actual suicide of another, however, the question of going on *returns*. You might think of this dissertation as arriving at the beginning of a nocturne, a point at which there is an

encounter between two obscured visions, that of dusk and that of prayer. The idea of the subject is very much alive in these places. James Elkins (1996), one of the first people to bring together theories of seeing from different disciplines, offers the concept of “subjective contour completion” as a helpful insight with regard to the way the visual operates in subjectivity. Elkins explains:

If a building is half hidden by the branches of a tree, we literally see it in fragments: subtract the tree and you would have a floating collection of irregular building pieces. But the eye completes the puzzle and sees the building whole. Psychoneurologists call the phenomenon subjective contour completion, and it helps explain how we can routinely see a single building instead of disjunct pieces. On a deeper level, subjective contour completion answers to a desire for wholeness over dissection and form over shapelessness. (p. 125)

Elkins brings the reader into the ocular reality of fragmentation in a way that speaks to the human being’s internal subjective struggle—or, perhaps, the seeming ease of alleviating that struggle. Elkins points to a central concern: he argues that “subjective contour completion” is an answer to a “desire for wholeness.” It is the answer to the yearning of a nocturne. But what does the desiring? What suggests that these are fragments that we want to be completed? Burke insists that mystery is intricately foundational to order, to the “possibility of the social” as Biesecker (2000) puts it (p. 43). In mystery humans see anxiety and exhilaration. Mystery seems to pull. As Burke (1969b) states, “In mystery, there must be *strangeness*; but the estranged must also be thought of as in some way capable of communication” (p. 115). When Sontag regards photographs of suffering subjects that do not regard her because they no longer can, subjects that threaten to undo her in her regard, what is that rhetorical moment?

Before I start to answer that question, I need to add another nuance to this subject-object relationship in the “objet petit a.” Elkins’ “subjective contour completion” could

be brought into the science wars as an explanation of why subjectivity is inferior to objectivity. Subjectivity deceives. But, then, I would argue the same of objectivity insofar as objectivity offers the same deception, at least from a psychoanalytic perspective.

Lacan (1978) explains this by distinguishing between hermeneutics and psychoanalytic interpretation in which “interpretation cannot in any way be conceived in the same way as [...] hermeneutics, hermeneutics, on the other hand, makes ready use of interpretation (p. 8). Lacan is suspicious of the term “research.” He prefers to think of psychoanalysis as a method of *finding*, because self-analysis is always a matter of what was lost returning, and that a psychoanalyst merely partners with the analyzed who must always ask the same question of “what is the analyst’s desire” (pp. 7-9). His point is that with hermeneutics, interpretation is a way of knowing. A hermeneutic orchestrates interpretation in such a way as to bring out the meaning of a text not unlike the way that constitutive rhetoric theorists have used the individual as subject to make ideological meaning. In psychoanalysis, however, interpretation is a way of being in itself at the very core of interpellation. Thus, while a hermeneutic system could incorporate this way of thinking about interpretation, the same could not be said of psychoanalysis because to articulate “interpretation as knowing” is quite literally beside the point if not even more fundamentally deceptive. We do not know; we only claim to know. In this way, I prefer to rethink both “subjectivity” and “objectivity.” Simply put, “subjectivity” is like an interpretive search for the subject in that it is not quite yet a finding, but would be most accurately described as an interpretive being qua subject—to interpretively be as a subject. And “objectivity” is the interpretive search for the object at the behest of subjectivity. Thus, if I refer to an individual as a subjectivity, I am specifically suggesting

that the individual *is* an *interpretive being of the subject*. And, an objective point of view is simply a way of orienting that interpretive being. But, I might also “see” subjectivity in an object—or, at least, I might *want* to see. This sense of objectivity is what is meant by the Lacanian notion of the “objet petit a”—the object of my desire that signifies me.

So, to return to the above question about Sontag’s sort of regard, the sense in which objectivity is the search for the object at the behest of subjectivity begins the answer. But, the viewer can also recognize in one of these photographs a subject that the viewer knows is no longer a self-perpetuating subject. Something else is revealed here. It is both Burke’s “mystery” and Lacan’s “unconscious,” which can only be known through the repetition of form. Lacan (1978) ties repetition to the unconscious to observe that “our concept is always established in our approach that is not unrelated to that which is imposed on us, as a form, by infinitesimal calculus” (p. 19). He elaborates, “if the concept is modeled on an approach to reality that the concept has been created to apprehend, it is only by a leap, a passage to the limit, that it manages to realize itself” (p. 19) Is it the subject that makes the leap or is it the unconscious? Does mystery itself cross from itself into the known? Is that the only repetition that ever actually happens? I argue, no. It is not the subject, the unconscious, or the mystery. It is the individual that is articulated by the subject, the unconscious, and the mystery. I also argue that traumatic encounters with the images that *we* regard have a particular power over the idea of *us*. In particular, images of suicide *can* facilitate the return of certain repressed materials of the unconscious that short circuit our sense of *I* in a way that is akin to our earliest sense of a subjective persona in which our own persona can be lost.

Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981) about his ongoing encounter with the photograph. He explains, “I was overcome by an ‘ontological’ desire: I wanted to learn at all costs what photography was ‘in itself,’ by what essential feature it was to be distinguished from the community of images” (p. 3). Something about the photograph makes him need to distinguish it, and he decides that “What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once” and it “always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see” as “the *This* (this photograph, and not Photography), in short, what Lacan calls the *Tuché*, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real” (p. 4). As I will explain in Chapter 2, Barthes is a bit off in his estimation of this photograph being an Encounter, although it may very well be the Real. But, more importantly for the moment, Barthes calls his “ontological desire” a disorder of supposed need and fragmentation and speaks to the curative gesture in psychoanalysis. His journey, his explicit search for the subject, begins from disorder in the hopes of not completing the puzzle, but to encounter the completed puzzle. Thus, Barthes transforms the subjective ontological desire into a sort of visual call and response. He argues that “certain photographs exerted [...] *adventure*” upon him” so that “This picture *advenes*, that one doesn’t” (p. 19). Tellingly, he concludes, “The principle of adventure allows me to make Photography exist” (p. 19). I argue that he wants Photography to exist to validate his subjectivity. But, as with an image of suicide or suicide itself, what happens when an image, utterance, or act specifically no longer regards you in such a way that you matter?

What follows is a dissertation attempting to answer the aforementioned following research questions:

1. What does it mean to regard suicide from the standpoint of beginning as failure?



2. What might a method for grappling with the implications of this failed regard look like?

This dissertation attempts to theoretically forestall subjective contour completion and to sit within the fragments of Babel. This is the sublime prayer of the nocturne. And it is doomed to fail. But, as Burke (1969b) observes, “There is mystery in an animal’s eyes at those moments when a man feels that he and the animal understand each other in some inexpressible fashion” (p. 115). Why might I look at anything in the world? The answer is that something shows me as possibly more than me. Or, as Lacan (1978) puts it:

The world is all-seeing, but it is not exhibitionistic—it does not provoke our gaze. When it begins to provoke it, the feeling of strangeness begins too. What does this mean, if not that, in the so-called waking state, there is an elision of the gaze, and an elision of the fact that not only does it look, *it* also *shows*. In the field of the dream, on the other hand, what characterizes the images is that *it shows*. (p. 75)

In the above passage, Lacan reveals a few significant components to the work of this dissertation. There is the “it” that “begins to provoke it,” the “elision of the gaze,” and “the field of the dream.” Lacan makes it clear that the world “does not provoke our gaze,” but that some thing provokes some thing. I argue that the first thing is a matter of both visual and auditory hailing and that the second thing is the individual production, or attempted production, of the subject through the gaze. The subject, which is always only an attempted subject, can be understood as the elision of the gaze in the way that it simultaneously inhabits and represses the gaze. Finally, the field of the dream may be understood as the revelation of the unconscious reality.

Chapter 2 offers an additional literature review and culminates in a discussion of the relationship between the disconstituent and identification. To arrive upon an understanding of this relationship, I attempt to come to terms with the subjective nature

of simultaneously being lead and blindly leaping through the work of Burke, Lacan, and Barthes. Specifically, I focus on “The Deaths of the Subject” that I see in their work in order to bring the subject to the point of identification as the demand of a false confession in order to articulate the disconstituent’s rejection.

Chapter 3 is my attempt to literally come to terms with how we can fail to see. Put otherwise, Chapter 3 attempts to create a failed model in that it attempts to recreate *our* failed regard. I delve a bit further into the psychoanalytic notion of the gaze so as to establish a particular understanding of Peggy Phelan’s (1997) consideration of the painting technique known as the “vanishing point” as a visual structure of the gaze. I subsequently reformat Joshua Gunn’s (2008a) articulation of the Ideal, Symbolic, and Real fathers outlined by Lacan but based on Freud’s work. I reformat Gunn’s stance through the use of Freud’s rendition of the fathers in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) as opposed to Gunn’s use of the earlier, shorter version in Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1918). In so doing, I combine my reworking of the vanishing point and the fathers into the promised method of our failed regard which follows along the lines of Ideal, Symbolic, and Real but in the form of the Authorial Subject, the Authoritative Subject, and the Constituent Subject. This structure also follows well with Sands’ (2009) “trying on the shoes,” walking in the shoes,” and “taking the shoes off.”

The final three chapters examine each of these subjectivities from a failed standpoint so as to deteriorate from the Authorial Subject, Authoritative Subject, and Constituent Subject into the State of Disconstituency, Disconstitutive Rhetoric, and the Disconstituent respectively. To aid in the exposition of these movements, each of these final chapters will focus in part on specific suicidal artifacts. Chapter 4 will regard Gus

Van Sant's *Last Days* (2005a), which follows a character named "Blake" who closely resembles Kurt Cobain. Chapter 5 will regard *Vice Magazine's* "Last Words" fashion spread in which models pose in renderings of famous female authors' suicides.

Specifically, I will focus on the poetic image of Sylvia Plath. Chapter 6 will carry us to the end of our nocturne with regard to Eric Steel's controversial documentary, *The Bridge* (2006), which films suicidal jumps from the Golden Gate Bridge.

I chose these images, whether moving or not, whether fictional or non-fictional or somewhere in between, because they do something more than provoke me. They invoke the *me* that tried to play away my brother's suicide. In Elkins' (1996) assessment of a specific set of images of death that are particularly horrifying, he concludes, "they are painfully close to something I know I cannot or must not see" (p. 115). The very thought of suicide, perhaps because of my personal history or perhaps because I still *must be*, has the same effect on me as these images have on Elkins. For him, "These images shout all other images down: they are harsh and importunate, so that they are not only hard to see; they also make everything else hard to see" (p. 116). Nonetheless, I stand back and think. I regard these images even as I get the sense that the subjects I see in them have chosen to have nothing to do with me. Additionally, these artifacts have the benefit of not being closely aligned with any particular politics making the disconstituent *connections* more available.

As you read the dissertation, I would like for you to keep three deaths in mind. The first is Burke's aforementioned Fall of Babel. This is what he places at the heart of rhetoric, a mythical holocaust of sorts. Thus, the process of identification begins upon the imaginary broken bodies of a utopian connectivity.

The second death is the death of an anonymous child found in Freud's "Burning Child Dream." I will discuss this dream in the second chapter, but it's important to know that this dream is the heart of psychoanalysis. As Lacan (1978) argues, "Everything is within reach, emerging, in this example" (p. 35). And within this dream, and this death, there is another death. As Lacan says of Freud, "*The unconscious*, he tells us, *is not the dream*" (p. 37). He later continues this thought by locating the subject in the *I* as "the complete, total locus of the network of signifiers, that is to say, the subject, *where it was*, where it has always been, the dream" (p. 44).

Finally, there is the death of Barthes mother. The majority of the work from Barthes in this dissertation comes out of the period following her death, because it rings with such heart-wrenching honesty and arguably performatively plays out his life's work (Dyer, 2010). Barthes' love for his mother is well known and his own death just three years later carries with it the traces of a broken heart. In these three deaths, we find the broken hearts of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. As Burke (1969b) offers, "rhetoric also includes resources of appeal ranging from sacrificial, evangelical love, through the kinds of persuasion figuring in sexual love, to sheer 'neutral' *communication* (communication being the area where love has become so generalized, desexualized, 'technologized,' that only close critical or philosophical scrutiny can discern the vestiges of the original motive)" (p. 19) And from there we, reader and writer, may proceed with the rethought subjectivity and objectivity to accept Burke's challenge. Central to all of this are the writings and lectures of Kenneth Burke, Jacques Lacan, and Roland Barthes and their interpretive approaches to individuals, texts, and individuals as texts— again, the subject that begins as failure.

Rhetorical theory is well positioned for this study because it is precisely about how we come to terms with the world. We do not have to judge these terms or the world, but we can begin to understand how we do so through both rhetoric and rhetorical theory. Thus, the impetus here is to come to the term of regard that I have set forth and to take the perspective of a first persona seriously. Psychoanalysis is also about coming to terms with the world with each other. If psychoanalysis teaches us anything, it is the rethinking of the old adage, “history repeats itself.” Alternatively, the psychoanalyst might say that what is repressed returns, sometimes in hidden and intensified ways. With regard to suicide, we must re-regard what we repress.

## CHAPTER 2: DEATHS OF THE SUBJECT AND IDENTIFICATION AS DEMAND

Chapter 1 introduced several key concepts worth reiterating. First, this dissertation is an attempt to offer a regard that defies ranking in a system of central and marginal status. To regard without ranking, to regard as a way of giving oneself up, is to negate order. This kind of regard may very well be impossible for any subject of interpellation such as myself. But, second, this likely impossibility is part of the beginning as failure that is key to this project. Beginning as failure does not mean setting out to fail. It means accepting and acknowledging the failure that has already *occurred*. Third, this dissertation participates in the tradition of constitutive rhetoric with a psychoanalytic approach to rhetorical theory and the subject, or non-subject, of identification. Chapter 2 focuses its regard on the specific meaning of beginning as failure as a constitutive lack which can be found in the works of Burke, Lacan, and Barthes.

Burke, Lacan, and Barthes are central figures in this dissertation because of their relationships with *the subject*. Burke gave his famous “definition of man” to rhetoric only to leave his man rotted at his core. Lacan, in the most literal way one can operate a metaphor, brought the subject up in Freudian psychoanalysis only to show how easily it vanishes. And, Barthes gave the reader new life *and* death with the author’s literary obituary. For each subject that they illuminated was an immediate departure back into darkness. This chapter looks at the particular ways through which each of their subjects passed.

Additionally, each of these thinkers operates with strong psychoanalytic tendencies. Lacan is obvious. Early in contemporary rhetorical theory, Burke was

primarily considered Aristotelian when he could be more contemporarily tied to Hegelianism, Marxism, and Freudian psychoanalysis (McGee, 1975, p. 236). As mentioned in Chapter 1, Gunn (2008b) syncs Burke's notion of identification with the Gunnian term "gesture of something more" (p. 138). This is also Gunn's reference to the "objet a" in Lacanian psychoanalytic parlance. Sometimes referred to as the "big Other" because of its relation to "objet petit a," "the "objet a" designates the subject's desire for various expressions of other subjects' desires to be directed towards the subject. Whereas the "petit objet a" can be materialized, though not quite attained, the "objet a" cannot be materialized as it is only what is promised in identification—and love (Gunn, p. 138). Both others are objectively sought for the sake of self-perpetuation.

Barthes operates theoretically in very similar ways to Burke in that he has a strong psychoanalytic bent combined with a passion for literary criticism. In particular, Barthes offers a beautifully written performance style that launches into the heart of subjectivity at the intersection of textuality, visuality, and myth. Taken together, Burke, Barthes, and Lacan create a rich terrain for psychoanalysis, rhetorical theory, and textual encounters. By tracing the ways in which they construct a subject that embodies beginning as failure, what I call the deaths of their subjects, the articulation of identification as a demand for the false confession of a *me* that is not and will never be becomes painfully clear—a distress call which the disconstituent no longer answers nor deflects.

Before launching into the deaths of the Burkean, Lacanian, and Barthesian subjects, it is worth noting a key way in which Burke puts his reader in distress, which also offers a perfectly doomed entrance into this chapter. Burke (1969b) does not begin *A Rhetoric of Motives* as failure. Through literary interpellation, he forces his reader to

begin as failure in the way he discusses Milton's portrayal of and identification with the mythic suicidal Samson. Similar to Black's "real author" as distinguished from an "implied author," Burke's opening is reflective of the literary perspective that issues forth from the commandment of no privileged subtext. Burke observes of Milton's work that:

One can read it simply *in itself* [italics Burke's], without even considering the fact that it was written by Milton. It can be studied and appreciated as a structure of internally related parts, without concern for the correspondence that almost inevitably suggests itself: the correspondence between Milton's blindness and Samson's, or between the poet's difficulties with his first wife and Delilah's betrayal of a divine 'secret.' (p. 4)

Burke immediately undoes the thing he suggests the reader could do. Upon his mentioning of the historical details, the reader can in fact no longer read the text without "concern" for the author's biographical information. At best, a reader can only pretend to do as such or strive to repress this information for as long as possible. Burke doubles down on this as an impossibility with the argument that, "Besides this individual identification of the author with an aggressive, self-destructive hero who was in turn identified with God, there is also factional identification" (p. 4). An array of author's intent is held before the reader's eyes in these passages only to flow into the claim that because "Milton's religion strongly forbade suicide" he was "Compelled by his misfortunes to live with his rage, gnawed by resentments that he could no longer release fully in outward contest," and so, "Milton found in Samson a figure ambivalently fit to symbolize both aggressive and inturning [sic] trends" (p. 5).

It is difficult to locate the divine betrayal, the suicide, in all of this. Are we now reading about Samson's suicide? Are we directly reading Milton's desire or the repression of his desire for suicide? Does Milton not know about his desire? Is there something self-destructive in Burke that gives him insight into this potential avenue of



inquiry? Is this why he seems to feel he knows something of Milton? Did Burke read someone else's biographical account of Milton? Or, do we now exclude any vague knowledge of Burke's personal life? The author, authors' intent, motive, and interpretation are all rather tricky things because they are, of course, caught up in matters of the subject. In his classic "The Death of the Author", Roland Barthes (1978a) explains that the "author is a modern figure [...] emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation," creating "the prestige of the individual [...] which has attached the greatest importance to the 'person' of the author" (pp. 142-143). In so doing, Barthes names what many readers seek as readers, what motivates interpretation itself. He speaks directly to the impossibility, the beginning as failure, the emptiness that we deny through the rational establishment of the subject as the faithful manifestation of our own *authority* over our own textuality.

Though Barthes and Lacan tend to operate their analyses from an atheistic standpoint, Lacan (1978) explains that while the subject "is not the soul, either mortal or immortal" there is a matter of faith involved in interpellation because "It is the subject who is called—there is only he, therefore, who can be chosen" (p. 47). In other words, the subject is the individual person insofar as it is the being-ness that is invoked by another to constitute both the myth of and the desire for the unified self. It is the *I must be* as opposed to the *I am*. And subjects look for objective textual signifiers, the "objet petit a," to master and maintain that myth in a doubly self-deceiving manner (Lacan, p. 5). With this, Lacan shows the playful complexity of the desire at work in the subject qua subject, the subject as self-perpetuating or self-performing subject. But, this subject is merely a product, or symptom, of the unconscious. This, then, is also the comedy of the

analyst who, in bringing this desire out into the open with regard to the analysand, also brings it out with regard to his or her self (Lacan, p. 5).

For further context, consider the possibility that Burke (1969b) succeeds, at least temporarily, in offering the reading of Milton without Milton as he suggests. In fact, *Rhetoric* opens with a series of suicides—all of which serve the “use” of establishing a foundational thematic to consider the work of rhetoric, persuasion, and identification. For contemporary readers, to begin with Samson’s suicide is a particularly interesting choice from the perspective of *our* post-9/11 context. After all, Samson’s suicidal tearing down of the two pillars amongst the Philistines in Gaza is remarkably akin to an ideologically driven suicide bombing that one might read about in mainstream news today if not “9/11” itself. But, obviously this context, while nearly unavoidable, is clearly not Burke’s intent. And, likewise, in Burke’s ideological loading of Milton’s retelling with the rhetorical purpose of Milton’s political strife, Burke simultaneously strips this metaphorical identification between Milton and Samson of ideology and authorial intent by rendering it as only a reference point for understanding a *form* of identification (pp. 3-6). In other words, Burke does succeed on some level at reducing the Milton’s suicidal Samson to a textual “petit objet a” by assuring its transformation into merely a signifier of a subject. And many readers may add it to their self-signifying collection of little objects of their desire for themselves.

Burke’s (1969b) series of literary suicides culminates in three particular thoughts: that war is, “a disease, or perversion of communion,” the idea of “Identification” being “compensatory to division,” and his famous claim that “Rhetoric is concerned with the state of Babel after the Fall” (pp. 22-23). Right there, in the earliest parts of this work, in

the contemplation of suicide and crumbling structures, we are told that we necessarily begin from the point of being unraveled. And he finishes the entire treatise with the thought that even as we are stuck with rebuilding ourselves out of this crumbled mess, “let us, as students of rhetoric, scrutinize its range of entrancements, both with dismay and in delight” until we reach “the end of all desire” (p. 333). To clarify, Samson’s ideological and suicidal pulling down of the pillars and the wrathful falling tower of Babel are both simultaneously chaotic and orderly. They are imagistic of chaos. They are ideological rejections of perceived chaos. In that rejection, there is the move to human order maddened by the mysterious motive of order itself, which is a process of both unifying identification and its always already implied division. In this rhetorical wink, Burke effectively condemns, desires, and simply observes as a scholar, all at once in an inspirationally engaged futility, a disturbing reflection of the subject on the narcissistic pool of mystery. The “end of all desire” is to either *choose* to cease failing to attain our signifying objects of desire via suicide or to simply die.

As Biesecker (2000) points out, “Burke identifies as central the thematic of courtship to which corresponds an underlying stratum of motive he calls ‘hierarchy in general’ with its attending effect of ‘mystery’” (p. 47). Out of the mystery of the unconscious the individual emerges, and out of the interactions of individuals a mystery emerges as the foundation of order. Or, in other words, “In the *Rhetoric* Burke’s thinking of the social finds its resources in the newly determined space of the individual: in the predication of the human being per se is the possibility of the social” (p. 47). And, it is here that Burke joins his readers by also beginning *Rhetoric* as failure, because his individual subject, his “definition of man,” has always already been doomed.

## Deaths of the Burkean, Lacanian, and Barthesian Subjects

### The Burkean Subject

Much of my argument with regard to the “death of the Burkean subject” follows from Biesecker’s (2000) work in *Addressing Postmodernity*. She argues that two of Burke’s masterworks, *Grammar* and *Rhetoric*, can and should be read as ontological pursuits, rather than the traditional epistemological approaches, that ultimately fail to produce an ontologically *substantiated* subject. This section of the dissertation largely focuses on the intricacies of her argument, but it also begins and ends this with aspects of his famous “definition of man.” His definition, as found in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (1966), is as follows:

Man is the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal, inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative) separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order) and rotten with perfection. (p. 16)

Burke’s specific discussion of the “man as a symbol-using animal” in his definition is revealing and speaks directly to the project of this dissertation. He offers the question, “But can we bring ourselves to realize just what that formula implies, just how overwhelmingly much of what we mean by ‘reality’ has been built up for us through nothing but our symbol systems?” (p. 5) He answers his own question to a large extent shortly afterwards that to bring oneself to such a realization “is much like peering over the edge of things into an ultimate abyss,” which is why he suggests, the subject “clings to a kind of naïve verbal realism that refuses to realize the full extent of the role played by symbolicity [sic] in his notions of reality” (p. 5). The “clinging” to which Burke speaks directly articulates the *realization* of desire that is subjectivity—the *making* “real” of subjective desire. It is an apt word choice as it is both a way of holding our own hearts,

of forcing our will, and a way of following an Other, small or big, in departure. Clinging, here, is the desire of signification and the refusal in repression.

Additionally, there is the wry rottenness. In his critique of a rather contradictory Freud, Burke (1966) re-presents the psychoanalytic insight of “repetition compulsion” (what contemporary social scholars might call compulsive performativity) to express the subjective desire for perfection as a unified self that cannot ever be achieved but that has somehow been aroused “in some earlier formative situation” (p. 18). Burke is cursorily beginning to describe the *psychoanalytic* notion of “drive,” or the driving force of *subjective* desire. The intricacies of the “drive” concept will be explored throughout this dissertation. It is important, for now, to simply note the central role drive plays in the “shaping” of a human form for Burke (p. 18). It is also intriguing, in this light, to note that Burke refers to this part of the definition as a “codicil,” as an *extra part* or *appendix to the text* (p. 18). To think of the drive as an appendage, as a way of reaching that is central to the shape of us is an incredible insight for a discussion of suicide, which one might consider, within a Burkean subject, an excessive *action* in the throws of *motion*.

Action and motion are central to the way that *A Rhetoric of Motives* begins Burke’s *us* as failure. It is within an action/motion differential that the Burkean human being *comes to terms*. Biesecker (2000) explains that to understand the doomed nature of Burke’s project requires a look back to his *Grammar* as “the *Grammar* is also a book that records its author’s attempt to come to terms with precisely that which Burke’s critical method precomprehends: motive understood in a more originary sense than its particular determinations—as the essence of being human” (p. 24). “To come to terms” has been used already in this dissertation as a significant part of the primary guiding research

questions. It is a phrase that is often invoked at times of grief as well as at times of negotiation. Biesecker not only brings the discussion out of the purely epistemological range, she also sends Burke off on an impossible journey that likewise shifts interpretation from a way of knowing to a way of not simply being, but a way of interpretive being not unlike our rethought subjectivity. Simply put, Biesecker's narration of Burke's ontological efforts is a story of a human being coming to term. Biesecker's treatment of Burke is to shift consideration of his work from epistemological readings towards "a painstaking and ultimately frustrated investigation of the ontological foundation of motives per se: that which effaces itself in the midst of its appearance" (p. 25).

To clarify, with "motive" Burke and Biesecker are not just discussing the notion of author's intent. Biesecker is arguing that this is a far deeper and more personal ontological pursuit than not knowing what someone meant to say, or meant by saying, but rather what people sense in and of their selves—what people sense by way of a person's singular intent. In particular, prior to arriving at identification in *Rhetoric*, Biesecker qua Burke is grappling with the individual human being, that may or may not be a subject, as the locus of motive in *Grammar*.

Biesecker (2000), in order to illuminate this struggle, gives a close reading of Burke's action/motion differential, which is as follows: "'Action,' according to Burke, is constitutive of human being: it is the primary mode of being human and is to be understood in relation to its dialectical opposite 'motion,' a term that signifies 'sheer locomotion' (85)" (B. A. Biesecker, p. 26). She considers Burke's example of the stumble. Burke (1969a) argues, "If one happened to stumble over an obstruction, that

would not be an act, but a mere motion. However, one could convert even this sheer accident into something of an act if, in the course of falling, one suddenly *willed* his fall (as a rebuke, for instance, to the negligence of the person who had left the obstruction in the way [*italics Burke's*])” (p. 14). As clear as this seems, even Burke acknowledges the ambiguities of “Terms like ‘adjustment’ and ‘adaptation’” that are used to explain “both action and sheer motion, so that it is usually difficult to decide just which sense a thinker is using them, when he applies them to social motive” (p. 14). And there is also Burke’s intermediate statement, “‘Dramatistically,’ the basic unit of action would be defined as ‘the human body in conscious or purposive motion’” (p. 14). Already, Burke finds himself on the edge of his abyss with choice as an illusionary trick. In *Mythologies*, Barthes (1972) presents a similar point, or perhaps quandary, when he writes, “Motivation is unavoidable. It is none the less very fragmentary. To start with, it is not ‘natural’: it is history which supplies its analogies to form” (pp. 126-127). The point in the stumble where the human transforms the motion of being into the action of being is lost in the past as an avoidable history of taught representation. Even at its most basic point of definition, this action/motion differential within the overall subjectivity via motive/motivation equation is collapsing *on the individual level*. Even as Biesecker observes that, “when applied to the realm of human being, the term ‘motion’ names for Burke the moment wherein the subject performs structure” (B. A. Biesecker, 2000, p. 26), where the human action begins or ends is lost because a “subject” is itself structurally ontological even if the performance is syntactical in nature. More to the point, “structure” is an interpretive concept put forth as a compensation for the messiness of a chaotic clumsiness. You may remember a common childhood joke in which the joker

asks the dupe to close his or her eyes and imagine running through the forest only to slap the dupe in the forehead and exclaim, “You hit a tree!” Eventually, the dupe will hopefully either stop closing his or her eyes or decline to participate in the joke altogether. Is that action or motion?

While Biesecker (2000) concedes that “the reading of the action/motion distinction prevalent among critics is quite correct from the existential purview: human beings act, things move” (p. 27), the beingness, as an action, has yet to elude, or distinguish itself from, the thingness. The human is still a slinky. In other words, human motion is the designated term for the subject performing itself like a wound up automaton while action might be the term for the subject creating itself within the context of its unwinding. To that point and the continuation of her ontological re-reading, Biesecker writes, “in reading this distinction between action and motion as only proposing a differential relationship between the human and nonhuman, critics theoretically elide what is, perhaps, one of the most productive moments in Burke’s work: the tacit suggestion that the difference that obtains *between* the human and the nonhuman, and that indeed structures their relation, also obtains *within* the human being itself” (p. 27). So, action is, ontologically speaking, the point at which a subject *interpretively* responds to the unconscious reality of motion in such a way that is ultimately self defining because the “human” is “being itself” within *the* context of *a* reality. In other words, the individual human responds to the metaphor of its body with the creation of a first persona.

Lacan (1978) explains that this *human response* is the precise nature of “signifiers” in which subjects “are constituted [...] by analogy” (p. 46). The signifiers



arouse the appetite for action. It is to these internal and external signifiers that one habitually, or performatively, clings. In other words, consciousness itself is an interpretive activity that *becomes* merely one signifier of the subject—"I think; therefore I am." But *I* is not just an individual; *I* is the subject that stands in for individual process of being. Signifiers are only analogous to the being of the subject just as the subject is only analogous to the individual. Biesecker (2000) concludes "that for Burke the human being is constituted in and by a resident rift or internal action/motion differential" (p. 27). "Resident rift" is one of my favorite ways of putting the subjective situation because even as she argues that "the [Burkean] human being is constituted in" this rift, it is the rift that resides, it is the rift that is the resident rather than a residence. One might rethink Nietzsche's abysmal thought into "the abyss peers back into the abyss." To the point, it is not uncommon to talk about the objective signifiers themselves as the subject (I = single white female), rather than as the subjective viewpoint as the analogy for itself (I am what I and others call a single white female), because such a strategy appears to temporarily offer a far more concrete sense of reality. This is the same overall issue with materialist constitutive rhetoric—the complexities of the "modest" signifiers for and of the subject are largely taken for granted. This is what Burke means by "naïve verbal realism." More precisely, Lacan (1978) further explains the functioning of signifiers, that "in order for these traces of perception to pass into memory, they must first be effaced in perception, and reciprocally, a simultaneity. He refers to this simultaneity as "signifying synchrony" (pp. 45-46). One can also liken this functioning to myths. Barthes (1972), for instance explains, "*in the eyes of the myth-consumer* [italics Barthes'], the intention, the adhomination [sic] of the concept can remain manifest without however appearing to

have an interest in the matter: what causes mythical speech to be uttered is perfectly explicit, but it is immediately frozen into something natural; it is not read as motive, but as reason”(p. 129). “Reason,” here, stands in for both “rational” and “causal,” and it performatively expresses the effacement suggested by Lacan—what the *I/eye* perceives is re-presented as fact.

In this way, the signifiers are made into ontic facts. This is the beginning of the principle of substitution and therefore hierarchy. What is unfolding here is the precise passing away of the subject within the Burkean frame. Just as he has developed the process by which the subject performs itself purposively, so too does the subject lose its grip, its *clinging*, on that performance. Biesecker (2000) explains, “if neither action nor motion can be understood as ultimately dominated, absorbed, or subsumed by the other in the moment of the act, then it is neither possible to conceptualize their relation as dialectical in the Hegelian sense of the term (i.e., as a movement toward the supersession of binary terms or substance) nor reasonable to understand the human being’s relation to the play of those motivational loci as one of mastery” (pp. 27-28). Thus, Biesecker argues that the individual human being is “always already in a state of becoming” rather than a “controlling or willing subject” master (p. 28). To be clear, the notion of a subject is, in fact, not simply lost in the rift so much as the subject is the rift between consciousness and a knowable reality. The subject is an empty space that utilizes the analogy of consciousness as a manner of activity that might fill the exterior space with itself in such a way that can become internalized.

Furthermore, Biesecker concludes:

The point of this somewhat lengthy digression has been to illustrate the way in which the ‘paradox of substance’ serves as the methodological trick by means of which Burke is able to rewrite an implicitly ontological inquiry into an epistemological one. Not only does the paradox of substance enable Burke to focus simply on the text or act since scene (that which is, properly speaking, outside the act) is incorporated within it, but it also enables him to inquire into ‘the ultimate ground of motives’ by grammatically analyzing specifically verbal acts since what is represented or represents itself in symbolic action is a negotiation within an always and already divided agent. (p. 33)

In other words, one could argue that Burke ultimately succumbs to his own naïve verbal realism because, “inscribed within the method Burke mobilizes in order to reveal by proxy an internal necessity that inaugurates the production of human being as such is the guarantee of a failure” (B. A. Biesecker, pp. 38-39).

Biesecker (2000) argues that Burke’s desire to materialize a subject, to give his human being a Platonic weight, is what “occludes the possibility of assuring the accuracy of his explanation of the human being if only because he seeks to situate his inquiry at an absolute point of origin, a point outside history, anterior to the historical emergence of human being” (p. 39). But, the piece that Biesecker is missing is the fact that Burke had to begin from a point of failure; the human being has to be incompletely substantiated, because otherwise there would be no need for being collectively or otherwise. Burke gave himself his own Babel.

One can easily see the tortured failure of the Burkean subject later in *Rhetoric* as Burke (1969b) tries to salvage the rotten individual. He begins with a rudimentary description, “A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so” (p. 20). But the

distinctness increasingly devolves into a mere materialistic, thus ontic and essentialist, separation of bodies rather than subjectivities: "Here are ambiguities of substance. In being identified with B, A is 'substantially one' with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another" (p. 21). And it is critical that he names the ambiguity of substance here because it reveals the *equally superficial* reality of materialism that is only deepened by the presence of the possibility of the human being itself. And he leaves us with a beautiful psychoanalytic opening by declaring, "While consubstantial with its parents, with the 'firsts' from which it is derived, the offspring is nonetheless apart from them. In this sense, there is nothing abstruse in the statement that the offspring both is and is not one with its parentage (p. 21).

Biesecker (2000) offers two questions: "How can ontology be anything other than a constantly thwarted attempt to explain the nature of the human being? and Does ontology itself not become little more than a cathected desire to produce an exposition on man?" (p. 29) My answer is an emphatic, "Yes!" And in this way, one can argue from a Burkean perspective, as conceived here, that rhetoric, vis-à-vis identification, and ontological desire are substantially the same—that free will is truly a *matter* of opinion. This opinion, though, is always already presented to us at one of the most foundational levels of identification and interpellation—"the negative." The negative, for Burke, is like Hagrid telling Harry Potter he's a wizard. But, Burke makes his magic real through rhetoric. For Burke (1969b), rhetoric makes *action* real by inducing a response in another whose very essence responds to symbols—identification (p. 43-46). Not unlike Althusser,

Burke cannot leave the individual subject empty, but the negative offers him a way out. As Gunn (2008b) observes, Burke is a “not me” kind of guy when regarding the initiation of the subject (Gunn, 2008b, p. 148). For Burke (1969a), the negative comes to *us* first—the *what I am not* (the “not me”) suggests to me both that *I am* and what *I might be* (pp. 295-300). He notes that the negative is a “function of *desire*, or *expectations*, or *interest* [italics Burke’s]” (p. 296), and that this “‘pure’ personality” and “purposiveness” that appears as a response to this sense of the negative is often described through the “imagery of a voice calling within” (pp. 300-301). Altogether, this is the “voice” of the *I must be* that is informed by the other’s demanding presentation of self. *I must be* is introduced to and as *me* as and by *not me*. *I must be that* type of *I am*.

#### The Lacanian Subject

Biesecker (2000) notes that “Despite the fact that, properly speaking, motive is not the act and the act is not the motive, one can gain access to motive by way of a systematic analysis of the act for which motive has served as the context or generating ground” (p. 31). In other phenomenological words, by looking around the edges of our “resident rift” at the active signifiers that appear to repeatedly point towards the potential contents of the rift—or lack there of—we may ascertain the subjective causality. This might be understood as a comforting opening for psychoanalysis, but Lacan does not offer much relief. The rift is still a rift no matter how much Burke attempts to substantiate it. Elkins (1996) succinctly observes that to Lacan, “the very idea that we are unified selves is entirely fictional, a lie that we tell ourselves in order to keep going. In reality (that is, in the world we can never face), my sense of myself is a desperate fiction, a “symptom” of being human” (p. 74). My point here is to be clear that a psychoanalytic

approach to rhetoric will not deliver some magical being that operates the body and its persona.

The subject is not only a fictive causal agent, but the subject is also something *who* is caused and thus has a cause that emerges from somewhere other than the Other not me: namely, the unconscious me that is not *I*. As Lacan (1978) directly suggests:

I am not saying that Freud introduces the subject into the world—the subject as distinct from psychical function, which is a myth, a confused nebulosity—since it was Descartes who did this. But I am saying that Freud addresses the subject in order to say to him the following, which is new—*Here, in the field of the dream, you are at home. Wo es war, soll Ich werden.* (p. 44)

But, the dream, like the subject, is a linguistic product of the unconscious as well.

Referring to the ancient idea of dreams as messages from the gods, as voices calling within, Lacan begins to manifest this new subject with the argument that, “What concerns us is the tissue that envelops these messages, the network in which, on occasion, something is caught” (1978, p. 45). The subject that now walks the plank is explicitly the *subject of the unconscious* that is invoked via hailing and made visible but remains illusive nonetheless. The tissue is the fictive but *driven* interpellation of the subject within the individual as the orienting lens at the service of consciousness, and the something that is caught is the signifying “petit objet a” that aids in the self-perpetuation of a conscious subject that has a touch of a deterministic quality in its desire for survival.

To momentarily step back into Burke in order to tie him to Freud in such a way that will demarcate Lacan’s departure from both, it is important to observe that Burke does not write “motive” as simply a substitute for “will.” A “will” might be enveloped by the idea of a “drive” or of the “subject” itself. Rather, “motive” causally and *essentially* operates at the center of both in precisely the same way as the quite essential *Freudian*

unconscious (Burke, 1969a, p. 431). In other words, it is a mistake to read motive as bias. Although one can, at times, read motive as precisely subjective bias. Rather, motive is an essential prompt, prior to the negative and rhetoric, which calls for a response. And, as such, Lacan (1978) offers the Freudian “residential rift” by the name of the “causal gap” (p. 46). The “causal gap” represents Lacan’s departure from Freud’s (and Burke’s) essentialism. For Lacan, Freud, too, is caught up in an “ontological desire” for greater certainty of some underlying unity (p. 46). But Lacan’s departure from Freud is also his addition to Freud. As he says of Freud’s certainty, “Opposite his certainty, there is the subject” (p. 47), or to be exact, the Lacanian subject that is the subject of the unconscious.

To understand how this is, one must, as previewed, return to the “Burning Child” dream that Freud (1965) believes to both fully explain and fully undo everything (p. 549). It is within interpretation (of dreams, symptomatic acts, verbal slips, and laughter) that the human subject attempts to catch a glimpse of the real. As Lacan (1978) suggestively beckons, “what we have in the discovery of psycho-analysis is an encounter, an essential encounter—an appointment to which we are always called with a real that eludes us” (p. 53).

To preface the importance of the dream, it is helpful to note the basic nature of the drives in greater detail. As is within the popular lexicon, there are the Freudian anal and oral drives that are sexually expository. When speaking of drives, psychoanalysts are not speaking of instinctual needs such as hunger or breathing. Rather, psychoanalysts are speaking of the ways that individuals manifest their reality through a desire to be realized and recognizable. The anal and oral drives are, as such, demands (Lacan, 1978, p. 180).

The Lacanian additions, or further elaborations, known as the scopic and invocatory drives are the “partial drives” of desire (p. 180). They are the reaches and the reached of the subject of the unconscious. All drives pass through the grammatical voices, the structural “circuit,” of the drives in the form of active (to see, to hear), reflexive (to see oneself, to hear oneself), and passive (to be seen, to be heard) so that subjects make themselves both seen and heard in order to encounter the real (pp. 180-200). One might also understand these circuitous points as the internalization of externally apprehended rhetorical personae in which individuals come to contextually comprehend themselves as the subject positions of *me*, *you*, and *them*. Through these points, subjects attempt real encounters that are always missed, in part, because of these points. In other words, *my* need to position *my* self causes *me* to miss the encounter.

Barthes (1981) explains the impossibility of real encounters through the Buddhist designation for reality, “*sunya*, the void” and adds the term “*tathata*,” which “in Sanskrit [...] suggests the gesture of the child pointing his finger at something and saying: *that, there it is, lo!*” (pp. 4-5). Barthes, here, is passing photographs through the circuit and finding his own “thatness” thwarted at this edge of, not the void, but voidness—“*sunyata*.”

Lacan (1978) offers another dream of his own to preface the “Burning Child” dream. It is a daydream that occurs in his office where he has fallen asleep and someone has knocked upon his door. The knock is incorporated in some way into his dream as it slowly registers to him that he must wake up, “But here I must question myself as to what I am at that moment—at the moment, so immediately before and so separate, which is



that in which I began to dream under the effect of the knocking which is, to all appearances, what woke me” (p. 56). He continues:

Observe what I am directing you towards—towards the symmetry of that structure that makes me, after the awakening knock, able to sustain myself, apparently only in relation with my representation, which, apparently, makes me only consciousness. A sort of involuted [sic] reflection—in my consciousness, it is only my representation that I recover possession of. (p. 57)

Here, in his awakening process, *he* ventures *into* his subjectivity. He adventures into the way that he has representatively defined himself as the way he makes sense of the reality that beckons him to awaken. There is a point in between that he designates as “the gap itself that constitutes awakening” (p. 57). It is at this point that Lacan returns to the “Burning Child” dream.

“The dream,” in its entirety, is as follows:

A father had been watching beside his child’s sick-bed for days and nights on end. After the child had died, he went into the next room to lie down, but left the door open so that he could see from his bedroom into the room in which his child’s body was laid out, with tall candles standing round it. An old man had been engaged to keep watch over it, and sat beside the body murmuring prayers. After a few hours’ sleep, the father had a dream that *his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: ‘Father, don’t you see I’m burning?’* He woke up, noticed a bright glare of light from the next room, hurried into it and found that the old watchman had dropped off to sleep and that the wrappings and one of the arms of his beloved child’s dead body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on them. (Freud, 1965, pp. 547-548)

This is *the* retelling of the dream that is at the heart of psychoanalysis according to both Freud and Lacan. For Lacan, everything is within reach with this dream, and, for Freud, this is the dream that undoes everything and forces a rebuilding of dream analysis. Thus, it is particularly interesting to note that the father does not introduce it to Freud. Rather, Freud is told about this dream by one of his female patients who “heard it in a lecture on dreams” (Freud, p. 547). As such, in a classic Freudian moment, *everything* is

encountered within his consultation with a female patient. The recounting of the dream is itself a subjective adventure with regard to a dream. This fact does not actually take away from the interpretation of the dream. It, in a way, enhances the dream's analytical life as a particularly rhetorical event.

Freud (1965), the woman patient, and the lecturer agree that "The explanation of this moving dream is simple enough;" namely, "The glare of light shone through the open door into the sleeping man's eyes and led him to the conclusion which he would have arrived at if he had been awake, namely that a candle had fallen over and set something alight in the neighborhood of the body" (p. 548). Freud adds, "It is even possible that he had felt some concern when he went to sleep as to whether the old man might not be incompetent to carry out his task" (p. 548). This collective interpretation is logical enough, even with a touch of guilt. Freud continues that, "the words spoken by the child must have been made up of words which he had actually spoken [...] and which were connected with important events in the father's mind" (p. 548). As simple as this little aside by Freud may seem, a very complex suggestion has been made. Here, within the dream, Freud articulates the process of the representative signification of possible real events. In the dream, according to Freud, the father has transformed memories into *meaning* in such a way that is forming his understanding of his unconscious awareness of the present. And here is where, as Lacan says, "everything is within reach":

But, having recognized that the dream was a process with a meaning, and that it can be inserted into the chain of the dreamer's psychical experiences, we may still wonder why it was that a dream occurred at all in such circumstances, when the most rapid possible awakening was called for. (Freud, 1965, p. 548)

It is disturbing to think that the answer to the child's question is, "Yes." The subject qua father *does* see. More to the point, the answer appears to be, "Yes, but." Freud surmises

what he considers “the most striking psychological characteristic of the process of dreaming: a thought, and as a rule a thought of something that is wished, is objectified in the dream, is represented as a scene, or as it seems to us, is experienced” (p. 572). Our experience of reality is a repetition at this juncture, a narrative retelling, a re-presentation, again and again of the scene at hand. As Cathy Caruth (1996) observes:

The specific wish behind the dream of the burning child, the wish to see the child again, Freud suggests, like the wish behind any dream, is tied to a more basic desire, the desire of consciousness as such *not to wake up*. It is not the father alone who dreams to avoid his child’s death, but *consciousness itself* that, in its sleep, is tied to a death from which it turns away. It is not primarily the wish to keep the child alive that motivates the father’s sleep but rather the wish of the consciousness to sleep that—even at the expense of a burning reality—motivates the dream. The dream is thus no longer simply linked to a wish within the unconscious fantasy world of the psyche; it is rather, Freud seems to suggest, *something in reality itself that makes us sleep*. (p. 97)

In Caruth’s articulation, there are actually three aspects of the father: one that is how he imagines himself, one that is how he represents himself, and the one that dreams. But, of course, Freud (1965) is still concerned only with the father that dreams, and suggests that the dream was the “fulfillment of a wish,” that “If the father had woken up first and then made the interference that led him to go into the next room, he would, as it were, have shortened his child’s life by that moment of time” (p. 548). This is what Lacan means by Freud’s “certainty.” Again, the Freudian unconscious that somehow manages the dream is more than a largely unconscious body that is also conscious (the Lacanian view); rather it is an essential self along the lines of Kierkegaard’s spiritual awareness.

There is a very real realness to Freud’s unconscious, where memory is very like Barthes’ photographs and even closer to a documentary film perhaps. But, Lacan (1978) argues, “Recollection is not a Platonic reminiscence—it is not the return of a form, an imprint, a *eidos* of beauty and good, a supreme truth, coming to us from the beyond” (p.

47). Instead, “It is something that comes to us from the structural necessities, something humble, born at the level of the lowest encounters and of all the talking crowd that precedes us, at the level of the structure of the signifier, of the languages spoken in a stuttering, stumbling way, but which cannot elude constraints whose echoes, model, style can be found” (p. 47). Here, Lacan offers the self-sustaining subject of the dream through re-collection—not the self-creating, but the self-sustaining subject *who* does so through interpretively piecing together only what has already been found. The father is invoked and he sees the truth of it in the dream just as in the past. It is this subject of the father, not of the child, that lives one moment longer. The subject qua father holds on to the false security of the subject qua father. But it is also this subject that forever misses the encounter with the real child. It is this subject, the *father* qua father, that is forever caught in the traumatic loop of a missed encounter.

Lacan (1978) explains, that, “the encounter, forever missed, has occurred between the dream and awakening, between the person who is still asleep and whose dream we will not know and the person who has dreamt merely in order not to wake up” (p. 59). Like the knocking dream, Lacan points to the gap between the father qua father and the subject qua father, the gap between the subject of the unconscious and the subject that is made conscious by consciousness, what dreams and who wakes up. So, it is not a matter of going deeper into Burke’s rift to discover the subject of the unconscious as much as it is a matter of discovering its overwhelmingly fundamental lack. In this way, Lacan reveals the heartbreaking truth that “Only a rite, an endlessly repeated act, can commemorate this not very memorable encounter—for no one can say what the death of a child is, except the father *qua* father, that is to say, no conscious being” (p. 59).

In other words, Lacan is pointing towards the unbearable reality that Elkins suggested human beings cannot face. Caruth (1996) is helpful in gaining a grip on the revelation at hand:

The relation between the burning within and the burning without is thus neither a fiction (as in Freud's interpretation) nor a direct representation, but a *repetition* that reveals, in its temporal contradiction, how the very bond of the father to the child—his responsiveness to the child's words—is linked to the missing of the child's death. To awaken is thus precisely to awaken only to one's repetition of a previous failure to see in time. The force of the trauma is not the death alone, that is, but the fact that, in his very attachment to the child, the father is unable to witness the child's dying as it occurred. *Awakening*, in Lacan's reading of the dream, *is itself the site of a trauma*, the trauma of the necessity and impossibility of responding to another's death. (p. 100)

The father could not bear witness to the child's death. Instead, he could only bear witness to the dying of the father qua father. Additionally, the "necessity" is a matter of both unavoidability and expectation of a *father's* response to the death of a child that continuously *presents* itself to this father-no-longer. Freud (1965), in fact, argues dreams are merely "psychical acts" that are "transformed into dream-shape" through a method of "clothing it in a sensory situation and in the present tense" (p. 589).

This is not an innocuous claim in the context of the burning dream. This conclusion is far darker of an idea. It is the idea that the dream is the very translation, or transformation, of both the subject qua father, and the father qua father, into the subject that is no longer a father and thus a subject of the gap. To be the subject of the gap in such a conscious way is a tremendously traumatizing variation of identification. To even approach it here has the feel of impossibility.

Caruth (1996) observes the foundational importance of this *presenting* aspect of the dream:

This peculiar movement therefore traces a significant itinerary on Freud's thought from trauma as an exception, an accident that takes consciousness by surprise and thus disrupts it, to trauma as the very origin of consciousness and all of life itself. The global theoretical itinerary is revisited in Lacan's interpretation of the dream of the burning child, in his suggestion that the accidental in trauma is also a revelation of a basic, ethical dilemma at the heart of consciousness itself insofar as it is essentially related to death, and particularly to the death of others. Ultimately, then, the story of father and child is, for Lacan, the story of an impossible responsibility of consciousness in its own originating relation to others, and specifically to the death of others. As an awakening, the ethical relation to the real is the revelation of this impossible demand at the heart of human consciousness. (p. 104)

One might consider this to be precisely Lacan's Burkean Babel moment—the overwhelming impossibility of being the humans that humans believe they must be.

Lacan (1978) lingers on the brutality of the dream's invocation: "*Father can't you see I'm burning?*" This sentence is itself a firebrand—of itself it bring fire where it falls—and one cannot see what is burning, for the flames blind us" (p. 59). What is ultimately devastating is that in the dream there are only representations of the subject qua subject—yes, representations of the subject's representation. It is all too unreal.

For Freud, the illusion of being present is primarily in the dream, whereas Lacan does not stop at the point of supposed awakening by his very presentation of the nature of the subject as the one who is called forth from signifiers. Caruth (1996) explains, "the father is no longer the father of a living child, but precisely now the father as *the one who can say* [italics Caruth's] what the death of a child is," which is to say he "transmits the otherness of the dead child" (p. 106). This is the new position of the one who was a father. It is also a subject position that interpolates other subject positions through Caruth's notion of awakening.

But what is the awakening? This awakening is an awakening to “thatness.” *My* “thatness,” *my* “tathata,” gives *me my* sense of realness, but at the greatest moments of “thatness” (when becoming the abject “jettisoned object”) *I* experience trauma because even as it seems to establish my realness, traumatic events threaten my mortal existence with the awareness of my inevitable death and my fictional existence as an individual unified subject/self, which is the foundational problem of the real that *I* cannot face. And so, *I* fail to be real, or at least *I* attempt to fail to be real as a strategy for psychical survival. Caruth (1996) offers the hope that “such a transmission [...] can be transformed into the imperative of a speaking that awakens others” (p. 108). But, to what do we loss survivors hope to awaken others to? What does awakening, here, resist? What the subject resists is the unconscious reality, which is to say the subject resists its utter emptiness simply because it must be—to which Lacan replies, not necessarily. *We* forever miss our encounter with the real, because *we* are, at the very point of the real, stubbornly not. In our stumble, we take note of our translation, but we do not notice the moment when our eyes are closed as much as we remember it, or “It is what, for us, is represented in the term neurosis of destiny or neurosis of failure. What is missed is not adaptation, but tuché, the encounter” (Lacan, 1978, p. 69). In short, psychoanalysis, from this particular Lacanian point of view, is precisely the awakening analysis of *our* lack that the subjects denies and secretly craves.

### The Barthesian Subject

At the core of the process of the subject being as a human being (subject qua human being) is not being, or the resistance of the subject against the unconscious reality of lack, which is a matter of bodies in discourse with desire. It is important to underscore

the shift to subject qua human being as this specifically denotes the subject at least partially taking its cue from the bodily experience as metaphor. Namely, the subject qua human being *is* the subject of the unconscious. In any case, it is a matter of desperately beginning as failure. This emptiness has been located in the stumbling body through the action/motion differential of motive and in the subject of the dream that emerges from the unconscious, and now we shall see it in the individual genius at the solstice of the symbol: namely, the death of the author.

While this portion of the chapter is dedicated to the aforementioned essay on the author, it is worth noting that Barthes points out in *Camera Lucida* (1981) that a photograph begins with a photographer looking through a “little hole” (pp. 9-10). In the end, the same could be said of the author in the context of the nuclear rift that has been established up to this point. It may seem as though Barthes is simply discussing the interpretive impossibility of a critical reader knowing the author’s intent at this point in literary history, but his arguments are actually far more radical and very much in line with the Lacanian evacuation of materialist meaning.

Indeed, as Barthes articulates in the opening of “The Death of the Author” (1978a), “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (p. 142). Barthes, as a great lover of the written form, extends his critical reach beyond the ink and papered symbol to acknowledge “As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view into acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death” (p. 142). This



textual death extends beyond traditional sense of the written text into the realm of performative oratory and even shamanism (p. 142). For Barthes, the author, in as far as the author is presented in a text, is only an aspect of the medium of collective imagination and “his [individual] ‘genius’” is merely an interpretive sleight of hand “not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novelist” but a “point where only language acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me’” (p. 143). Obviously, Barthes locates his “not me” in textuality.

Barthes does not suggest that literary language, or formal language, is not a way in which subjectivity itself reaches and is reached towards. For him, it absolutely is. Lacanian psychoanalytic “castration” discourse is only metaphorically a matter of sexuality. In *our* regard, *we* yearn in many ways. When I consider the parts of me that yearn, I am not limited to sexual pleasure and neither is *jouissance*—Lacan’s term for Freud’s suicidal connection between the death drive and erotic desire that can never be satisfied. To that suicidal point, Barthes (1978a) spells out precisely the current undertaking in this chapter which is *being* the very “destruction of the Author” as “an empty process, functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person” of materialist ideology (p. 145). Of course, the only addition to this would be that Lacan fully extends the logic of the subject to the person, which is also true of Burke’s bodily act. And Barthes finds himself in league with the fullness of these “deaths” by further vanquishing the possibility of originality (p. 146).

Barthes brings his textuality into the very heart of the human. Just as Burke could not escape the auto-motion of the subject and Lacan manifested the vanishing gap of the

dream, Barthes trots out the declamation of interpretive being itself. He even has his own Burkean Babel moment:

We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphrastical recriminations of good society in favour of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers, or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author. (Barthes, 1978a, p. 148)

However, Barthes, like Burke's doomed ontology, has already emptied out the reader as well but noting the emptiness of the subject. But, his positing of "the reader" subject position brings back an important constitutive rhetoric principle—that the individual finds sense in reading and being read. Barthes offers the reader as not the first persona critic but as the first persona analyst. This is the *I* that reads *you* for the sake of both *you* and *I*. This is a beautiful failure on Barthes' part, but a fatal one nonetheless. There is a heavy reality to the subject that I do not pretend to alleviate—particularly in the context of suicide. As Lacan (1978) notes, "the real brings with it the subject, almost by force" (p. 54). This is the "tuché" he speaks of, the very chance for the subject. It is the way in which we discover the yearning of our hearts amidst our mounting anxieties of awakening to the world.

Barthes (1981) puts the plight of the subject, the heart of its impossibility, beautifully by explaining the "disorder [...] revealed by my desire to write on Photography, corresponded to a discomfort I had always suffered from: the uneasiness of being a subject" (p. 8). Within this resistance some of us find hope. Our dis-ease could suggest an alternative if we let it, but the terrible risk of this gesture is the risk of one's complete unraveling, one's always lurking potential suicide by way of no longer repressing our beginning as failure. What distorted form does our lack take?

## Identification as Demand

What is the “successful” human response to this overwhelming lack? For Burke, it is the redemption found in identification. For Lacan, it is the affirmation in psychoanalytic transference. For Barthes, it is the pleasure of reading. But, for Barthes, reading is also bound up in mourning. As he writes, “to mourn is to be alive” (Barthes, 2005, p. 10), but mourning is also the process of letting go of one’s false sense of control over meaning (p. 14). Thus, while to read is to mourn towards the third meaning as a form of hope, it is also the threat of mourning towards hopelessness. This hopelessness is the danger of our regard.

Barthes (1981) declares, “It is my political right to be a subject which I must protect” (p. 15). Burke (1969b) argues, “A doctrine of *consubstantiality*, either explicit or implicit, may be necessary to any way of life” (p. 29). Gunn (2008b) explains that consubstantiality is both the promise and the desire passed between two individuals that can neither be delivered nor satiated (p. 140). Inherent in Burke’s argument is the very meaty notion of what it means to matter and what it means to gather in mass. It is also arguably the meat of his *search* for motive. But, it also speaks to a fundamental truth about the drives—that they constitutively cannot be satiated or else they, and thus we, will cease. The drives perpetuate the denial of and insistence upon lack.

Lacan (1978) explains this phenomenon as “*souffrance*” in which “Reality is in abeyance” and “awaiting attention” because of the “constraint” that “governs the very diversions of the primary process” (pp. 55-56). Souffrance begins to underscore the importance of Lacan’s point that, “Descartes apprehends his *I think* in the enunciation of the *I doubt*, not in its statement, which still bears all of this knowledge to be put in doubt”

(p. 44). A successful unified analysis requires discretion. As already noted, when Lacan speaks of encounters, he is actually speaking of missed encounters. Thus, “souffrance,” meaning to be both held in suspense and held in pain, operates as Lacan’s description of the subject’s most real experiences, which the subject representatively repeats as a method of diversion from the painful suspension that is its reality of lack. In other words, “I must be” is not the statement of fact that Descartes would have in his “I am,” but a statement of desire within a context of doubt brought about by the existence of the Other who is *presumably* operating as the “not me” answer to *our* ontological inquiry that *we* can only hope to know.

It is for this reason that “in order to cure the hysteric of all her symptoms, the best way is to satisfy her hysteric’s desire—which is for her to posit her desire in relation to us as an unsatisfied desire—leaves entirely to one side the specific question of *why* she can sustain her desire only as an unsatisfied desire” (Lacan, 1978, p. 12). In short, Lacan is spelling out the meaning of “the talking cure” as is often the descriptor of psychoanalytic therapy. But, he is also describing a particular understanding of transference that occurs in psychoanalysis. As Judith Butler (2005) observes in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, which is an ethical account of the loss of self, the psychoanalyst plays the *you* to the analysand’s *I* (pp. 50-51). But, transference in psychoanalysis is a matter of the analyst only allowing the patient-subject to view the analyst as the “objet a” of desire in so far as it is clearly known that the analyst is not the object of desire that actually desires the patient-subject. It is pure representational and theatrical catharsis. And, Lacan is not merely discussing therapeutic practice; rather, Lacan is discussing the nature of the subject and thus the nature of interpretive being within the context of our dialectical

existence. *You*, for *me*, is the *you* that *I* desire to be in such a way that validates *my* understanding of *me*. But, then, *I* am the same for *you* and both are ultimately and necessarily empty gestures if we are to go on being *as we currently are*, and as importantly, *want to be*.

Barthes' estimation of the photograph is driven by his dialectical system of studium and punctum. As you may recall, Barthes is off in thinking of *this* photograph as an Encounter, but he has a point in regarding *this* photograph as the Real. Barthes is using "this" to indicate any photograph that seems to appeal to us, that calls the subject forth in some way and becomes a capital "P" photograph. He is off because it is clear that Barthes is attempting, in *Camera Lucida*, to articulate the difference between photography and other visual images in such a way that posits the Photograph as more real so that we might understand *this* Photograph as an actual encounter with the real. But, of course, this is only Barthes' explicit desire, and this desire mirrors the very reality of subjectivity. However, Barthes is ultimately more right than wrong. We may view the photograph as very much the remarkably accurate representation of our missed encounter with the real. This Photograph precisely freezes our Missed Encounter. Barthes' assertion is a rather sophisticated one, and this sophistication emerges within his productive discussion of his aforementioned dialectical system.

His initial explanation of studium is, "application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity. It is by *studium* that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes: for it is culturally (this connotation is present in studium) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings,

the actions” (Barthes, 1981, p. 26). It could be argued that studium is akin to cultural hegemony—the effacement that occurs in the naturalization and transformation of myth into reason by way of Lacan’s signifying synchrony. Punctum, on the other hand, “is the element which rises from the scene, shoots out from it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument” and also a “sting, speck, cut, little whole—and also a cast of the dice” (pp. 26-27). In these two concepts, Barthes offers an exposition on the elements at play in the kinds of photographs that specifically catch our *I/eye*. Barthes captures the idea of Lacan’s souffrance in his photographic thought—the subject, both looking subject and the photographed subject, is held in abeyance. What is significant in this dialectical system is very much the same as Biesecker’s point about the internality of Burke’s action/motion differential. A reader of photography can locate an external representation and mechanism for the internal process at work when the reader regards certain photographs. In other words, Barthes’ studium/punctum articulation of *this photograph* is both a metaphor for and initiation of the internality and externality of subjectivity in the way that punctum casts doubt.

However, there is the potential of a reversal at play here that must be given some attention. Intuitively, one might consider Barthes’ “studium” to be most akin to Burke’s “motion;” and, likewise, Barthes’ “punctum” would be reflective of Burke’s “action.” The assumption here would be that the studium is representative of the general morass and the punctum is representative of what makes a photograph stand out as a unique individual. But, upon closer examination, you discover that it is the studium that “I participate in” and the punctum that is the “accident,” which would be a direct inversion

of Burke's action/motion differential. Barthes (1981) furthers this reversal of sorts in a way, though, that actually finds a clear home within the Burkean logic with the following description of *studium* that speaks well to Burke's sense of form:

To recognize the *studium* is inevitably to encounter the photographer's intentions, to enter into harmony with them, to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them, to argue them within myself, for culture (from which the *studium* derives) is a contract arrived at between creators and consumers. (pp. 27-28)

This is reminiscent of the Burke's logic that communication between the estranged must, in some way, be thought of as possible for mystery to take hold. It is in *studium* that the viewer can safely articulate success or failure and move on as an intact subject. But, it is the *punctum* that threatens with a failure that lingers. And, so, when a photograph contains both *studium* and *punctum*, it contains both the lure and the hook from which we try to renegotiate and pull away. *This* photograph shows both repetition and failure in such a way that the repetition-and-failure stands out. It is in this instance, though, that we find the harmony of the seeming reversal. In the accidental fall, the *punctum* presents itself as the possibility of choosing a different and thus presents the potential for the subject to fully emerge. But, it is also in this hopeful promise of action that the automotive reality of *studium*, and thus our ultimate and collective failure to fully be subjects, is revealed. And it is for this reason that individuals often intentionally surround themselves with photographs that present only the single element of *studium*. As Barthes (1981) observes, "The unary Photograph has every reason to be banal, 'unity' of composition being the first rule of vulgar (and = notably, of academic) rhetoric: 'The subject,' says one handbook for amateur photographers, 'must be simple, free of useless accessories; this is called the Search for Unity'" (p. 41). It is best to not distract from the

success of form one might say. And, so we return to the place of the subject, which is the dream.

But then, when speaking of psychoanalysis, it is always important to note that, “it in no way allows us to accept some such aphorism as *life is a dream*. No praxis is more oriented towards that which, at the heart of experience, is the kernel of the real than psycho-analysis” (Lacan, 1978, p. 53). This is, on the one hand, Lacan’s way of insisting that psychoanalysis is far from some sort of Platonic Idealism. On the other hand, it is perhaps the most important and complicated notion to grasp in psychoanalysis, which is precisely *beginning as failure*. Lacan (1978) argues that:

The real may be represented by the accident, the noise, the small element of reality, which is evidence that we are not dreaming. But, on the other hand, this reality is not so small, for what wakes us is the other reality hidden behind the lack of that which takes the place of representation—this, says Freud is the *Trieb*. (p. 60)

This could be understood as a Lacanian articulation of the Freudian reality drive, not to mention a clear parallel to Barthes’ punctum/studium dialectic, because “Trieb” is the German term for what is meant by “drive” in psychoanalytic parlance. But, first, think about what Lacan is specifically suggesting here. The real, for the subject, is defined by that which punctuates, thus ends, the subject’s ability to wholly remain as the subject sees itself in its representations; and it is this small but significant failure that drives the subject to be as it represent itself in the place of its lack because it is the subject’s representations that allow it to safely make sense of the world as an individual. But, the subject does so with help through identification.

Again, Burke’s (1969b) pathway to identification passes through suicide. Specifically, he revs up to identification with a treatment of Coleridge’s line of poetry,



“Victorious Murder a blind Suicide.” “This statement,” he argues, “suggests a point at which murder and suicide can become convertible, each in its way an image for the same motive” (p. 10). He goes on, “You need to look for a *motive that can serve as ground for both these choices*, a motive that, while not being exactly either one or the other, can ambiguously contain them both” (p. 10). Now, we rhetoricians know that he is adventuring towards “identification” because that is the most important thing to emerge from *this* text. However, it is important to take note of the path he takes to get there:

A term serving as ground for both these terms would, by the same token, ‘transcend’ them. The battlefield, for instance, which permits rival contestants to join battle, itself, ‘transcends’ their factionalism, being ‘superior’ to it and ‘neutral’ to their motives, though the conditions of the terrain may happen to favor on faction. The *principles* of war are not themselves warlike, and are ultimately reducible to universal principles of physics and dialectic. Similarly, a poet’s identification with imagery of murder or suicide, either one or the other, is, from the ‘neutral’ point of view, merely a concern with *terms for transformation in general*. (pp. 10-11)

Not only does Burke articulate “transformation,” rather than an encounter of individual identities, as the root of “identification,” he does so with the violent imagery of war in the space of the neutralizing text. The “poet’s identification,” then, is a violent transformation of what would seem senseless, the actual threat of mystery, into order. So, in returning to the series of dialectical systems (e.g., punctum/studium, action/motion, and psychoanalytic transference), a profound understanding emerges: that the very syntactical act of being a subject is both suicidal and murderously self-sustaining. The real, the punctum, the central lack must be overcome by the automotive certainty of a repetitive failure that sustains the subject. The subject cannot allow itself to be as it is because it is precisely lacking, and the subject cannot allow the same for *its* Other. *I must be* is the violent underlying transformation within the claim that “written into the

*Rhetoric* is an ontology of the social, an ontology of collective being” (B. A. Biesecker, 2000, p. 40). As such, *I must be* is the underlying principle of the identification, which is a process of transformational desire. *Identification is a demand. I eliminate my self* by becoming a *we* so as to validate my *I*. We academic writers that struggle with my voice knows this transformative failure very well.

Burke establishes the idea of identification through writing, both the book he is producing and the work he is discussing. In other words, the very process by which the individual transforms *itself* into a *myself*, a subject, is done primarily in the absence of the listener (or reader). The demand is to make sense of *us* as an individual as much as it is to make sense of the individual as an *us*. Lacan works at this understanding through the game of “Fort-Da.” The phrase translates into “Gone-There,” and is a reference to Freud’s musings on a game he observes a child playing in which the child uses a cotton reel to cast about his crib (Lacan, 1978, p. 62). Lacan explains that, “the game of the cotton-reel is the subject’s answer to what the mother’s absence has created on the frontier of his domain—the edge of his cradle—namely, a *ditch*, around which one can only play at jumping” (p. 62). He goes on, “This reel is not the mother reduced to a little ball by some magical game;” rather “it is a small part of the subject that detaches itself from him while still remaining his, still retained” (p. 62). In other words, the subject creates desire for itself within “objet petit a” as the practice of “objet a.”

If I think of punctum as a departure from unity, then I enter into an unbearable possibility of isolation and nothingness, which drives me to declare, like Barthes’ child of tathata pointing her finger, “that, there it is, lo!” I insinuate myself as a replacement for lack via my methods of projection and transference. Or, in the Lacanian algebra, the petit

a: “It is with his object that the child leaps the frontiers of his domain [...] that it is in the object to which the opposition is applied in act, the reel, that we must designate the subject” (Lacan, 1978, p. 62). What I cast out is “not me,” but it orients the possibility of an *I* without resistance. Thus, it is through the narrative repetition of departure that the constitutive transformation of the individual into a subject occurs. That which is other than myself invokes me, and in the other’s departure I map myself out. And, it is in this way that Lacan (1978) concludes:

It is the repetition of the mother’s departure as cause of a *Spaltung* in the subject—overcome by the alternating game, *fort-da*, which is a *here or there*, and whose aim, in its alternation, is simply that of being the *fort* of a *da*, and the *da* of a *fort*. It is aimed at what, essentially is not there, *qua* represented (pp. 62-63).

“Fort-Da,” then, is another way of saying “objectivity at the behest of subjectivity” and that an objective act “out there” somehow validates a subject “in here.”

And this form of rhetorical textuality is, in part, a violent act. In other words, the Burkean conceptualization of rhetoric, and I argue any conceptualization of rhetoric, is a violent transformational elaboration of the cotton reel justified only by the consubstantial desire for the individual existence of validation. We rhetorically produce the logic of our selves through our individual sensations in the guise of an epistemological objectivity—meaning we objectify one another. This is why I enjoy Barthes’ (1981) deceptively simple statement that “cameras, in short, were clocks for seeing” (p. 15). In these words, he captures so much of what is meant by terms such as “visual rhetoric” or the “scopic drive.” The camera, for Barthes, is a manufactured managerial machine that represents and reproduces the abbreviated visual evidence of visual reality itself in the same way that a clock represents and reproduces the abbreviated sequential evidence of time itself. They recollect what we forgetfully cast out in order to manage our self-sustaining

histories. What *I* gather and manage from “out there” is also the demand that *I must be* that I place outside of me because it shows that what makes me the *I* that I claim to be can also be objectively claimed and captured precisely because it resists me in a way that affirms me rather than the unconscious resistance that dispels me.

In a more charitable light, one might rethink the violent demand of identification as the mourning of our own subjective deaths. Along this line of thinking, Barthes’ (2005) concept that he labels “the Neutral” formally emerges in a lecture series that he prepared within the same time frame of his mother’s death and subsequently during his mourning process (p. 13). The Neutral is Barthes’ operationalization of mourning as the context for the emptying out of the subject. Barthes’ Neutral is marked by the event of his mother’s death in that the idea preceded her death, but, like Barthes himself, was radically altered by that death. The Neutral comes to fruition prior to, within, and following mourning in such a way as to posit mourning as the true anchor of his meditation, even as his meditation refuses the logic of an anchor. In other words, Barthes posits the Neutral as process and in flux, but it is continually, almost statically, haunted by the traumatic return of his mother’s death and consequent absence/departure. We may move past the accepted or acknowledged period of mourning, but we cannot escape the death. Both the mourning and the death formulate the Neutral even if both do not comprise it.

Barthes is not simply mourning his specific loss in this procession of the Neutral. He is naming inspiration and mood. He is experiencing out loud the thing that has been a lifelong intellectual meditation on death. He adds a bit later in his lecture notes: “To read the dead author is, for me, to be alive, for I am shattered, torn by the awareness of the

contradiction between the intense life of his text and the sadness of knowing he is dead: I am always saddened by the death of an author, moved by the story of the deaths of authors. [...] To mourn is to be alive” (Barthes, 2005, p. 10). Barthes brings to mind his essay while simultaneously mourning real authorial deaths that continuously reach out to him as a conscientious and vital reader. For here, as in the aforementioned essay, the life of the text always ultimately exists in the critical, perhaps vital even, reader. Reading is mourning. *We* mourn the loss of authority as *we* begin to find our own. This is perhaps an underlying *reality* of our life text—a conceptual suicide in its own rite. Barthes declares, “only death is creative” (p. 10). Because a death, like unconsciousness, is unmoving in and of itself, it holds its place forcing all else to rhetorically, interpretively, and narratively move around it. It is in that idea, that deathliness, the Neutral begins to take shape—a display that continuously repeats authorial suicide.

To make this idea as clear as possible, consider the studium/punctum system in the Neutral/mourning context of time and we can begin to see the full brilliance of the camera qua clock. Time itself is timeless. But, in our subjective context, time is the very reality of our ultimate demise. In the same way, photographic studium may appear to be an eternal capturing of the subject until the punctum reveals the failure of such an ambition. In this way, punctum reminds the viewer of a history of the failure to be timeless. Now, place that idea back into Barthes’ articulation of the written text as the space where all identity is lost. As Barthes (1978a) notes of the authorial demise, “The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*” (p. 145). His proclamation is also the demise of the reader qua subject because we are all defined

by the before and after of the eventual text that is read here and now which obscures our subjective emergence but certifies our objective end. Barthes concedes this without intent when he declares, “We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (p. 146). One can see Barthes’ idea of the text in a way that spells out Burke’s notion of identification as a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of subjects, none of them original, violently transform and mourn one another as a means of survival. To mourn is, again, to be alive.

*I* constantly read and write how *I* am read within an historical process of identification. *We* establish form as the demand for the confession of “not me.” But, in each repetition, my failure to be an *I am* as opposed to the more desperate and uncertain *I must be* is also repeated, because each repetition is always another missed encounter no matter its level of elevation. As Lacan (1978) maddeningly posits, “The enclosed aspect of the relation between the accident, which is repeated, and the veiled meaning, which is the true reality and leads us towards the drive—confirms for us that demystification of that artifact of treatment known as the transference does not consist in reducing it to what is called the actuality of the situation” (p. 69). Just because the illusion is revealed as an illusion does not mean that we can escape it. But then, why would we want to escape this illusion? It is the small pleasure that temporarily alleviates a great suffering. There is comfort in the idea that we *know* it is traumatic repetition, pure construct within the real as opposed to the real as ideal form, the pleasure derived in the Burkean form as the arousal of the appetite to be safely satiated as the beautifully empty validation. In other words, we are back to the hysteric who maintains her desire as unsatisfied desire, which

is to say the will-to-live and the desire in mourning. As Lacan puts it, “Let us conclude that the reality system, however far it is developed, leaves an essential part of what belongs to the real a prisoner in the toils of the pleasure principle” (p. 55).

The demand of identification locates, for the subject, its individual place by transcending the individual. In the acceptance of the madness of subjectivity, the subject objectifies the other in the place of the object of our desire, the “objet a” transformed in the “objet petit a,” while also demanding that the other remains the “objet a” as the beholder of our subjectivity. In other words, the subject insists upon the punctum so that it might reject the punctum because, again, the subject emerges in the resistance to the subject. Failure, in the identification demand, must be simultaneously observed and overlooked. But, then, the failure is itself an illusion that results from *our* dialectical exchange, and, as such, this manifestation of suffering is not merely self-inflicted. The disconstituent no longer bears the process of the interpellation of the subject that has been *demanded*. Take, for instance, Burke’s (1969b) aforementioned tortured attempt at saving the subject in the dialogic identification of A and B. Shortly after, he returns to his suicidal formalism to lay out a violent, albeit metaphorical, understanding of identification:

As seen from this point of view, then, an imagery of slaying (slaying of either the self or another) is to be considered merely as a special case of identification in general. Or otherwise put: the imagery of slaying is a special case of transformation, and transformation involves the ideas and imagery of *identification*. That is: the *killing* of something is the *changing* of it, and the statement of the thing’s nature before and after the change is an *identifying* of it. (pp. 19-20)

Again, here is a point with a before and after in the clutches, or denial, of mortality. And, again, we are reminded that Burkean identification is a type of transformational violence.

Further, individual subjectivity is itself problematically and necessarily normative. Burke moves from this A and B identification to a larger collective and destructive identification, which is presumably at odds with another web of identifications. In this way, the creation of an *us* requires the creation of a *them* on the macro level as a way of easing individual divisions within an *us* on the micro level, which creates a condensation of the various signifiers surrounding the nucleus that constitute the individual and collective subjectivities at play and at odds.

Physical violence, and thus an existential threat, erupts at the point at which the subjective affirmation is threatened—the point beyond internal resistance at which the *you* negates the *I* or the *them* negates the *us*. The very assumption of an *us*, identification, is already a transformative violence. As Burke (1969b) suggests, “Identification is compensatory to division” (Burke, 1969b, p. 22). Identification effaces. Put another way, “myth is read as a factual system” (Barthes, 1972, p. 131). The transformation of myth into fact, of interpretive being into interpretive knowledge, is the transformation of *I must be* into *we must be*, and that is no longer an innocuous subjective desire but a normative one which is a demand in mass. And, so, rhetoric emerges as the collective ontological desire and reach by way of the demanding violence that is the epistemological effacement of the unconscious reality that of an internal division, or our resident rift, externally projected. In other words, while the resident rift is repressed, it returns as a normative, or corrective, suspicious interrogation of the other.

Both the disconstituent and the normative constituent subject fail to be the subjects that normative subjectivity demands. It is just that the latter individual is more successful at repressing the instances in which the unconscious reality, the punctum,



reveals itself. The normative constituent subject is more adept at missing the incriminating encounter with its own otherness. It is Burke's act in the fall, the making of the fall into a choice (and then looking around to make sure no one saw). It is not a matter of recovering from the fall but of tirelessly re-covering the fall again and again. This is why Lacan (1978) emphasizes that for Freud, and psychoanalysis in general, repetition cannot be equated with reproduction (p. 50). Lacan observes that for Freud, and again psychoanalysis, "nothing can be grasped, destroyed, or burnt, except in a symbolic way, as one says, in *effigies, in absentia*" (p. 50). This argument is not necessarily a denigration of the realness of bodily suffering so much as a description of how subjects act within a network of signifiers that can only ever be missed encounters. Namely, Lacan thinks of the act in the same way that Burke conceives of action, and more specifically symbolic action, in that any human act must be seen as symbolic if it is to be considered anything more than "mere motion." This is how and why, from a psychoanalytic standpoint, "Repetition first appears in a form that is not clear, that is not self-evident, like a reproduction, or a making present, *in act*" (Lacan, p. 50). Repetition is always symbolic even when it does not immediately register as such, and all acts are repetitions even when they do not register as such.

Lacan (1978) etches his argument out further through the analogy of honor suicides, or "seppuku" (p. 50). This final act, for Lacan, is the last in a series of repetitions for it is an act set into motion long before the *actual event* occurs. The suicide is the ceasing of the repeated subjective failure through an act that simultaneously represents the subject at its solstice and annihilates it (p. 50). Lacan continues by drawing our attention to the fact that the German word that has been translated into "repetition"

within the psychoanalytic lexicon is very close to “to haul” so that one might think it “very close to a *hauling* of the subject, who always drags his thing into a certain path that he cannot get out of” (pp. 50-51). Here, Lacan captures the very idea of the repeated desire for and denial of real encounters. The subject cannot encounter the real in the way the subject thinks it should because the subject is not what it thinks it is supposed to be, and this repeated failure drives the subject to distractions that cannot ultimately satisfy its unrealistic demands to prove that *we* are what *we* want to be, but *we* identify these distractions as *our* proof nonetheless.

This sense of identification as a forced hauling of the subject compares well to Elkins’ (1996) notion of “inconstant seeing,” which he describes as “a way of looking that skips over some parts and emphasizes others in the service of some unrecognized anxiety or desire” (p. 92). Much like subjective contour completion, inconstant seeing is a way of forcing the world, including the other, to conform to my/our expectations of it. But, while the disconstituent may or may not know that no one can fully conform to these expectations, the disconstituent is tragically aware that s/he cannot because s/he is consumed by the piercing punctum that is brutally engulfed by the studium.

In Barthes’ (1978b) *A Lover’s Discourse*, he proffers a one sided dialogue from the perspective of “A Lover’s” as opposed to “The Lovers’.” Possession is key to his treatise with particular attention to having the last word—as he writes, “What is a hero? The one who has the last word” (pp. 208-209). This is a fairly extreme variation on the normative constituent subject that has been laid out to this point, but it is seemingly common. If placed in the context of Lacan’s ruminations on seppuku, an intriguing nuance develops that requires some attention. Here, we have an idea of suicide as a

power play. Even in its annihilation, the subject finds its solstice, its pinnacle. It controls its narrative exit and thus its own rendition of the tale. However, Barthes is articulating the trap of control through mastery. In the tragedy, the hero is lost—a common theme among those who survive a loved one’s suicide.

### **The Disconstituent and the False Confession**

No matter the sincerity of identification, it is a demand for a false confession. In the context of an actual suicide, this violent demand validates survivor’s guilt. The final section of this chapter focuses on the entrance and exit of the disconstituent. More specifically, this section focuses on the disconstituent choice to cease failing at the rhetorical game of Fort-Da. To make sense of this, consider Biesecker’s (2000) point that “motive is precisely that which effaces itself in the midst of its material appearance” (p. 29). Biesecker is pointing towards the ontological motive as opposed *by* the epistemological motive. It is, in fact, the epistemological subjectivity that effaces the ontological subjectivity in that the subject presents itself not as proof of itself but as knower of proof while simultaneously repressing how it came to be—or, more accurately, how it came to *pass*. If the subject acknowledges its lack of an ontological basis, which drives its subjectivity, then the subject can only see its inherent failure. The disconstituent brings to the fore this inherent failure on some conscious level via the subversion of the motive effacement. In other words, the ontological subjectivity, the resident rift, continuously short-circuits the epistemological subjectivity because the failed subject only encounters empty gestures of a false faith in the self. The disconstituent is stuck in “not me.”

Generally, within Burke's writings, identification is a means of redemption. In crossing from "not me" to "me," the human being atones for the initial failure to be a correct "me" through the process of "self-abnegation," or "mortification." This is one of the ways in which the negative plays out. In fact, the negative, as typically described by Burke, is not simply a matter of "not" or "not me." Instead, the negative is the "Thou shalt not" or the "command" of "don't" (Burke, 1966, pp. 9-11). This is a crucial follow up to the "not me" experience. "Not me" suggests *me*, and identification processes affirm this new sense of *me* with the addendum of "don't be not me" as a variation on identification by antithesis (p. 12).

This particular aspect of identification is clear in Burke's (1969b) consideration of the biblical tale of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac (pp. 244-267). For Burke, the point of God's request likely boils down to Abraham's "*willingness to sacrifice* [italics Burke's]" the "most precious" representation of himself—Isaac, his only son (pp. 252-253). Thus, Abraham proved his faithful production of his (God) given identity (e.g., interpellation and identification) by being willing to symbolically sacrifice himself with Isaac as his substitution. Burke calls this symbolic sacrificial suicide, or "willed variant on *dying* [italics Burke's]" both "self-abnegation" and "mortification" (p. 266). "Self-abnegation" is a particularly interesting terminal choice. "Abnegation," of course, means "self denial." So, "self-abnegation" can be translated into "self self-denial." Further, the prefix "ab-" is itself a variant of the negative, so "self-abnegation" can also be translated into "self-denial denial." Somewhere within these two possibilities is the potential of redemption. Either *I* sacrifices what *I* fears itself to actually be in order to participate in

sociality, or *I* sacrifices the initiating “not me” to validate and position itself on one side of a social division.

The two redemptive options constitute what I mean by the false confession that is demanded within identification. The idea of the false confession of a self is not a new idea. Foucault (1978) argues that Western cultures value confession as one of the “most highly valued techniques for producing truth,” and that the “Western man has become a confessing animal” (p. 59). He further argues that the human is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question” (p. 143). Judith Butler (1993) observes that Althusser’s sense of interpellation is not a simple hailing, but one that is issued from the police as a reprimanding question (p. 81). For Foucault, his argument about confession is regarding the medico-complex that forces bodies to confess themselves. For example, he introduces Herculine Barbin, a “hermaphrodite” whose body was interrogated by a doctor and a priest in order to determine Barbin’s “true sex” (Foucault, 2010, pp. xi-xii). Foucault explains that ultimately Barbin completed suicide because “he was incapable of adapting himself to a new identity” (p. xi). In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues that Barbin’s existence calls into question the normative gender categories that largely constitute *us* (pp. 31-33).

Barbin may, in fact, offer an excellent future case study as a disconstituent, but only because of his suicide. This is because it seems clear Barbin attempted to fully participate in identification processes of signification until that final decision based on Foucault’s analysis. To label Barbin’s life as disconstituent because of Barbin’s body when he sought to assimilate may very well be a highly questionable repetition of the same logic that led to his suicide. Further, there are two factors that separate the

*discussions* of Barbin from a disconstituent as depicted in this dissertation. First, Butler and Foucault place Barbin within a larger institutional politics of sex and gender enforcement as the primary discursive locale. While Foucault (2010) suggests Barbin lived much of his life as a “non-identity,” it was largely a practice of assimilation within a local community until the medico-juridical apparatus intervened (pp. xiii-xiv). Second, and most importantly, it is clear in both Butler’s and Foucault’s analyses that Barbin’s suicide is not what undid the *us* of that situation. Instead, it was Herculine’s very existence as an uncertain body that undid the social iterations of *us*. Thus, Barbin’s suicide was not a withdrawal or a sacrifice of an *us*. A *we* very clearly sacrificed Barbin for the maintenance of its *us* that culminated in Barbin’s suicide. Rather than a disconstituent, Barbin may be better represented as a victim of alienation.

Similarly, Butler’s (1993) observations of institutional hailing involved in interpellation ultimately leads to a discussion of “catachresis,” or “misrecognition,” that sets up her own account of disidentification as a politically charged site of resistance (pp. 165-167). The subject who is hailed is misnamed and must suffer under the wrong sign. The woman as the “lost referent” is a matter of being alienated and marginalized within a patriarchal regime (pp. 163-166). Disidentification practices, then, are a means of politically challenging the order of the patriarchal code by embracing the uncertainty within misrecognition as a repetition of semiotic breaks. The disconstituent, however, is not a political position even if the disconstituent may also be a product of alienation in various instances.

What does tie the disconstituent to Barbin and the misrecognized subject of interpellation, however, is that a confession of a false self is demanded of each of them in

such a way that rises to an intensified level within conscious being. The corrective logic of the demand of identification is captured in Burke's (1969b) commentary on the capitalist drive of competition (p. 131). He argues that competition, as it plays out in society, is not a matter of presenting better differences as a way of standing out; rather, it is a matter of out-conforming or out-imitating one another within the confines of identification (p. 131-132). Barbin attempted to imitate, and the misrecognized attempt to reform the identification process in such a way that gives them recognition, but the disconstituent stops competing altogether.

This idea of the disconstituent also plays out in Barthes' notion of the "scriptor" as the replacement for the author. Specifically Barthes (1978a) posits, "the scribe no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred" (p. 147). Here, Barthes' "scriptor" exists in very much the same way one might *imagine* the disconstituent to be. Barthes places the reader in the epistemological subject position as the subject that knows as well as the ontological subject position that is epistemologically assumed (or effaced) to be. This subjective reader, then, projects its self into the neutral text in order to know the scribe other as the reader's other. Indeed, the scribe only represents a fictional subject to a fictional audience. The scribe-persona, as a lost persona, is caught somewhere in between the reader's sense of self and the reader's projection of an expectation of an Author. But, again, if the scribe is specifically read as the disconstituent, then the scribe qua

disconstituent has already departed from the “mutual dialogue” and remains only as an empty space where the reader’s cotton reel cannot reach.

We can bring the disconstituent into further focus through Barthes’ (1981) treatment of the photographic subject of portraiture:

The portrait-photograph is a closed field of forces. Four image-repertoires intersect here, oppose and distort each other. In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. In other words, a strange action: I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this, each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture (comparable to certain nightmares). (p. 13)

Here, Barthes articulates quite well the difficulties of the false confession, the knowing of beginning as failure, in the action/motion differential of being the subject of a photograph. Whereas the constituent subject may be driven away from this nightmare, the disconstituent is driven into the nightmare because there is no epistemological illusion that successfully effaces the inherent ontological lack that constitutes its subjective failure. The nightmare of constant failure is the nightmare of constantly trying to hold still for the camera.

In Kristeva’s (1982) exposition on Céline and the abject, she lays out the potential threat of the disconstituent as one who “displays an ingrained love for death, ecstasy before the corpse, the other that I am and will never reach, the horror with which I communicate [...] which dwells in me, spends me, and carries me to the point where my identity is turned into something undecipherable” (p. 150). The extremes that Barthes and Lacan put forth are exciting and they do carry the subject to its peak. This is the meeting place of the pleasure principle and the reality principle—why Lacan and so many other practitioners of psychoanalysis love talking about fucking, which is to reach towards



what is beyond one's reach in the most shocking, immediate, physical, and metaphorically present way. It is the desire to wake up and know you have finally gotten it right. But, the beyond is always just beyond and it is only an illusion of being shocked awake. Yet, it is in the beyond that the subject places its faith and justifies the violence of its transformative reach. The invocation, the making present, of what-is-not in the moment that the lack is revealed is the most frightening failure of the subject and the very thing that the demand for identification only attempts to overcome.

Barthes' answer to the subjective trap of control and mastery is his own brand of orientalism; namely, "this is what the Zen master did who, for his only answer to the solemn question 'What is Buddha?' took off his scandal, put it on his head, and walked away: impeccable dissolution of the last word, mastery of non-mastery" (Barthes, 1978b, p. 209). Like a disconstituent, the Zen master withdraws and refuses to continue on the path of a false confession. To ask, "What is Buddha?" is to ask what it is to awaken and the Zen master only knows that he cannot. For Barthes (1981), "the Photograph (the one I *intend*) represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter" (p. 14). As the subject becomes increasingly aware of how completely it misses, the nocturne slowly becomes only the sensation of night.

Identification can also mean understanding, even empathy. There is a risk of contamination and loss of self in identification that may very well be mutually curative rather than entirely normative. To operate from the standpoint of beginning as failure is to risk becoming a lost persona as well. But, if the work of a student of rhetoric is to cast

a gaze into the abyss in such a way that orders observations so that we may risk identification in even our darkest wounds, then there is the hope that a sandal atop one's head may carry us into some sort of light. Perhaps we may answer Caruth's (1996) call to "the ethical imperative of an awakening that has yet to occur" (p. 112). That awakening and form of identification may find its definition in the difference between alienation and disconstituency, which is the way some of us care for the disconstituent.

### **CHAPTER 3: A VANISHING METHODOLOGY**

An Episcopal priest, other than my father, recently told me a story that offers another element of context to this dissertated nocturne regarding the jouissance of mourning, which is to say the failure to completely mourn. A fellow parishioner had been talking about how people need to “move on” after a certain period of time, and both the priest and I were countering with the argument that “to live is to mourn and to mourn is to live.” Less philosophically, we were also pointing out that the deep loss in the wake of a loved one’s death never really goes away and always has the potential of returning as if the loss had only occurred yesterday even if years had passed. For the priest, “moving on” was a matter of faith—the faith in resurrection and redemption. He proceeded to tell the story of his son in the wake of a pet goldfish’s death, which was also his son’s first encounter with death. After a responsible discussion that one might expect from a collared parent, the priest felt good about this important lesson that was taught. The goldfish was in heaven and only with us in spirit, so we might as well bury the body that the goldfish no longer requires. Ideology achieved. However, shortly thereafter, he saw his son walking to the backyard where the pet had been buried with full rites. His son was carrying a shovel. He reminded his son about their talk and the fact that the pet was with God now. The son replied, “I know, but this is a magic shovel.” The priest thought this was great because his son was thinking on such an imaginative level about what is one of the greatest struggles in being human. For me, though I didn’t say it at the time, the “magic shovel” was likely to become the actual traumatic event, because in it the boy was about to discover not only his own failure of resurrection but the failure of his

understanding of his father's faith in redemption as well. But, then, that's my story, and I'm still working out what "moving on" means to me.

If Chapters 1 and 2 offered an answer to what it means to regard suicide from the standpoint of beginning as failure, which is to say the validation of the disconstituent perspective, then the remaining chapters present a method for grappling with the implications of our failed regard and the subject's desire for redemption. Chapter 1 introduced the entirety of the project by focusing on the constitutive dilemma of the constitutive failure *presented* by both suicide and the disconstituent as a lost persona for those who attempt to give their regard to this lost persona. Chapter 2 argued that *any* regard begins as failure because the subject of identification is always already dead on arrival and subsequently caught up in a continual collective and individual demand for a false confession of the negative *not me* to be violently transformed, or identified, into a *me*. The disconstituent withdraws from this interrogation leaving the interrogating subjects with only the fragments of their interrogations. Chapter 3 offers a method for regarding within this initially failed regard, the demand for a false confession that is no longer answered, and the final three chapters are designed to allow this new method of regarding to once again fail before *our* eyes in a way that hopefully approaches an awakening at the end of this nocturne.

To understand the kind of regard at the heart of this dissertation, one must understand a certain kind of approaching weight that accompanies *this* regard. Elkins (1996) apparently enjoys the nocturnal sensation of lying in his darkened bedroom "feeling the force of vision everywhere in the room" (p. 70). Like Barthes' photographic adventure, Elkins imagines objects that animate him—his "objet petit a" that signifies his

self-perpetuating subject. As is often the case with Barthes, the contradiction for Elkins only appears to be present. His belief, or lack thereof, is really his desire. The “feeling the force of vision,” is the way that he describes *this* object of desire. Elkins’ “objet petit a” is not so much “lifelike” as with Barthes’ sense of the photograph. Rather, Elkins’ “objet petit a” remains an object while still capturing the unconscious reality that subjectively being a human being is like being a photographic subject being photographed. No actual force is being exerted exteriorly. Elkins is imagining his self-reaching subjectivity being reached towards and captured by objective exterior forces that he might reciprocally bring into his interiority to give it weight.

I feel *this* weight when I look at family pictures. My family portraits are always already marked by suicide—before and after. As Annette Kuhn’s (2002) memory work in *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* attests, family photographs are like crime scenes in which interrogating subjects, as “detectives,” gather up “evidence” (pp. 13-15). Each photograph before the event is read for clues of clues—clues that leads the subject to the proof of a soul. Thus, the tragedy for my family is that each photograph after Kryn’s suicide displays the proof of an absence that places the desire for a spiritual reality in anxious abeyance. In other words, I don’t want my brother to go to Hell. But, of course, no matter when the photograph was taken, the absence is always already presented and the uncertainty about what to desire creates an inconstant looking that is more about missing than selecting. Like Barthes’ *Neutral*, each photograph continually offers another possibility that can radically alter the order of things. The notion that there is a better way than *ours* at every *event* is continually presented and represented—not in the sense of a progressive politics so much as a mysterious “what if...?” In other words,

Barbie Zelizer's subjunctive voice haunts the series of photographs found in any family album, because each picture leads to and from the "about to day moment." Punctuation drags itself into the next sentence as an act of defying its definition even as it defines the enunciation of what preceded it.

As I look upon this particular photograph (Figure 1), a specific weighty experience takes shape—one that I am attempting to share with you in the forthcoming methodology. Barthes (1981) argues that *studium* is a "half desire" that "mobilizes...the same sort of vague, slippery, irresponsible interest one takes in the people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes one finds 'all right'" (p. 27). *Studium* is representative of what a spectator has been taught, disciplined, to both visually read (or interpret) and expect. Conversely, *punctum* is disruptive because it appears to require something more of the viewer, of *me*, which threatens the quotidian comfort of *studium*. It repeatedly resurrects within *me* the *not me*. But, *studium* and *punctum* are both mutually threatening and mutually elevating. Each threatens to swallow up the other, yet for either to carry with it any individual significance, the other must exist. *This* photograph (Figure 1) is your typical picture for a Church directory. It is what one expects to see. It is also the only picture of my brother that I keep. It is a picture of an *us* that never really existed. That is one story it tells. Another story that it tells is a story of an *us* in which at least one member fully believed to be absolutely real. This *us* was bigger than the family. It was the Church and the congregation, and it was deeply trusted. I suspect this trust may have existed in the hopes of all of the individuals in *this* photograph.



Figure 1: Womesldorf Family Portrait

In her discussion of punctum, Michele White (2006) argues, in line with Barthes, that “the shocks and moments of intimate engagement, which he experiences through aspects of photographs, eventually dissipate” (p. 112). This suggests the temporariness or fleetingness of the punctum and the eventual, sooner than later, desire for some *other* distraction or respite within the confines of studium. White acknowledges Barthes’ realist, documentarian, and evidential approach to viewing photography in his consideration of studium, but she notes, “his use of punctum goes beyond the evidential” in the way that he posits individual spectatorship as a form of disrupting “unified social conventions” and “larger cultural conceptions” that are rational (pp. 153-154). Thus, White suggests punctum is a difficult experience to share even as *we* feel that *we must* share it. How do *we* share the sentiment that *this* photograph lies to *me* for *me* in a way that productively unravels *us*? It seems too dangerous. However, White later points to the

penetrative operation of punctum in which “there is pleasure, pain, and bodily fragmentation when punctum undoes traditional forms of spectatorship” (pp. 159-160). In other words, punctum qua souffrance is a forceful experience for the spectator insofar as the spectator is always free to look away until punctum is once again revealed. Of course, it is often at the moment of punctum’s arrival that subjects most desperately want to look away—or, at least, reduce its gaze to a sideways, peripheral glance so as to return to the “irresponsible” comfort of studium. The older boy in my picture hanged himself while the rest of us posed. This is Jean Baudrillard’s (2007) logic of the “Non-Event” in his reflections on 9/11; namely, *we* love the excitement and identification involved in great tragic (so-called “real”) events until *we* start to realize that *I* am implicated to which *we* respond by reducing the event to just another subjective signifier (pp. 113-118). *We* becomes a collective of survivors, deep wells who understand tragedy.

Kuhn (2002) observes that while she may look at photographs or images that might be separated into private and public, memory and convention make this separation “less readily” available (pp. 15-16). Indeed, the enterprise of her work is to carry private memory (punctum) into the public (studium), not for display as much as for identification. In other words, private memories and public memories continually expand and contract within each other as a matter of discourse precisely in the same dialectical way as studium and punctum.

This (Figure 2) is happening. Kryn Womelsdorf hates life, not death. He is in the throws of the abject. He is Kristeva’s (1982) “stray,” her “dejected” (p. 8). “Chas,” the little *me*, is too small to understand this. We all are, being typical, losing his or her or its genuine smile because the picture took just a little too long, a little too much from us.



There is nothing unusual in this picture other than a looming suicide and a scopic desire for subjective knowledge. But then I have not set out to merely repeat such effacement even if it is largely unavoidable. Nonetheless, I embrace the visual metaphor in the presentation of my findings. I proceed towards my own map with my own magic shovel.



Figure 2: Womelsdorf Family Portrait in Traumatic Repetition

Speaking of things that have shafts and heads that we use to penetrate into what is Other, there is the fact that this dissertation claims to be psychoanalysis in a desexualized manner. For some, this may be problematic. As Lacan (2008) himself argues in *My Teaching*, “The psychoanalytic truth was that there was something terribly important at the bottom of it, in everything that gets hatched up when it comes to the interpretation of the truth, namely sexual life” (p. 17). He goes on to say that “psychoanalysis is all about,” what he calls a “hole in truth,” which is “the negative aspect that appears in anything to do with the sexual, namely its inability to aver” (p. 22). But, it is in this logic that one can begin to see that Lacan himself had no need for sexuality in psychoanalysis beyond its usefulness as an embodied metaphor. Psychoanalysis, at its basic point, is about this *little hole* that cannot reach nor be reached but which the subject subjectively desires to yearn. Additionally, “truth” is a tricky thing in the Lacanian vocabulary because he insists that a psychoanalyst must specifically know that “he does not know,” and that the practice of

psychoanalysis is to be psychoanalyzed oneself (pp. 110-111). What is the analyst's desire? In other words, psychoanalysis is a matter of pushing back against one's own epistemological subjectivity and its accompanying ontological effacement.

And Lacan (1978) further establishes this point in declaring, "The real is distinguished [...] by its separation from the field of the pleasure principle, by its desexualization, by the fact that its economy, later, admits something new, which is precisely the impossible" (p. 167). He further clarifies:

The pleasure principle is even characterized by the fact that the impossible is so present in it that it is never recognized in it as such. The idea that the function of the pleasure principle is to satisfy itself by hallucination is there to illustrate this—it is only an illustration. By snatching at its object, the drive learns in a sense that this is precisely not the way it will be satisfied. (p. 167)

It is clear that sexuality, in this context, is in fact only an embodied metaphor caught up in the impossible, which is to say the hole in truth that is the apex of the subject's missed encounter. Lacan (2008) explains that the commonly used concept of "castration anxiety" only suggests that desire "cannot be both being and having" (p. 42). The radical suggestion here, then, is that subjects' bodies themselves become missed encounters in the subjective frame and even become the instruments of the ontological understanding of objectivity. *Our* bodies become objects pursuing other objects at the behest of *our* subjectivity. Therein lies the centrality and hindrance of sex and sexuality in psychoanalysis. It is an exceptionally powerful metaphor, but the power of the metaphor overtakes the discourse. Of course, it probably says something about me that I choose to adventure away from sex and sexuality in my approach to psychoanalysis. I am, after all, being psychoanalyzed as the analyst.

Self-confession in analysis is not only a critical move for those challenging epistemological objectivity, it is also an inevitable lie that can be actively represented not as the alibi but as the exemplary display of coming out. *I too am not me*. And, it is abundantly clear how significant self-analysis is to Lacan (1978) in his discussion of the fact that his beloved Freud “would not have been able to advance” the field of psychoanalysis “if he had not been guided in it, as his writings show, by his self-analysis” (pp. 47-48). It is in this *thinking*, this standing back and thinking, that one finds the point of departure between what Lacan deems as hermeneutic research and what he purports as psychoanalytic findings. In both, the analyst goes over a matter repeatedly, but a researcher bound up in the hermeneutical demand is looking for something other than what has been found in the pursuit of the new. However, for the Lacanian psychoanalyst, every *return* is a new finding. Lo! There it is! Every recurrence is the opportunity to speak the psychoanalytic truth of the subject. It is the opportunity to lift the weight. For me, castration is largely a matter of my disintegrating memory of that moment on the bench and my inability to speak the truth of my failure to bear mourning, which is to say my failure to be able to bear regarding Kryn’s suicide.

Elkins (1996) simply observes the overwhelming truth that “you can *never* inventory a landscape, not even in a lifetime, because most of the objects you think you see are only rough guesses” (p. 98). On the one hand, one might say that the world is maddeningly unclear when considering Elkins’ point. On the other hand, one could also say that the world is maddeningly clear. Either madness drives *us* towards that searching epistemological range of subjectivity. As Barthes (1978a), in the wake of this reality, counters, “an activity that is truly revolutionary” is “to refuse to fix meaning” (p. 147).

This is his revolution and revelation. It is a large part of Barthes' psychoanalytic truth. It is an impossible truth. It is an impossible truth that I try to share in a way not unlike his, by making my self "the measure of photographic 'knowledge'" (Barthes, 1981, p. 9).

When I consider Kryn's suicide filling *our* casket, it is an impossible truth that I cannot help but want to know, to search for, so that I might share it as a way to offer a bit of light in *this* nocturne. It is *this* context of *this* suffering weight that I am attempting to approach in *this* method, the suffering that identification not only acknowledges but also forces. More specifically, it is the establishment of the disconstituent's withdrawal—meaning both how the disconstituent withdraws from the social body and how the social body withdraws from the disconstituent even within the toils of a potentially mutual yearning. This is Barthes's disorder, Burke's Babel, and Lacan's dream.

In his regard of the "Burning Child" dream, Lacan (1978) offers the following missive: How can we fail to see? In his discussion of identification, Burke (1969b) notes the "active, reflexive, and passive forms of death" to be "killing, self-killing, and being killed" (p. 13). What does it mean for the reflexive, thoughtful, form of identification to be so closely aligned with being suicidal? And Barthes (1981), in his regard, realizes that "each photograph always contains this imperious sign of my future death that each one, however attached it seems to be to the excited world of the living, challenges each of us, one by one, outside of any generality (but not outside of any transcendence)" (p. 97).

Of Burke's quest for the ontology of the social, Biesecker (2000) points out Burke's occasional seeming distaste for much of psychoanalysis and its oversexed ways which miss "the true underlying motivational locus" (p. 44). And, again, Lacan (2008) does not disagree with the heart of Burke's critique as is clear in his continued

explanation of the castrated organ: “So, the organ serves, perhaps a purpose that functions at the level of desire. It is the lost object because it stands in for the subject *qua* desire” (p. 42). Psychoanalysis, at least as forwarded by Lacan, is always about the activity of specifying “the true underlying motivational locus,” which is to say the real; and just as Burke finds himself to be up against the action/motion differential that Biesecker refers to as a “resident rift,” so too does Lacan find himself *I/eyeing* a “little hole” not unlike Barthes’ camera. The “lost object,” and the “lost persona,” present an unbearable weight for all of these little holes. The vanishing methodology promised by this dissertation must first be placed in the context of a more thorough understanding of the psychoanalytic concept of “the gaze” so as to apply this understating to Peggy Phelan’s (1997) articulation of the “Vanishing Point.” This metaphor can then aid in the crafting of a reformatted of Gunnian approach to Freud and Lacan’s positions of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real fathers.

### **The Gaze**

Lacan (1978) explains, “The Other is the locus in which is situated the chain of the signifier that governs whatever may be present in the subject—it is the field of that living being in which the subject has to appear [...] that the drive is essentially manifested” (p. 203). It is in “the chain” that find the magic shovel can be found as well as the territory to be mapped out within the gaze that longs for its formal home within the Other. As is clear in the scopic drive, opticality is critical to the psychoanalytic venture. Elkins’ (1996) gives a basic breakdown of Lacan’s Mirror Stage theory: “It could be that the first few times I glimpsed myself in a mirror, when I was too young to speak, I realized in some infantile way that I had a certain shape and a certain look and that I was

not just a few flashing limbs or a crying sound—that I was like my mother a little, and different from her as well” (p. 71). A very direct parallel between Lacan’s gaze and Burke’s divisive understanding of identification is, if in a very basic manner, abundantly clear. The subject *sees* in the separation from and consubstantiality with the other its self as collectively and individually constituted. Elkins’ observes another way of thinking about the “objet a” as seeing oneself “in the other person’s gaze” (p. 71). In so doing, Elkins bears out the basic foundation of the gaze. The gaze is not merely an extension of sexual desire and control as is sometimes assumed. These elements may often be present in the gaze, but the gaze is more so conditioned by subjective information processing. It is the process of putting subjectivity out there—and, yes, in there too. But it is also that more hidden desire to take in the Other because the Other’s assumed successful interpellation appears as proof of the subject’s own subjective failure.

Lacan’s explicit ontology is only concerned with the reality of the subject, which is the reality of being an interpretive being. And as he says, “it is not between the visible and the invisible that we have to pass” (Lacan, 1978, p. 72). Rather, it is between being and not being that the analyst and analysand must pass, between what *we* have interpretively become and what is tucked away behind *our* lack so as to make the lack decentralized. In other words, psychoanalysis is about the process of facing the centrality of lack—the unconscious. Phelan (1997) comes close to this understanding when she states that “the syntax of loss” may very well be “hard-wired into the psyche which structures our encounters with the world” (p. 5). The problem with leaving it at “loss” is that this already implies something that was once present rather than presented. “Lack” is more accurate. However, “loss” does offer a performative utterance as this is precisely

the lie that is syntactically software into the subject. Further along these wares and wires, the gaze can be understood to be the syntactical nature of the rhetorical audience who watches with constitutive desires.

As in Phelan's articulation of loss, Burke's (1969b) metaphorical murders imply a before that was present, that was a living thing vanquished for the sake of sociality rather than a constructed thing animated out of the foundation of the unconscious reality. Specifically, he argues that "Taken at face value, imagery invites us to respond in accordance with its nature" (p. 17). This is the arousal of the appetite that is the heart of the formal appeal. The gaze is something that is also pulled out of the subject in that it reminds the subject of its insatiable lack. In his discussion of Ego construction, which is really the construction of one's identity, Lacan (1978) argues that "The return of need is directed towards consumption placed at the service of appetite. Repetition demands the new" (p. 61). He goes on to explain, the need for meticulous repetition "can be seen in the child [...] at the moment when he is formed as a human being, manifesting himself as an insistence that the story should always be the same, that its recounted realization should be ritualized, that is to say, textually the same" (p. 61). So, the demand for the new is merely the demand for new territories to be rendered the same—to con-form in such a way that forces the Other to fail at imitating *my* correct imitation.

But, then, that is the inevitable and necessary failure of the gaze: "This requirement of a distinct consistency in the details of its telling signifies that the realization of the signifier will never be able to be careful enough in its memorization to succeed in designating the primacy of the significance as such" (Lacan, 1978, p. 61). This failure of the gaze is what Lacan means by the fact that the *subject of psychoanalysis*

does not pass through “the visible and invisible.” It is more precise to say that the subject of psychoanalysis passes through what it sees and what it fails to see. Lacan (1978) explains that, “In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we call the gaze” (p. 73). The gaze, then, not only carries with it the subject’s subject and the subject’s lack, but the gaze is the failed subjectivity that transforms what is other from the standpoint of this failed regard.

The gaze is not limited to objects, “things” as Lacan says; rather, other human beings are *objectively* transformed—identified. As Burke (1969b) conceives, “put identification and division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric” (p. 25). This rhetorical nature of the gaze is at the heart of this chapter. Lacan (1978) could be speaking of the rhetor as he pronounces the force of the gaze as “the regulation of form, which is governed, not only by the subject’s eye, but by his expectations, his movement, his grip, his muscular and visceral emotion—in short, his constitutive presence, directed in what is called his total intentionality” (p. 71). Of course, he could also be speaking of the silent majority as the implying “implied auditor” who sees. It is from this rhetorical position that the vanishing point emerges as a powerful metaphor, a position that successfully fails to construct the subject while nonetheless animating it as an outward and inward moving force.



## The Vanishing Point

Phelan's analysis offers another chance to rethink identification, and thus the gaze, as the pursuit of redemption in the wake of our findings, to map out a passage from a *you* to an *I* within a text that decidedly claims there is not the *we* that *you* and *I* would normatively cohabitate. In fact, Phelan (1997) opens up her chapter on the vanishing point with a reflection on redemption asking, "In our own age of despair [...] What does it look like from the standpoint of redemption if you are the Redeemer? If you are in despair?" (p. 23) The ambiguity of her relationship with the image is a powerful expression of something like Barthes' Neutral or "third meaning," of a neutralizing textuality in which the direction of the redemption is uncertain because the "redemption" is somehow affixed between the positions of the "Redeemer" and the one "in despair" in a manner that precedes them though not quite transcendently. The standpoint is not "you," nor is it the other position, nor is it a matter of the redeemed. Rather, Phelan asks, "what does it look like from the standpoint of redemption?" Regardless of what position "you" maintains, Phelan asks us to premeditate the image, the idea of images, from a place somewhere in between even as she understands such a task to be "increasingly unfathomable" (p. 23). The gaze, as Lacan posits, "is the split through which that something, whose adventure in our field seems so short, is for a moment brought into the light of day—a moment because the second stage, which is one of closing up. Gives this apprehension a vanishing aspect" (Lacan, 1978, p. 31). Here, the vanishing aspect is both an effacement and a truth. What finds its way "into the light of day" is the subject's desire laid bare as a desperate desire for itself—the redemption of the promise held in the false confession that is guided by a false interrogation.

One can at least begin to imagine in an objective way “that something,” that “standpoint of redemption,” within the concept of the vanishing point:

Put simply, the vanishing point was derived from a theory of optics based on the illusion that parallel lines converge at a point in the distance. The painter placed that convergence at the optical center of his or her composition; that became known as the vanishing point. The vanishing point gained depth and significance because it presupposed a parallel point outside the frame called the viewing point. (Phelan, 1997, pp. 23-24)

Phelan is explaining a static variation of parallax. More importantly, the vanishing point and the viewing point can also be understood as two vanishing points so that we, scriptor and reader, might inhabit, as best we can, the space of redemption, which is neither the place of the redeemer, nor the redeemed, nor the redeemed to be that a Cartesian logic might proffer because none of these places actually exist. Each is only relatively present, or as Biesecker (2000) puts it, where “the action/motion differential makes its appearance in symbolic action, as a structure it resides in the human being” (p. 29). It is an imaginary ratio of exchange. This imaginary quality also allows us to avoid the math.

Phelan (1997) explains the Foucaultian perspective on the history of the “vanishing point” as being one practice in which the “human subject becomes a theological concept” (p. 24). It is largely the same argument that Barthes articulates on the rise of the Author as the authority and divining individual. Particularly important in Phelan’s observation is the requirement of belief in the construction of the human subject as posited by Foucault in his consideration of the historical emergence of the human subject in the Classical Age. Phelan explains that the vanishing point is really a matrix of substitutions where “Christ the son stands in for God the father; in language, the signifier stands in for the signified; in perspective, the vanishing point stands in for the illusionary convergence of parallel lines” (p. 25). She continues, “the stand-in itself is not only a tool

in the construction of ‘man’ as a theological concept, but it too is a theological concept. The foundation of the epistemology of the stand-in is the vanishing point: the hole that launches the illusion of perspective underlies the Classical Age’s ordering system” (p. 25). In this way, Phelan argues that the vanishing point is precisely the lost object, the little hole that cannot be reached or avoided, the weight.

Lacan (1978) clarifies between the function of the *eye* and the function of the *I/eye* that is the gaze as “the stain” (p. 74). The “stain” is precisely that point of contrast, which one could also say of a painting that operates as a phenomenological stain—that is to say it stains more than the canvas. One such painting would be Velasquez’s famous *Las Meninas* (1646). The viewer sees the painting from the viewpoint of the royal subjects being painted, which is evidenced by their image in a mirror holding the position of the vanishing point within the painting (Phelan, 1997, pp. 25-26). Phelan suggests via Foucault that a resistance to power dynamics is at play in this usage of the vanishing point because the King and Queen’s “image cannot be rendered except as reflected in the gaze of their subjects”(pp. 26-27). As important as Phelan qua Foucault’s particular observation with regard to power is the fact that the king-and-queen’s subjective mirror image is precisely the vanishing point *and* the representation of the subjective viewing point that vanishes.

Just as Foucault subverts power, the notion that the viewer point is also a vanishing subject allows the vanishing point to subvert the subjective gaze, which is perhaps Elkins’ (1996) very meaning in the title of his book *The Object Stares Back*. This falls in line with Barthes’ (1978a) reader as “the space on which all quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its

origin but in its destination” (p. 148). Except, all of it is always already lost, which is to say lacking. Barthes positions the reader as the *constituent* other to be a subversion of the authority bestowed upon the Author—the *you* that takes over the *I* position, which is akin to the “audience turn” in rhetorical circles. Phelan qua Foucault is making this point as well with regard to the royal subjects of the painting while allowing the genius of Velasquez, who the viewer also sees in the painting, to remain intact much like McKerrow’s critic. To take Barthes to his previously and multiply mentioned end, the entire scene empties out the viewer because the viewer is asked to view a mirror reflection that forces the viewer to face the emptiness that this reflection implies no matter which subject holds the place of the viewer point. Would the king and queen be behind the viewer or in front? Would the viewer be one or both of them? Are they reduced to being their own *royal* subjects? Are they viewing their viewpoint as the subjects of themselves? Are they *them*? Is it Velasquez’s viewpoint of their viewpoint or is it all only his mirror image? Each possible subject position can believe itself to be implied, but each is left empty because each position holds the place of the vanishing point.

Otherwise put, “That in which the consciousness may turn back upon itself—grasp itself [...] *as seeing oneself seeing oneself*—represents mere sleight of hand. An avoidance of the gaze” (Lacan, 1978, p. 74). The illusion that is the vanishing point is the lie that is the subject. Most important, perhaps, is the reciprocity of identification at work. Something is given and something is taken within the exchange of vanishing points.

Phelan (1997) continues:

*Las Meninas*, in Foucault's argument, issues from the discovery that the human subject's "depth" isolates him from God. This isolation dramatizes the human subject's doubt about his or her position within the order of things more generally. Foucault's thesis that the Classical Age creates human subjects who *become* theological concepts (a becoming made possible through reciprocal logic and the economy of substitution), also requires that theological concepts become human subjects. Thus, the Classical Age required stories dramatizing God becoming man *and* man becoming God. (p. 27)

The illusion *stands in* the way of the illusion so as to prove or disprove both. Or as Barthes (1981) says, "It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures" (pp. 5-6). That which the subject would have as proof, the evidence that the subject presents to itself, is a most precise deathblow. Phelan concludes, "Perspective is a theatrical technology and a technology of the theatre" and "The 'as if,' the illusionary indicative that theatre animates, allows for the construction of depth, for the 'invention' of physical interiority and psychic subjectivity" (Phelan, 1997, p. 27). This theatricality, like Zelizer's subjunctive voice, is present in the everyday life of humans being. It could be argued, and will, that we subjects name this theatricality "art" as an effacement of its accurate display.

Within this framework, subjects place the demand for one another's gaze within various substitutions that may also include their own subjects. One can consider the burning child and the father *in the dream* to both be the substitute awareness of the dreaming father's failed regard. Neither the child nor the father in the dream are precisely subjects. Instead, they are both signifiers of the dreaming father and his consciousness

that is aware of the actual burning that is taking place in the very next room. Lacan (1978) explains:

that this split is still there only as representing the more profound split, which is situated between that which refers to the subject in the machinery of the dream, the image of the approaching child, his face full of reproach and, on the other hand, that which causes it and into which he sinks, the invocation, the voice of the child, the solicitation of the gaze—*Father can't you see...* (p. 70)

What sees between the vision of the dream and the father's closed eyes, and what is being seen? The split, the blind spot, sees and is seen. Phelan (1997) shifts her attention to Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of St Thomas* and the lack that not only remains present in resurrection but emerges there as well. Phelan argues, "Caravaggio's Christ is uncertain who he is after the resurrection, and especially who he is in relation to the men with whom he had shared a history and with whom he had tried to forge a collective body" (p. 28). Christ takes on the position of the burning child in a way that reflects the burning child's own emergent lack. The viewer of Caravaggio's Christ comes to "know" this through the symbolic code that also moves the viewer beyond this lack into a substitute presence. The viewer divines his and its presence to be. The child, like Christ, is conjured as a measure of self-affirmation because the father knows that the child in the dream is not his child lying dead in the next room. Yet, the child in the dream appears to him as proof that his child is both on fire and was once with him as a living subject.

Biesecker (2000) explains, "the symbolic (and its concomitant logic) is itself the form in which the social, indeed history itself, approaches sense" (p. 50). The symbolic presentation allows the human being to fixate upon the external other as opposed to the internal other because the internal other defies a subjective sense of the world. The external other offers at least the perceived opportunity for redemption while the internal

other is the subject's undoing. The burning child, the uncertain Christ, is the failed subject's redemptive substitute. Lacan (1978) puts it this way: "It is no doubt this *seeing*, to which I am subjected in an original way, that must lead us to the aims of this work, to that ontological turning back" (p. 72). Here, Lacan is articulating the psychoanalytic mission as he sees it. It is the work of re-membering the sociality of the subject in such a way that accounts for the "lost object" without allowing the "lost object" to completely consume the psychoanalytic subject. On the one hand, then, one might think of the symbolic aspects of the gaze within a psychoanalytic exchange to be curative. On the other hand, though, the symbolic carries with it the violence of a corrective.

Phelan (1997) offers a helpful, but problematic, observation:

Western theatre is itself predicated on the belief that there is an audience, an other willing to cast in the role of auditor. The "act" at the heart of theatre making is the leap of faith that someone (that ideal spectator some call "God") will indeed see, hear, and love those brave enough to admit that this is the movement that keeps us from our deaths (or at least from permanently dark houses). The psychic problem raised by theatre is that it remains a perpetual rehearsal. The one for whom the theatre maker makes the piece never arrives for the performance. ("Nobody/bears witness for the/witness"). This is why theatre remains an art rather than a cure. (p. 31)

This is partially problematic because of the curative possibilities of the curating subject, of the one who actively displays the failure to be. There is also the powerful display of mutual witnessing between two fragmentary vanishing points—the backstage and the gallery each bearing false witness to one another's reality. But, I take her point that it is the symbolic substitution taking place in the theatre that precisely allows for this false witnessing. In other words, in the gaze as constructed through twin vanishing points, we are dealing with the method of psycho-subjective contour completion and collective inconsistent seeing. Within the symbolic, subjects agree to the illusionary power of the

vanishing points as a substitution for their redemption. It is not simply a matter of inconsistent seeing, but also of inconsistent showing, all of which is played off as consistency. Likewise, Barthes (1981) observes, “I possess only two experiences: that of the observed subject and that of the subject observing” (p. 10). The gaze is the cotton reel, which is to say the gaze *is* the subject, and the eye may very well capture the interlocution of subjects as filtered through the mutual denial of the unconscious reality of lack.

Herein lies the impossibility of the wound that is the view from the standpoint of redemption. Phelan (1997) opens this wound:

The wound in Christ’s body opens up to an interiority that painting cannot expose. The absolute limit of the look is underscored here: even at the moment that heralds and “proves” the narrative endpoint of Redemption, the physical body nonetheless remains partially inaccessible to vision. The redemption of painting, Caravaggio seems to imply, requires, as does Thomas’ doubt, that painting go *through* the body, to penetrate its interiority and to display that. But such a penetrating cannot happen without a cutting, a tearing, a wounding, of the painting’s skin. (p. 35)

In short, Phelan is describing Lacan’s notion of *jouissance* within this visual metaphor. In so doing, Phelan also captures the rhetorical illusion of identification and the false promise, or confession, of order. She goes on, “Caravaggio’s painting holds the viewer’s eye in the vanishing depth of the image of a wounded body. That image serves as a mirror capable of reflecting the eye’s own longing to be arrested, to be still, to be done with looking, to be held” (p. 35). Here, Phelan precisely captures the weight that Elkins seeks in his bedroom. Phelan’s psychoanalysis argues, “The eye we make from the wound is an eye that is slit open, an eye the viewer seeks in order to constitute herself as an ‘I’” (p. 40). In her observation of this invitational wound qua eye that offers the promise of the constituted subject, Phelan also finds what has been sought only to reveal



the subject qua wound, because redemption is ultimately the subject's undoing—the end of all desire is the hysteric's most avoided curative confession which is also the cessation of the illusion of failure.

And so, the methodization of the vanishing point must be a method of dissolution, of deterioration. As will be revealed momentarily, it is from a point of deterioration that Lacan elaborates upon the idea of the “Name-of-the-father” as captured in the symbolic father's relationship to the imaginary and real fathers. But it is also the point that demands to be terrifyingly dissolved by those who follow Lacan. Phelan (1997) concludes:

But even as I transform the wound in Christ's body into an eye, I also blind myself to the truest terror of the painting and the story that lies behind it. When his friends and mother go to look for Christ in the tomb, it is empty. The form, the skeleton, the very corpse that held Christ's body is gone. The interiority of the tomb will not yield the form they seek. Nobody is there. The failure of the body to remain a solid set of remains is underscored by Caravaggio's painting as it encourages the viewer to transform the wound into an eye. This transformation reflects the changing and seemingly endless slipping away from us that the dying do. Not even the dead will hold still: they do not leave us all at once, which would be horribly violent but clear. They fall away from us piece by piece until we cannot bear the withering decomposition of their form of relation to us. It is the lack of form, the lack of anything to hold onto in death, that inspires the drama of love that can offer us only bodies with holes in them. The radical formlessness of the beloved's body (its utter failure to remain static) creates the wild terror of Caravaggio's painting. (p. 41)

The beauty of her writing justifies a lengthy quotation. Even the most real formality of the subject we can see, the body, vanishes. And though subjects may utilize symbolic representations of this functional reality as a pretense for mastery, the fact of its own living curative failure remains. It is the madness of the subjective relationship to the unconscious reality. The next section will attempt to offer a rapidly vanishing structure for analysis through the use of the vanishing point, Sands' “shoes,” and Freud's “primal

horde” within the overall context of a regard that begins as failure, identification as the demand of false confession, and the withdrawal of the disconstituent.

### **The Vanishing Fathers**

Unlike Jenkins and Cisneros’ (2013) “love,” Phelan’s “redemption” does not hold still in a “common” position for verification. Neither do the vanishing subject positions of her painting analysis nor even the bodies that hold their weight. In a regarding that undoes *us*, it is the *us* that becomes marginalized in a traumatic disappearance. People often present themselves with paradoxes, with things that seem impossible, to express pointlessness and to simplify their next steps. Can God make something too heavy for her to lift? Doctor, it hurts when I do this. Don’t do that. But why does calling God a “her” still reify the patriarchy? Sometimes, though, paradoxes contain more than a point. As Elkins’ (1996) observes, “If we look at looking too long, it falls apart” (pp. 120-121). Here, Elkins presents something more than an analogy in which the way we human beings subjectively see is a metaphor for how the we physiologically see and how we physiologically see is also a metaphor for how we subjectively see. These ideas of perspective actually inform one another in their mutual articulation. This way of thinking offers a glimpse into the gaze that precedes and follows the eye. So, when Lacan (1978) declares, “It is in no way necessary that the tree of science should have a single trunk,” he may very well be offering much more than a binary logic in his bi-petal metaphor (p. 8). Namely, we have our very own bifocality as a way of seeing to suggest our understanding of an “optical unconscious” (Elkins, pp. 120-121). Neither I/eye is completely correct. Caruth (1996) explains that “In opening the other’s eyes, the awakening consists not in seeing but in handing over the seeing it does not and cannot contain to another (and

another future)” (p. 111). This is what Gunn and Treat (2005) mean when they argue that the repressed materials of the unconscious are not completely lost to us because others have the potential of seeing them. In particular, traumatic images offers the radical opportunity to think *us* seeing *us* think the way *we* see in the fragmented context of the unconscious reality

In his essay, “Father Trouble: Staging Sovereignty in Spielberg’s War of the Worlds,” Gunn (2008a) playfully offers the correction, “Lacan’s immediate answer to the rhetorical question ‘What is a father?’ is unsurprisingly cryptic: ‘It is the dead Father,’ Freud replies, ‘but no one hears him’” (p. 8). In the same way that Burke offers a series of suicides as merely a series of formal appeals, Gunn observes Lacan’s (qua Freud) use of a series of fathers: “Lacan implies that there are many other kinds of fathers; the father figure is a composite of many things that need to be disarticulated from one another to be better understood: the symbolic father, the imaginary father, and the real father” (p. 8). Gunn goes on to point out that Lacan is referring to Freud’s depiction of the “primal horde” (p. 8). Both Gunn and Lacan are specifically referencing the *Totem and Taboo* (1918) version of this primal depiction (Gunn, p. 8). As mentioned earlier, however, Freud’s (1939) “primal horde” retelling in *Moses and Monotheism* is more narrative in nature and accordingly nuanced in its expansion.

Freud’s pattern tends to be one of moving out of the multitude into the individual and back into the multitude. In this way, he offers an outline for understanding his narration of the primal horde within the structure of individual trauma: “Early trauma—defence [sic]—latency—outbreak of the neuroses—partial return of the repressed material” (Freud, 1939, p. 101). This is itself a psychoanalytic rendering of ideological

interpellation. It is the ideology of the subject. Not me, don't be not me, we're all a bunch of me's, maybe we're not me. For the purposes of the proposed methodology, The Imaginary happens within the defense, The Symbolic in the outbreak of neuroses, and the Real (as in the missed encounter) in both the early trauma and partial return. Latency is that moment between dreaming and awakening. It's worth noting that it is Lacan who clarifies the three fathers out of Freud's primal horde.

In the first half of his essay, Gunn (2008a) discusses the political philosophies of "the state of nature" and its more current variation of "the states of emergency or exception" which "are premised on the fear or worry that a communal order can collapse into some primary, albeit mythic, default chaos" (p. 4). In other words, Gunn posits Burke's Babel as the sublime context for Lacan's reading of Freud's horde. Freud's (1939) own primal fantasies, his *urfantasien*, are revealed in the opening of the story as much as anything, but he lays out "early trauma" as a combination of what one might begin to consider the Real and the Imaginary (The Imaginary Real; Originary). It's the story of the first tyrannical dad who has sex with anyone and everything he wants, and he kills, castrates, or drives out anyone who defies him or makes him anxious (Freud, p. 102). It is an imagined narrative of a fictional complete control carried out in the most brutal, or primal, of ways that can be understood as the representation of a traumatic event—a missed encounter. Additionally, one can go a bit further with the crafting of the Imaginary to include its emergence as occurring within the psychic defense of the brotherly horde, which is to say the internalization as representative thought. More crudely, Freud offers murder and cannibalism, "The next decisive step towards changing this first kind of 'social' organization lies in the following suggestion: the brothers who

had been driven out and lived together in a community clubbed together, overcame the father, and—according to the custom of those times—all partook of his body” (p. 103). Freud is articulating a very crude imaginary depiction of identification. In so doing, The Imaginary takes on the shape of an impossible legacy of control. The brotherly horde wants to be what they know they cannot be by claiming pieces of it and consuming it.

This imaginary shape is not to be confused with a symbol. As Gunn (2008a) argues:

Unless one separates the imaginary father as an image and the symbolic father as a function, it is easy to get the two confused. In fact, it is this confusion that Lacan suggests is typical of psychosis, broadly conceived. Understanding the story of the primal horde as a useful myth, the imaginary father is first represented by the tyrannical father who imposes the incest taboo, and later the as the friendly ghost, the ideal father. (pp. 9-10)

Particularly useful here is the ideal image that Gunn proffers which combines the “tyrannical father” with the “friendly ghost” as a binary frame for desire. Out of the murder of the Imaginary Father, the Symbolic Father, or functional father, begins to emerge as the repetition, and thus substitution as opposed to reproduction, of Imaginary memory. In Freud’s (1939) tale, this involves the substitution of spirit animals to which the brotherly horde attributed the symbolic subject of the father as a manner of carrying his memory (p. 104). Accordingly, Gunn moves back into Lacan’s re-articulation of Freud’s fatherhood with particular attention of the functional father:

Later in his work Lacan would combine the protective and legislative function of the father in terms of the ‘symbolic father.’ Unlike the idealization or image of a father that we harbor early in life (viz., the imaginary father), the symbolic father has more to do with signification as such and less to do with a real person. (p. 9)

Whereas a subject’s early thoughts of its Imaginary parental units, or bigger humans, are rather magical in their fictive total control over the subject’s environment, the symbolic

parent emerges as the operator and symbolic master of the symbolic world. They stand in for the imaginary because they fail to be the imaginary and they impose this limitation upon the subject, which is to say they are the outbreak of neuroses as repetitious substitutions for what is denied. Namely, each of the brothers “renounced the ideal of gaining for himself the position of father, of possessing his mother or sister” (Freud, p. 104) In other words, the Symbolic Father is the Lacanian representation known as the Name-of-the-father, which in the form of a human being is the symbolic made fleshly stand-in for the authoritative subject (Gunn, p. 9). Or as Gunn magnificently puts it, it is “the *functional* father who precisely responds “Because I say so!” [...] because it is not a living being, but rather an operation” (p. 9).

The Symbolic Father is not the partial return, the supposed Real Father, nor the purely Imaginary Father, but it is the one institutionally caught up in the symbolic; the space in which subjects aspire to be authorial, in the sense of being able to write its own unique narrative, but knows and collectively reaffirms that desire to be an impossibility thus alleviating the shame in its repeated internal failures. Still caught up in the symbolic, “The next step forward from totemism is the humanizing of the worshipped being. Human gods, whose origin in the totem is not veiled, take the place previously filled by animals” (Freud, 1939, p. 105). One can begin to see the parallel of Freud’s primal acculturation in “Foucault’s Classical episteme” as articulated by Phelan. Theological certitude stands in the way of human connectivity to the animal and corresponding subjective uncertainty in the same way that authorized subject of the symbolic stands in for the Imaginary.

The emergence of The (impossible) Real Subject is Jesus (Freud, 1939, pp. 109-110). The Real Father is actually the son—the father made flesh. Freud sets out on establishing the parallel between the sacrifices/murders of Moses and Jesus which is very interesting and has a place in the suicide narrative. However, the Real Subject, the notion of the constituent subject in the forthcoming method, begins to emerge within the following passage:

Paul, a Roman Jew from Tarsus, seized upon this feeling of guilt and correctly traced it back to its primeval source. This he called original sin; it was a crime against God that could be expiated only through death. Death had come into the world through original sin. In reality this crime, deserving of death, had been the murder of the Father who later was deified. (Freud, p. 109)

This passage brings in the inherent guilt of the implicated self, implicated directly based on constituency, or identification, itself, and the paradoxical reality that this guilt-driving identification is, in fact, a constituent denial of the subject's lack, the unconscious.

Caught up in the real, too, is the fleshed out reality of death.

Substituting Paul for Jesus in the fatherly trio is also my departure from both Gunn and Lacan. Gunn (2008a) finishes his Lacanian triumvirate with “The father as an actual person—that individual which is said to be the biological father of a child—is the ‘real father,’ and should be sharply distinguished from the symbolic father, which, as a function or operation, is ‘dead’” (p. 9). The very phrase, “real father” is a symbolic designation continually caught up in a patriarchal repetition. The “biological” is code for one particular system of logic and objectivity in and of itself. I don't disagree that this is the point at which the “real father” emerges, but I do disagree with the ease of its enunciation. Freud's “Paul,” though, offers a departure from the genetic code of patriarchal order even if Paul is still a man.

But, within the context of the subject, aside from the mythic horde, who or what is murdered? Gunn (2008a) offers the following:

Like the stories of Oedipus and the primal horde, *War of the Worlds* demonstrates the interplay between the imaginary and the symbolic father, announcing at the onset that it is another tale of the dead father by underscoring paternal failure at almost every turn. In the widest narrative context, the failure of the State represents the patricide that leads to the state of emergency and a regression toward the state of nature (psychosis); the film thus collapses (or confuses) the imaginary and symbolic fathers in the figure of Ray, who becomes the paternal imago for the spectator. Ray is literally an imaginary father insofar as he is a film character (hence his ‘bad father’ and eventual ‘good father’ personae are stereotypes). As the world becomes chaotic on the screen, Ray also increasingly becomes a representative of the symbolic father. From a psychical standpoint, the film thus represents the way in which the fallen father or State is regurgitated by—or the way in which the paternal metaphor is integrated into—the broken but nevertheless functional family; *War of the Worlds* represents the triumph of the rule of law, the persistence of the dead father. (Gunn, 2008a, p. 10)

It may be that Gunn, in actuality, confuses Ray’s and the State’s imaginary and symbolic failures for the very real failures of the Imaginary and the Symbolic as housed within the failure of the Real Subject. Perhaps, though, one might shift myths. Could this also be the phoenix rising from the ashes—the “real” identity emerging from the death (burning away) of the symbolic and the imaginary? The real subject emerges at the point that Samson’s two pillars of the symbolic and the imaginary fall leaving an analyst with the human being subject. What Gunn suggests as psychosis here may in fact be the vanishing real. It is the repetition of the decayed ideal and its forced resurrection from the failed foundation of the denial of *our* lack. This is what answers the 9/11 spectatorial desire in his analysis of Spielberg—the validation of spirit as pure spiritual parallax. In other words, all of these ideological moving parts create a sense of depth because they can so easily be conceived of as layers.



In fact, Gunn (2008a) creates the opening for this common reality of subjective movement through the different fatherly identities:

The figure of the mother is invoked here in terms of her prohibitive function: Ray sarcastically acknowledges his lack of authority by referring to the true parental power. In other words, in the opening diageitic space of the film, the mother represents the symbolic father. The plot is thus announced as a process of substitution: how will Ray escape his status has the bad father to replace the mother as the representative of the law? (p. 11)

Gunn opens up the possibility for both subjectivities to find their selves in the movement through the imaginary, symbolic, and real with each representing a passage of deterioration. The mother doesn't only play the role of authority, she also represents the ideal in the wake of a real absence. Ray is caught up in the subjective desire to fill this very same absence even as he is always threatened by his inevitable failure. Both are supposed to be doing the holding for their subjective spawn (their two kids) and both are trapped in the dilemma of their denial of that impossible task. They are caught up in the belief that they must be subjects for the subjects that they brought into the subjective frame.

In further agreement with this logic, Gunn (2008a) argues:

In life, the primal father was powerful and was the law. However, in death he became even more powerful, for life is no longer a pre-condition for demands. For Lacan, this ghostly father that rules from beyond the grave is really no person at all (he is dead, after all), but the function of signification as such. What the myth of the primal horde and the dead father teaches us is that even if imaginary and real fathers represent the law, they cannot be or fully embody the law; the primal father was killed at the moment his corpse became the metaphor for the law of exogamy. In more common parlance, Lacan's understanding of the symbolic father as a legislative function articulates the 'rule of law': that no-one is above or beyond the law, including those who claim to represent it. (p. 10)

Embedded in Gunn's argument is the failure of the real subject as well as the imaginary and symbolic because the real subject cannot attain the status of either in its

epistemological search for ontological validation. Most importantly, this threesome locates the vanishing point, the constituent signifiers standing in for the uncertainty signified, and the viewer point that also vanishes within the calculation of subjectivity. Out of this inherently psychotic sense of repudiation, Gunn's (2008a) contention that "*War of the Worlds* can be read as a negotiation of the anxieties of subjectivity itself at multiple levels" as is clear in that "the father-imagō of Ray is fashioned to help audiences negotiate social anxiety about the paternal function and to accept the Law, even if its representative—or, rather, especially because its representative—is a flawed human being, a former dead-beat" (p. 13) can be escalated. By escalation, I mean that we might continue to desexualize this essentialist understanding of the subject and begin to imagine the commonality of the neurosis and psychosis held within all subjective proclamations.

As Burke (1969b) morbidly makes clear, "an adolescent, eager to 'grow up,' is trained by our motion pictures to meditate much on the imagery of brutality and murder, as the most noteworthy signs of action in an ideal or imaginary adult world" (pp. 17-18). Gunn's insistence to maintain the language of Lacan and Freud is merely filmic reification of psychoanalysis's sexist bite that one might muzzle. All cuteness aside, following Gunn's findings leads to a very helpful way of furnishing a rapidly deteriorating methodization of the vanishing point through these vanishing fathers qua subjectivity.

For the rhetorical purposes of this method, Burke's (1969b) discussion of a few classical classifications of rhetorical form based on Aristotle and Cicero (and taught by Quintilian) are also helpful—namely, Burke lists Aristotle's classifications (deliberative, forensic, and demonstrative/epideictic), and both Cicero's "offices" (to teach, to please,

to move or “bend”) and styles (grandiloquent, plain, and tempered) in the context of past, present, and future (pp. 69-78). At the beginning of this particular area of analysis, he further contextualizes these classification arguing, “Considered broadly, in terms of *address*, an audience can have three primary purposes in listening: to hear advice about the future, or to pass judgment on some action in the past, or merely for the sake of interest in a speech or subject as such.” (Burke, 1969b, p. 70) Mapping this basic logic of the rhetor and the audience out, there is a clear emergent pattern that that can also be understood as making up the rhetorical structure of the subject (Table 1).

Table 1: Rhetorical Structure of the Subject

Imaginary – Future – Deliberative – Grandiloquent – To Please
Symbolic – Past – Forensic – Tempered – To Teach
Real – Present – Epideictic/Demonstrative – Plain – To Move/Bend

The subject in this structure represents both the individual audience member and the rhetor. Additionally, I have added the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real to offer further context to the subject positions. The imaginary rhetorical subject is not yet constituted. It is deliberating about itself for the future emergence and attempting to entice others into its identification. The symbolic rhetorical subject has been encoded and transmits its historical emergence through careful repetition. The real rhetorical subject attempts to throw off the pre-tense of appropriate code in order to get to the heart of the *matter*.

Barthes (1972) is also helpful in discussion of “the reader of the myth” in which he outlines the three subjects of myth production: the “producer,” the “decipherer,” and the “reader” (p. 128). Combining the logic of the deliberating rhetorical subject with “producer” of mythic texts offers a creative sense of subjectivity that I label the

“Authorial Subject” because this iteration of the subject portends to write its own narrative into the future out of nothing but itself. The “decipherer” is also the critic and the one who then professes the word. In the forensic domain, the “decipherer” also takes on the corrective activities of one who has been authorized to do so. Thus, the symbolic subject is the “Authorized Subject.” Here, the symbolic emerges as the process of forced signification—authority. Herein lies the precise space of epistemological subjectivity that effaces the ontological lack within the Imaginary and the Real. This effacement is the work of the authorized subject as the normative navigator and ultimately failed symbolic master of the symbolic. Last, Barthes’ “reader” connects the real to embodied constituency as his reader qua destination. It is the “Constituent Subject”—the plain fleshing out of subjectivity whose very body suggests the metaphor for the subject. Table 2 displays the added elements to the rhetorical subject.

Table 2: Rhetorical Structure of the Vanishing Subject

Authorial Subject – Imaginary – Future – Deliberative – Grandiloquent – To Please  
(Early Trauma – Defense – Birth)

Authorized – Symbolic – Past – Forensic – Tempered – To Teach  
(Outbreak of Neuroses)

Constituent – Real – Present – Epideictic/Demonstrative – Plain – To Move/Bend  
(Early Trauma – Partial Return of the Repressed Material – Death)

Of course, there are several other elements in this second table including the addition of the word “vanishing.” The new elements within the structure of the vanishing subject are intended to play out the deterioration that is at work in driving lack of the

subject. Barthes (1981), in his way, spells out the social functioning of the vanishing subject in his further discussion of *studium*:

The *studium* is a kind of education (knowledge and civility, ‘politeness’) which allows me to discover the *Operator*, to experience the intentions which establish and animate his practices, but to experience them ‘in reverse,’ according to my will as a *Spectator*. It is rather as if I had to read the Photographer’s myths in the Photograph, fraternizing with them but not quite believing in them. These myths obviously aim (this is what myth is for) at reconciling the Photograph with society (is this necessary?—Yes, indeed: the Photograph is *dangerous*) by endowing it with *functions*, which are, for the Photographer, so many alibis. These functions are: to inform, to represent, to surprise, to cause to signify, to provoke desire. And I, the *Spectator*, I recognize them with more or less pleasure: I invest them with my *studium* (which is never my delight or my pain). (p. 28)

While a bit confusing, the “Photograph” itself can be understood as the authorial subject and the “Photographer” as “Operator” can stand in for the authorized subject. Placed in the context of the following passage and the suggestion of the vanishing subject, something interesting happens:

It can happen that I am observed without knowing it, and again I cannot speak of this experience, since I have determined to be guided by the consciousness of my feelings. But very often (too often, to my taste) I have been photographed and knew it. Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing,’ I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. (p. 10)

The “consciousness of my feelings” is like the consciousness of signifiers. In this fascinating moment, he’s describing the process of *moving* from real (constituent) subject to symbolic (authorized) to imaginary (authorial) in a reversal of the map. But that is precisely the point, to articulate this failure. Punctum occurs in and as the failure of this transformation, which seems to rupture disconstituency when it actually, ultimately, affirms it.

In fact, one can see Barthes’ (1981) photographic subject desiring the creation of the vanishing point again and again. Shortly after the above point, he goes on stating,

“But since what I want to have captured is a delicate moral texture and not a mimicry, and since Photography is anything but subtle except in the hands of the very greatest portraitists, I don’t know how to work upon my skin from within” (p. 11). At the point of the real, the subject reaches for the ideal because the real does not hold the subject in the way it thinks it should be held. The subject encounters the same failures in the painting in its self. Barthes lends himself “to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing, but (to square the circle) this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality” (pp. 11-12). Again, Barthes captures the Real, if not the Encounter. And, in so doing, he captures its deterioration. Otherwise put, Barthes (1978a) announces the constituent subject as not that which constitutes the viewer, but that which constitutes the text in his argument that “this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he’s simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted” (p. 148). This unconscious reality, for the subject, is the abject reality of suffering.

Kristeva (1982), in classic psychoanalytic fashion, announces the narration of early formational trauma:

The scene of scenes is here not the so-called primal scene but the one of giving birth, incest turned inside out, flayed identity. Giving birth: the height of bloodshed and life, scorching moment of hesitation (between inside and outside, ego and other, life and death), horror and beauty, sexuality and the blunt negation of the sexual.” (p. 155)

More bluntly, she captures the “stench of me” as evoked by Céline’s articulation of the mother giving birth to the failed subjectivity, “When Céline locates the ultimate of abjection—and thus the supreme and sole interest of literature—in the birth-giving scene,

he makes amply clear which fantasy is involved: something *horrible to see* at the impossible doors of the invisible—the mother’s body” (p. 155). As problematic as this is, as Céline is, the evocative image normalizes the traumatic recurrence of abjection. It announces a truth about the real body in the subjective frame. Our bodies tell many of us a lot about ourselves that we do not like.

Barthes (1981) argues, “ ‘myself’ never coincides with my image; for it is the image which is heavy, motionless, stubborn (which is why society sustains it), and ‘myself’ which is light, divided, dispersed; like a bottle imp, ‘myself’ doesn’t hold still” (p. 12). As Elkins (1996) clarifies, “Vision is not a simple act of volition. We want to see, but we cannot; we try not to see, and we see in spite of ourselves; we try to see everything, and we see next to nothing. Seeing is not easy: it is not easy to do, it is not easy to control, and it is certainly not easy to understand” (p. 124).

Diana Sands’ (2009) tripartite model of suicide bereavement offers a way of thinking about what hides in the parentheses in Table 2. The disconstituent does not undo us without our help. We try on the disconstituent’s shoes. We walk around in the disconstituent’s shoes. And we take off the disconstituent’s shoes. Or, at least we try. Like Sands’ model, the vanishing method of regarding the disconstituent moves from one position to another in a nonlinear fashion but can be articulated separately as if by stages. Following Freud’s traumatic outline, the method fails at each point to hold still. The analyst, or brother, tries on the shoes only to find them impossible to fill. As Sands’ notes, it is all too shattering and too irrational to imagine. Thus, even with the shoes that cannot be filled, the survivor analyst attempts to meticulously piece everything together “Like a forensic investigator” only to fail once again and again (Sands, pp. 13-14).

Finally, the lost analyst can only remove the shoes in the effort of trying to “move on” with living. But even this can only fail because too much of the emptiness in *these* shoes has been revealed. But, then, there is always the Zen master’s withdrawal, shoe atop his head.

The final three chapters elaborate upon each deterioration, each subjective suicidal departure. While each element can be found in each artifact, each chapter will only focus upon the primary deterioration of its regard. Chapter 4 will focus on the deterioration of the authorial subject into the state of disconstituency. Chapter 5 will focus on the authorized subject’s participation in both constitutive and disconstitutive rhetoric. And Chapter 6 will focus on constituent subjects’ relationships with disconstituent individuals. As a definitional aid, the disconstituent is the lost persona which is lost to and by the subjective practices of identification. Disconstitutive rhetoric is false interrogation and false confession that creates the state of disconstituency which inhabits the regarded disconstituent.



## CHAPTER 4: GUS VAN SANT'S *LAST DAYS*

What makes the authorial subject so simultaneously threatening in its tyranny and hopeful in its control is that it is not entirely impossible to conceive of it. It is “the concept” itself. It is made plausible through the image, through the imagined interiority of the subject, the soul. The Christ structure offers a hint about this: “Cast as the ultimate stand-in, Christ had already given his body to the script, a script that had him say, ‘This is my body, take and eat,’ in an effort to dissolve the boundary between a divine body and a fallen one” (Phelan, 1997, p. 28). Here, Phelan makes an important observation that falls into place with the overall structure. Namely, the Christ story is preordained by the trauma of the social itself. Christ never was the subject of his own body. Christ was a spirit hitching a ride in his body *for us*. It is believable because there is *something* to it that seems to stand apart from the symbolic and the real as a disembodied divination. It requires imagination because it is an assumption prior to realization. Dr. Lanny Berman, former executive director of the American Association of Suicidology explains, “Suicidal people have transformation fantasies and are prone to magical thinking like children and psychotics” (Friend, 2003). Unless everyone is suicidal, this logic is not specifically suicidal at all and is deeply shared on a massive scale. However, a suicide can force the surrounding subjects into a state in which the magical and transformative foundations of their identification structures crumble.

Imagination, in and of itself, offers the subject the illusion of both singularity and agency. The ability to simulate the images in one’s head in the plane of symbolic exchange subjectively demonstrates creative power. It suggests that, prior to the subject’s ability to manipulate the world around it, there is something that conceives the possibility

of that manipulation—in short, the assumption of genius. This is the idea, the idea of “genius,” at the heart of Barthes’ authorial critique—the “Author” with the authorial powers of creative genius that he kills off. The space of the authorial subject, the domain of the ideal image of the subject as constituted in the imagination, serves as the foundational state for disconstitutive rhetoric and the disconstituent—the state of disconstituency. Chapter 4 explores this particular point in the vanishing structure of the rhetorical subject as the authorial subject deteriorates into both the symbolic and the state of disconstituency in the example of Gus Van Sant’s (2005a) film *Last Days*. Whereas the authorial subject is defined by the imaginary, future-oriented, pleasure-driven, grandiloquent deliberation of the subject, the state of disconstituency is the parenthetical suicide pill of early traumatic birthing abjection and the primal attempt of a doomed defense.

*Last Days* is the final installment of what is informally known as Gus Van Sant’s “Death Trilogy,” which features three films based on tragically *real events* (Edelstein, 2005). Thematically, it could be argued that this trilogy is a reversal of the underlying order of this dissertation beginning with the constituent, or real, subject and ending with the authorial, or imaginary, subject. The first film, *Gerry* (Sant, 2002), reduces the subject of the film to its most base form of survival by following two friends on their tragic trek through the desert in which they completely lose their bearings. *Gerry*, in a performative gesture, brings the audience into this sense of lost bearings through various film techniques of parallax disorientation. In other words, there are several times when the viewer cannot tell whether the actors are coming or going, which character is leading or following, and if they are close to the viewer position (the camera) or far away from it.

It mirrors the idea of the leap that Lacan places in question with regard to the unconscious and the subject of the unconscious. Additionally, the audience is not given names for the two characters beyond their slang usage of “Gerry” referring to each other as “Gerry,” someone else as “Gerry,” and using it in various other grammatical positions along the lines of “Gerry up that mountain, Gerry.” In short, the subject is completely lost in this desert of the real. The film culminates in the two characters reduced to lying on the ground on the brink of dying. Their bodies, like Phelan’s bodies, have already begun to decay and disappear during their walk. Matt Damon’s character rolls on top of Casey Affleck’s character and strangles him to death. The assumption is that this is a mercy killing. But the actual traumatization is that a family arrives shortly after this to save the remaining character. He must live with his actions because he is saved, but not redeemed, and the audience can only watch as he is driven away from the desert presumably at the beginning of a very dark variation on survivor’s guilt.

The other two installments of the trilogy require less initial explanation because they are both based on well-known events. The second film, *Elephant* (2003), resembles the more familiar 1999 Columbine, Colorado massacre and follows several high school kids around on the day of the tragedy culminating in the massacre itself. The film is arguably an expression of the symbolic relations of the authorized (and yet to be authorized) in the way that it depicts teenage angst and conformity as related to authority figures in the guise of teachers, administrators, and dysfunctional parents as well as popular culture and localized kid culture. It teaches with a big stick. The anywhere-ness of the high school and the characters authorizes the trauma as one of identification—it visually screams, “this could be us” and “don’t be *not me*.” Everywhere, the viewer looks

for order to turn the inevitable away. But Van Sant resolutely allows his film to stand-in for the cultural trauma of Columbine in such a way that still allows the viewer to “move on” without the feeling of being implicated. Finally, there is *Last Days* (2005a), which, according to the closing credits, is “inspired in part by the last days of Kurt Cobain.” In other words, the film is inspired by the last days leading up to Cobain’s suicide.

Inspiration is itself a form of what is meant by the authorial subject as it is a component of conception. Obviously, the film is a realization of a concept, which means that it is operating within the symbolic representation of the concept through the activity of real people embodying roles for the eventual pleasure of an audience of real people playing their role as the individuated universal audience. That being said, the goal here is to suspend that reality in the same way that viewers often do as filmgoers and embrace the imaginary space at hand. *Last Days* is an excellent case study for this experiment because it so clearly aspires to *be* conceptual. In the DVD bonus feature, *The Making of GUS VAN SANT’S LAST DAYS* (Andrew, 2005), actor Lukas Haas states, “There’s no script, it’s literally all creation.” In the same short, the film’s producer, Danny Wolf, refers to the work as “pure presentation” and “not manipulative” (Andrew, 2005). This idea of ideation is repeated in various ways throughout the bonus material. These comments seem to be attempting to both glorify and explain Van Sant’s directorial vision—not just for this installment, but the entire trilogy. Each film is not simply inspired by the real events in a way one might find on the Lifetime Channel. Rather, they are all presented in a very realist documentarian style that reeks of unscripted improvisational acting. Both the audience and the performers are being asked to try on

the shoes. The audience is never clearly directed towards specific conclusions. The films are not meticulously forensic in its approach.

Van Sant works to create the effect of just being the silent passenger, the consciousness that creatively gazes. The camera follows the banality of the characters' lives in an almost cold and detached manner. It leads *us* as it follows *them*. It shows. The Director of Photography on all three films, Harris Savides, explains that the camera work and overall style of lingering shots requires an "active audience" (Andrew, 2005). It requires the viewing subjects to gaze their own gaze as the accompaniment to van Sant's. Gus Van Sant, himself, contends that his approach is attempting to subvert the "shorthand," the authorized symbolic gesturing, that is typical in film making in order to encourage the viewer to "really watch what it is" in such a way "as if you were in the car" (Edelstein, 2005, p. 1). Specifically, Van Sant is likely referencing a couple of very lengthy camera shots in a couple of cars at the beginning and end of *Gerry*, but the idea remains true for the other films and the overall approach. It is not the car that is important; rather it is the idea of being in a car as the viewing subject is driven towards and away from a site of untimely death. It is a remarkably literal approach to the death drive as a form of finding what a thing is in its end. So, from top to bottom, *Last Days* and its filmic siblings are explicitly deviating from the more traditional, authorized, oeuvre of movie making in that they attempt to actively force all players into the inspirational, conceptual, or authorial role—to simply be or be with the idea in a participatory creative manner. But, Van Sant is inviting the viewer to gaze into the vanishing point in such a way that the viewer is actively within the gaze while not being able to act out the gaze within the frame. The viewer is only allowed to imagine.

Cobain serves as both the “primal father” and the “lost persona.” On the obvious level, the disclaimer in the end credits directly states that the film is “in part” based on him just as every description of the film does, whether you are looking at the back of the DVD case or at the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) entry. Interestingly, Van Sant *seems* to be attempting to lose Cobain’s persona in his creation of a lost persona. But there is also the image (Figure 3) on the cover of the DVD, promotional poster, and IMDb entry. It is the same image at every entry point. If you are at all familiar with Kurt Cobain and Nirvana, then the hair, beard stubble, and sunglasses immediately scream at you. Reading the image in combination with the words of the title, “Last Days,” the casual observer is immediately sent on the imaginary adventure of Cobain’s suicide. On the DVD, beneath the title, there is also the added future-oriented caption, “Rock and roll will never die.” Michael Pitt, the actor in the image, reciprocally gazes at the viewer point from behind those *characteristic* sunglasses as though they are the latent sheen between the viewers’ sense of reality and the filmic fantasy. They are latent in that they give the viewer the chance to imagine rather than confront what’s behind them. They allow for individuated nostalgia for a fashioned past. They hover in the awakening gap without forcing the gap into view by remaining as a blind spot. Further along these lines, the primary film locations are a large house in the woods and an accompanying detached studio that are reminiscent of the images in the journalistic aftermath of Cobain’s actual suicide. The connotation of Cobain’s suicide story is virtually inescapable in the way that the film and the audience reciprocally linger on these images.

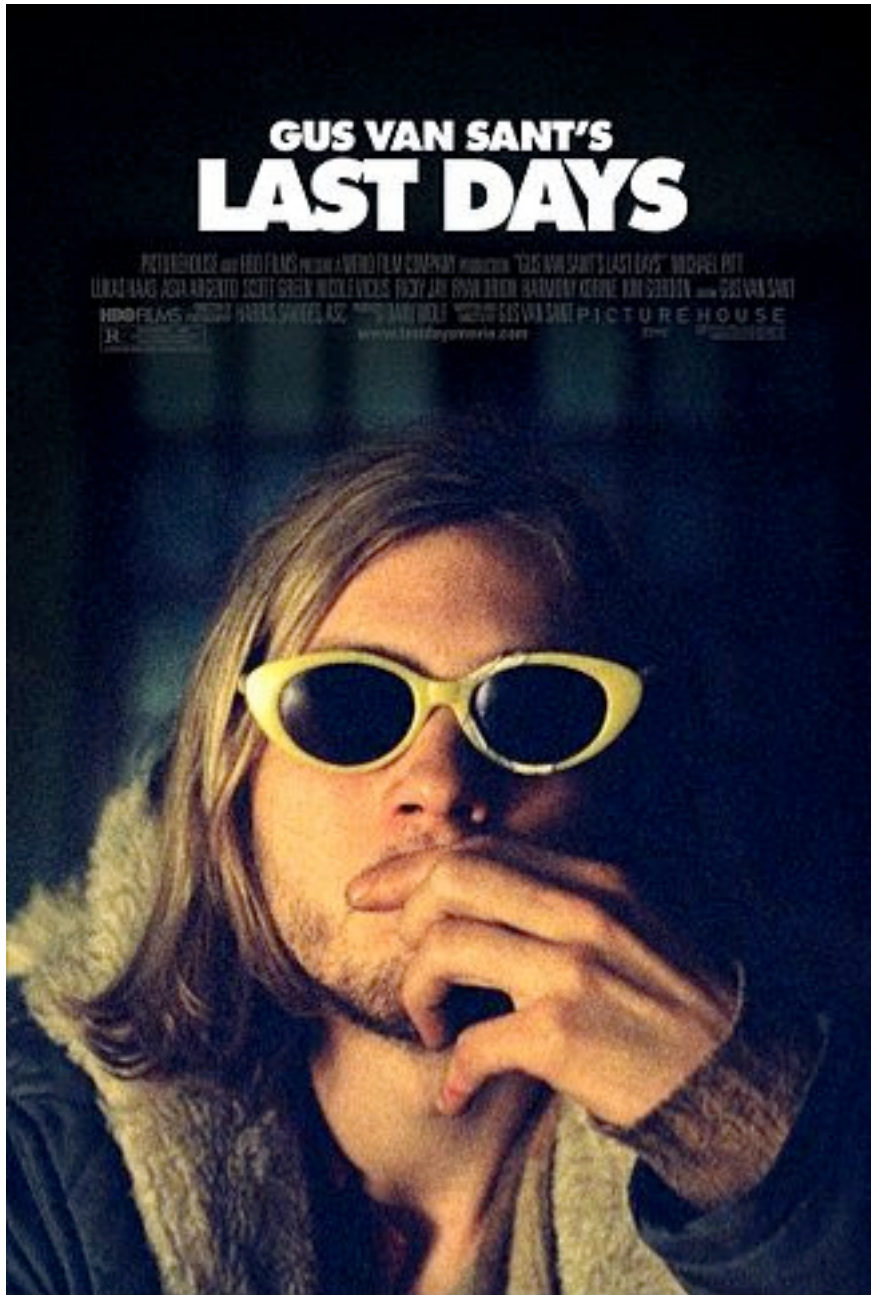


Figure 3 Theatrical Poster for Gus Van Sant's (2005b) *Last Days*

All of these images, though, are connotative. This is an important clarification in this analysis because it also demarcates a point of departure from the implied past of the film. The film, itself, always drives towards an inevitable future suicide and its aftermath based on that implied past, but that implied past is not necessarily what the film shows. Again, Van Sant's directorial approach is not meticulously forensic. As the full

aforementioned disclaimer in the credits attests, “Although this film is inspired in part by the last days of Kurt Cobain, the film is a work of fiction and the characters and events portrayed in the film are also fictional” (Sant, 2005a). Michael Pitt is not playing the role of “Kurt Cobain;” he is playing the role of “Blake.” “Blake” looks like the idea of Cobain, and the cast of surrounding characters also compliments the “Grunge” idea of the norm subversion surrounding Cobain as well as certain persons of interest in the investigation of Cobain’s suicide. However, none of these characters are any of those things.

In fact, there is another wrinkle. While Michael Pitt’s character is named “Blake,” most of the other primary characters follow a different pattern: Lukas Haas plays the role of “Luke,” Scott Green plays “Scott,” Nicole Vicius plays “Nicole,” and Asia Argento plays “Asia.” Clearly, the characters’ names, their nominally identifying symbols, in the film are not as important as the idea of the characters. Furthermore, there is very little dialogue to carve out specificity of characterization throughout the film. In two of the more revealing dialogic character moments, the content has as much to do with the actors’ lives as it does with the characters’. First, there’s “Scott’s” talk with “Blake” in which “Scott” asks for money and a “jet engine heater” to heat up the large house in the woods. As we learn in the bonus feature, this was a semi-joking request made by Scott Green in his complaint about the actual house being cold, and Van Sant and Green decided to include it in “Scott’s” lines. “Luke,” while requesting help on writing lyrics to a song, tells a story to “Blake” about a woman “Luke” jilted in Japan. And this story, as we again find out in the bonus feature, is taken right out of Lukas Haas’s life. The actors



are only trying on the shoes without committing to the specificity of those shoes. In short, the film is not a reproduction. It is better understood as a deliberative repetition.

The film is, in fact, very elliptically deliberative. It is a group of individuals collectively and individually *thinking* through a situation that can never truly be resolved. There are two groups of individuals seeking this impossible resolution. First, there are the cast members, crewmembers, and audience members, who are the subjects of Van Sant's experiment, thinking through the situation. Second, there are the characters, the *other subjects* of Van Sant's film, thinking through the situation as well. As Van Sant puts it, "the movie is about putting you in the moment with a man who has lost all sense of time – whose grip on the present is 'decomposing'" (Edelstein, 2005, p. 2). Here, again, Van Sant drives the viewers towards a future death by specifically attempting to "decompose" the present. This is why "early trauma" is part of both the state of disconstituency and disconstituent parenthetical underwriting of the authorial and the constituent subject positions. Both embark within the always already too soon, too early, trauma of the lost present. The future decomposes the present, and the present decomposes itself into the future.

Edelstein (2005) paraphrases Van Sant to argue that "the film is more of an abstract meditation on the loss of the natural world than it is about the real suicidal rock star" (p. 2). Further, like Phelan's redemptive meditation on the vanishing point, Van Sant's meditation is also an assumptive regard of "loss" that asks the viewer to consider it from the standpoint of an abstract condition along the lines of redemption. Additionally, the loss is the loss of the state of nature positing the present as a point of deterioration into a doomed future. The present that is lost in the future-oriented death drive is the

abjection of birthing—the messy gateway into being, or the attempt to depart from the *stench of not me*. As such, the viewer sees both the inspirational past and deliberative present decomposing in its death driven state of disconstituency into the *repetitive* future of a traumatized survival of loss. The “primal father” was not murdered by the horde, at least not directly; Kurt Cobain completed suicide. The authorial subject, “Blake,” will also complete suicide.

Before deteriorating the authorial subject further into a state of disconstituency, a quick review of the situation may be helpful. Namely, this is a good point to clarify the authorial subject as a point within the subjectification of this film. All of the characters are vaguely reminiscent of other role players in the implied “real” past. While the viewer of the film *and* the bonus feature is given a sense of how each character was born for the film, each birthing can never actually be seen or even completely recalled as anything more specific than a procession of events built upon layers of repetitions. The viewer may very well project a sense of “it must have been like this” onto a great deal of the basis of this film, but this can only ever be a projection. This is not just a commentary on the film, but also a commentary on the formation of the authorial subject in general. Our own human births are very much like the “births” of these characters. To take that idea a bit further, many subjects think of themselves as authorial at some point in their lives in that there is a Lukas Haas creating and orchestrating the character, “Luke,” as he goes about his life, and that this authorial creative action began at the moment of the individual’s birth. But, the fantasy of the film is not simply the idea of the actors controlling their fates. Rather, the fantasy of the film is that *all* subjects can deliberately create and control this world that they will encounter because of the fantasy that other

people did it in the past. There is another fantasy worth observing: the fantasy that this film is somehow more real than other movies and that the viewer is being driven towards that reality. This fantasy mirrors the subjective experience in which the subject suspects, or magically believes, there is something more real down the road.

But, then, why not “Mike?” Why did Michael Pitt play the role of “Blake” instead? Pitt thinks it is an “arrogant” idea that he would somehow “understand Cobain more by playing Blake” and that the importance of the lack of specificity to the names and time within the film, to Pitt, is about allowing “people to look at a human being in that situation” in a similar vein to Van Sant’s *Car* (Canavese, 2005). But, the distance between “Mike” and “Blake” is less readily available. There is, though, a distance. At one point in the film, “Blake” plays a song on an acoustic guitar that is eerily reminiscent of Cobain’s voice. It reminds me of my own drooling strums on a guitar and what I might imagine a rehearsal for Nirvana’s “Unplugged” session to resemble. The lyrics of the song, at least what the viewer/auditor can make out, also reflects the filmic situation at hand as well as the dark, murky spiritual core of a youthful angst found in a large portion of Cobain’s own lyrics. If you listen closely, you can make out phrases such as “last gasp left,” “should I die again,” and something about “tears.” More clearly, the viewer/auditor can make out what seems to be a chorus, “it’s a long lonely journey from death to birth” that ultimately builds to the words, “I know I’ll never know until I come face to face with my own cold dead face.” These lyrics are remarkable representations of the both the project of the film and the project of this dissertation. At this point in the film, the first time I watched it, I felt like I was witnessing brilliantly “in-tune” character work. I thought, “Here was the genesis point of the creative genius. This is what happens when

you ask a great actor to channel the biographical spirit of an artist. This is how the idea of a song appears.”

At another point in the film, the camera watches from outside through the window of the in-home music studio—the detached studio is a studio in the sense of an architecturally open space rather than music production. Through the window, the viewer can see “Blake,” presumably, moving from instrument to instrument. It seems that the viewer/auditor can hear what’s happening musically in the room. It sounds as if “Blake” is somehow adding each instrument to a layered, or looped, recording. Out of the initial chaos, like Burke’s mystery into order, a possible song begins to emerge. All of the disconnected sonic elements mimic a type of invocatory identification within the gaze from the external viewer point. However, Helder Filipe Gonçalves (2009) argues that the sounds that we hear are in fact non-diegetic, meaning not being produced by what viewers are seeing in the film, and that the soundscape may very well be meant to represent what’s happening in the character’s mind (p. 7). Once again, Van Sant is inviting the viewer to contemplate the imaginary and to participate in his authorial vision. In fact, a great deal of the film operates with a non-diegetic soundscape approach. One hears bells, doors opening and closing, and voices throughout that have no clear source other than perhaps an abstract representation of some internality. It is as if Van Sant wants the audience to imagine what life is like inside the mind of a mad genius. Or, in terms of Freud’s burning child dream, the sounds may simply be remnants of past events in “Blake’s mind” caught in a mental loop. The specifics, again, are not as important as the idea of “Blake’s mind.”

There is a remarkable disconnection here. The viewer watches, or follows, a muttering character around with a strange soundscape as a sort of internal guide that seems to have nothing to do with what is being seen. In other words, much of what viewers are seeing is also what the character is seeing, and what auditors are hearing is possibly representative of what the character is thinking and has nothing to do with what the character is seeing as far as the audience can know. On the one hand, the viewer might imagine this to be along the lines of a musical genius being able to hear something other than the immediate soundscape in his or her mind in such a way that makes sense of that immediate soundscape on a higher level than the ordinary world listener. On the other hand, the viewer might imagine the character to be so lost in his genius thoughts that he is oblivious to his immediate soundscape, which would certainly represent a common conception of genius as well. Further, this latter view syncs up quite well with the idea that this film is about society's overall loss of the natural world—that even when subjects are immersed in nature subjects can no longer connect with it. But, then, are the viewers and characters even seeing the natural world at all? Is what is caught up in the collective gaze natural? It is certainly not real. Even if the audience imagines these thoughts to be “Blake’s,” these are not the thoughts of Pitt. Even if these sounds happen in the audience members’ heads in thoughtful ways, these are not their own creation. Indeed, many of these sounds, which are largely from Hildegard Westerkamp’s soundscape composition entitled “Doors of Perception,” were not even made for this film (Jordan, 2007, pp. 4-5). In other words, any connections, or encounters, are only arranged and imagined. Van Sant is bringing his audience into the precise experience of

missing, and the miss is unavoidable whether the subject keeps regarding or renegotiates its position by turning the film off and looking away.

Even the aforementioned song sung by Pitt qua Blake qua Cobain is merely an arranged, imaginary, and thus missed encounter. It is easy to be fooled by the realistic camera gaze into believing that Pitt is inventing something right then and there within the character of “Blake.” Even if it took more than one take, the thought of this is impressive. But, if anyone really wants to know the actual and full lyrics, anyone can find them associated with Pitt’s band, Pagoda, because Pitt wrote this song several years before the making of *Last Days* (Canavese, 2005). Further, Canavese (2005) observes that Pitt was reluctant to use this song in the film because, as Pitt says, “it was mine.” Whether or not the song was ever about suicide, the connection to Cobain’s suicide, like everything else in the film, is once again inescapable. The idea of individual genius deteriorates within the gravitational pull of the tyranny of Cobain’s suicide. The fucking genius killed himself. Nothing is original, not even the Pixies. Even Cobain’s adult, heroin drenched, parental suicide is lost in the currency of Christian Slater movies as nothing more than teenage angst with “Wave of Mutilation” (1989) playing in the background. For those unfamiliar, “Wave of Mutilation” is a song by the group Pixies and is featured in the movie, *Pump Up the Volume* (1990), which also feature Christian Slater. The point here is that the distance between “Mike” and “Blake” is the desire for distance, for division, in the midst of identification. It is the desire for distance in the guise of close attention, the subject’s renegotiation of its regard. The state of disconstituency is the state in which the myth of the authorial subject inescapably deteriorates, the point at which the individual qua subject can no longer be a voluntary or active participant in identification because the

resident rift has been irrevocably revealed as the emptiness of the subject. For Michael Pitt identify with *this* lost persona, *this* disconstituent, is to ultimately risk becoming suicidal himself. To identify with *this* suicidal ideation is to acknowledge that what others identify within the subject does not exist and that the subjective future within this identification is always already doomed. To identify with this is to be in a state of disconstituency—to arrive upon an encounter that suggests that the only real option is to withdraw from a social body that the subject finds itself incapable of satisfying as an interpretive being.

*Last Days* is a powerful expression of this state. The viewer can never settle into the subject of its gaze because the object is only ever imagined—it is the big hole that is the lost persona. The film is a vanishing point that vanishes within the viewer point. It reflects back the emptiness of the viewer's identification as projected onto the screen because the film was never that which it appears to be; and, yet, its appearance cannot be denied. All of the subjects are doomed to fail. The viewer is haunted and driven by what is shown and sonically invoked even as what is being seen and heard is not and never was what it interpretively is. It is not simply a reflection on a man's loss of the natural world, nor is it the story of Kurt Cobain's suicide, because even those who experience or experienced them can only ever imagine these things. The film opens and closes with The King's Singers' version of "La Guerre," which is a celebratory song written in the remembrance of a French military victory over the Swiss, and the song culminates in the French soldiers exclaiming, "Victoire," and a Swiss mercenary lamenting, "All is lost by God" (Janequin, 2008). Just as the song captures the victory and failure that is survival and death, so, too, does the film, rotten with perfection, capture Burke's violent notion of

identification. There is no way out for “Blake” except the inevitable suicide. There is no way out of this for any of *us*.

This narrative of inevitable suicide plays out even as the viewer leaves behind the promotional poster, DVD cover, or film description. When the detached studio comes into view, the bells in the soundscape and possible interior of the mind crescendo like a Pavlovian arousal of an appetite for the suicidal sacrifice—the false confession of *me not not me*. Lo! There it is! “Blake” emerges with a shovel, perhaps a magical one, as if to dig his own grave in this death drive of a movie. But, he does not dig a grave. Instead, the viewer is led to believe that he has dug up a box of shotgun shells protectively contained within a plastic bag that had been previously buried. The objectivity of the past is dug up as a predictable reminder of the chiming future like an old black and white photograph. Then he has the shotgun “itself.” In what appears to be a woman’s undergarment, he answers a phone and hears a voice pressuring him to go on tour, “86 dates...world is gonna fall apart on this....you gotta play the dates.” This is the first time the audience hears the name, “Blake,” but it is already too late to save him. He has been forcibly identified as the person everyone knows he is. He wanders around the mostly empty house dressed like Elmer Fudd dragging an identity around, hauling the subject, and pointing *this* gun at the other characters performing sleep. He is a dream. Like a child, he makes the gun noise with his mouth as he pretends to shoot. But, “Blake” is not a murderer. He is a metaphorical rape victim and the fans and producers, *us* viewers and reviewers, are the metaphorical rapists. One knows this from the Cobain’s (1993b) song, “Rape Me.” We empathize as we sing along with “me.” “Smells Like Teen Spirit” reeks of the stench of *not me* as it demands, “Here we are now, entertain us,” and “Load up on



guns” (Nirvana, 1991). Cobain (1993a) sings, “Throw down your umbilical noose so I can climb right back.” Blake serenades, “It’s a long lonely journey from death to birth.” But, of course, only one of these lyrics is happening in this film.

In arguably the most realistic moment in the film, “Blake” interacts with Thaddeus Thomas. Thomas, not in quotation marks, is a *real* phonebook sales representative who happened to show up at the house during the filming of the movie (Andrew, 2005). In this interaction, Thomas asks “Blake” if he would like to renew an ad in the phonebook for a locomotive parts shop that presumably has something to do with the actual previous owner of the house. Who’s going to walk away from this train wreck? When Thomas asks about the success of the original ad, “Blake” responds by saying, “success is subjective.” When asked about any partners, “Blake” says he has none, and Thomas concludes their conversation by suggesting, “you should achieve the same level of success” and “see you next Tuesday.” It is a remarkable exchange of lies. Later, “Blake” is writing something down out loud. He says, “I lost something on my way to wherever I am today. I remember when...” He repeats the last part as if stuck, as if not remembering. These are not words taken from Cobain’s suicide note, but they sound like a suicide note when you know it’s a suicide note. It sounds positively lost, which is very different from loss. We are all demanding something of him that he doesn’t have. Even a character, a record executive played by Sonic Youth’s Kim Gordon, who seems to be trying to help “Blake” forces an image on him and asks him if he wants to be a “rock and roll cliché” as she attempts to guilt him into going to rehab for the sake of his child. Be the imaginary father. Be the authorial subject. Don’t be real. Don’t choose the real option. Play with us. But, this is not just the authorial subject’s deterioration into a state of

disconstituency. This is also the authorial subject's deterioration into the symbolic that emerges from the latency of early trauma and defensive repression.

Finally, there is a traumatic gap in the film. At what could be considered the climax of the film, the viewer gazes *beside* "Blake" in the detached studio as the other characters leave the property in another car. "Luke" looks towards *us*, sees the living "Blake," maybe *us*. The next scene follows the gardener walking around the detached studio. The gardener looks through the glaze of the glass doors and sees the body, the corpse, lying there. There is no detail. Barthes might say, "How tasteful," as he sips his cup of studium. But, the punctum is there no matter how fervently Van Sant and the viewer might renegotiate this collective regard. The gardener, with *us* gazing alongside, watches as a naked and opaque Pitt climbs out of "Blake's" body and up an invisible ladder. Is it Jacob's Ladder? Was this all a dream caught in limbo? Who won the war? In the next scene, the other characters are at another home. "Scott" frantically says, "We're going to be implicated, they're going to say we were there." They drive away with "Luke" playing a song on his guitar in the back seat, a song that Lukas Haas is credited with writing.

Van Sant seems to tell the audience, and many conspiracy theorists, that they were, in fact, not there. More importantly, he seems to tell *us* that neither were *we*. Within his "meditation on the loss of the natural world," he is also telling *us* that *we* are never even here. However, Van Sant's choice of not showing the moment of suicide is more about the depth of our cultural disregard towards suicide than anything else. Michele Aaron (2014) argues that suicide is itself a cinematic vanishing point because suicide is so stigmatized that it is nearly impossible to show, let alone see (pp. 91-92). In

*Gerry*, the strangulation scene is intense and rather lengthy. It is suffocating. Equally disturbing is the massacre in *Elephant*. The viewer is not protected from the gory *details* of kids murdering kids and broken down adults. Both movies are gruesome in their executions. Everyone's vulnerability is laid bare. Yet, *Last Days* shields the viewing subject's regard from the coup de grâce and goes so far as to even provide the potential of escape in the form of life after death and a literal getaway car—all while the King's Singer's celebrate victory and its corresponding defeat as the camera safely watches, from a distance, investigators at the suicidal crime scene. If a suicide at the end of this death drive might tell us something about what it is, Van Sant would prefer to leave that to our imagination. And, maybe "Mike" is right. Perhaps anything more would be an arrogant effacement. Perhaps anything else would be as equally beside the point as *us*.

Van Sant's *Last Days* is a remarkable adventure into the state of disconstituency. It captures all of the elements of the authorial subject (imaginary, future, deliberative, grandiloquent, pleasure) and deteriorates each through an always already traumatic lost persona and primal father, defensive posturing of uncommitted shoes, and the abandonment of the messiness of birthing in the idea of a lost natural connection to the world. In the end, it leaves its viewers lost in the meaning of a victory song at the end of a death drive to self-abnegation. It leaves the viewing subjects gazing at the emptiness of the studio filled with Cobain's and Blake's suicide. The viewer has been shown *not me*, but the viewer is left without a clear path back to *me*. In short, Van Sant leaves *us* in a state of disconstituency wondering why *we* cannot see.

## CHAPTER 5: *VICE MAGAZINE'S* AND SYLVIA PLATH'S "LAST WORDS"

Bodies are only ideas in the imagination of the authorial subject even as they are the material that produces their ideation. Bodies are lost in the state of disconstituency even as they are the sites of this state. In the case of the disconstituent as a lost persona, the state of disconstituency inhabits the disconstituent within the gaze of those who regard it. In other words, when regarding a disconstituent, the state of disconstituency at the very least threatens to inhabit *you*. In the symbolic economy of the authorized subject, though, bodies begin to matter as the result of the menace of becoming meaningful, of signification. The authorized subject speaks in the place of lack as the symbolic materialization of identification. The authorized subject has been given symbolic authority, accreditation, and centrality, because the authorized subject is the symbolic substitution for both the impossible ideality of the authorial and the latent encounter with the real. It is the place of the traditional constitutive rhetoric because the individual is pushed to the margins, and as an outbreak of collective neuroses by way of enforced repression, also the place of disconstitutive rhetoric. While the battle of the authorized and credited versus the unauthorized and discredited plays out, the disconstituent, as well as the constituent, subject is caught somewhere in between. It is in the symbolic that authorized and unauthorized subjects reach towards one another through division and epistemological effacement.

This chapter focuses on the authorized subject as the point at which the authorial subject is symbolically replaced in the wake of its failure to be. Its features are symbolic, past-oriented and forensic, tempered by reason, and the realm of the lesson. Its parenthetical poison pill is its own outbreak of neurosis, which is to say the driving fear

of being undone. To return to the logic of the formative relationship between a child and a parental figure, this is the point at which the child recognizes on some level that neither it nor the parental figure or figures can live up to the ideal of truly creating or controlling reality. This is not necessarily a linear progression. The authorized subject is also the substitution for the constitutive subject, which is merely the false promise of a subjective, or objective, encounter with the real. As the functional substitution for the individually embodied subject, the authorized subject transcends both the authorial and constituent positions of the subject and diminishes the body to the existence of a symbol. To be authorized, it is not enough to interpretively be, one must also be interpreted as a correct interpretation. In other words, the authorized subject is not simply read as an accumulation of history, but also taught as an accumulation of history. The symbolic is always already built upon a past. As such, its analysis is not prescriptive. It is descriptive at best and always the postscript. It is the suicide note. At the point that constitutive rhetoric is recognized as also disconstitutive, the note is already, at the very least, being written. In fact, to even enter into the symbolic through “ritual transformation,” which is to say to enter into identification, is already “a kind of self-immolation” (Burke, 1969b, p. 11)

In his consideration of the classic butterfly dream in which Choang-tsu dreams of a butterfly and wakes up wondering whether the butterfly is dreaming him, Lacan (1978) concludes, “It is when he is awake that he is Choang-tsu for others, and is caught in their butterfly net” (p. 76). In other words, the symbolic, the realm operated by the authorized subject, is a subjective trap at the invocatory moment of identification designed to capture the authorial and constituent subject in a meaningful way that simultaneously expresses

and represses the butterfly as an embodied fantasy. To awaken within the social is to become trained in one's own gaze and to be read as a symbol for one's self. It is the place of competitive imitation resolved by the false confession. Within Barthes' strata of the readers of myths, the authorized subject is the critic and scholar—the corrective rhetor/writer and the corrective audience/reader.

It is from this understanding of the authorized subject that this chapter regards *Vice Magazine's* "Last Words" fashion spread with particular attention to its depiction of Sylvia Plath. Unlike *Last Days*, "Last Words" does not attempt nominal distance in its representation of the suicidal subject. There was no pretense of separation from the implied past beyond a rudimentary re-contextualization within a fashion aesthetic. As "VICE Staff" puts it, "'Last Words' is a fashion spread featuring models reenacting the suicides of female authors who tragically ended their own lives" (Staff, 2013c). Namely, these images are meant to represent whom the viewers think they are meant to represent. However, I cite "VICE Staff" here to immediately articulate the defensive posturing of the imaginary, or authorial, subject within the symbolic exchange because of its overt nature. The fashion spread outraged readers and activists. The reaction was so strong in its collective reprimand that the magazine felt forced to take the spread down from their website. "VICE Staff" is obviously not a person and the entire staff did not write the statement that has been given this byline. This byline stands in for the individuals as the imaginary sacrificial being. It is a collective self-mortification, rather than the complex of self-abnegation, in the absolute form of *not me*. The represented bodies of this staff are neatly packed into this identifying symbol in a way that expresses and represses them as

well as the unruly creative spirit that is the oeuvre of *Vice Magazine* as is clear in the way the statement continues:

The fashion spreads in VICE magazine are always unconventional and approached with an art-editorial point-of-view rather than a typical fashion photo-editorial one. Our main goal is create artful images, with the fashion message following, rather than leading. (Staff, 2013c)

In other words, the staff was being artistic, not realistic, and they did not mean anything by it. The models were elevated as artistic actors playing roles rather than the usual sexualized objects within the superficial fashion world. It was all just an idea. Further, they “will no longer display ‘Last Words’ on our website and apologize to anyone who was hurt or offended” (Staff, 2013c). One can see Staff’s logic at work in the images (Figure 4) *and* why many might find them offensive and hurtful. The “fashion message” does not “lead” in these disturbing images; rather the “fashion message” protects the viewing subject from these horrific images.

But, what is protecting the models. An interesting lack is the overall lack of concern for the models in all of the responses. Unlike Michael Pitt, these women committed, or were committed, to the graphic representations of their lost personae’s suicides. They completed the image. These women are professionals at completing photographs. Looking at their expressions in these photographs, they seem to have captured a remarkable weight of lack in their own performative regards. They are each caught somewhere between meditation and orgasm, both of which are tiny deaths. What abyss do they see? What subjects are they in these pictures and what subjects are they when they see these pictures? What does the subjunctive voice, the “what if,” mean to them? Being symbols, whether authorized or not, seems so easy for these practiced women.



Figure 4: Vice Magazine's (2013a) "Last Words": Novelist Sanmao (right) and writer Dorothy Parker (left)

In the context of Zelizer's (2004) subjunctive contingency and Barthes' (1981) studium and punctum, these images of these models performing are exceedingly fascinating. They do not capture the typical "about-to-die" moment that Zelizer outlines. No one is about to die in these images other than perhaps Barthes' sense of a photographic death. These images stand-in for the suicides they depict. What protects these models is the studium of fashion. For the viewer, the elements that give way to Barthes' "third meaning" as described by Zelizer are those informational and symbolic elements that are easily read. The viewer can know through captions and methods who is being depicted. The viewer can look at the fashion concept and outline an understanding of what the fashion is attempting to impart. The models are protected by the fact that they are not actually performing suicides; rather, they are performing fashion. What one might think is the punctum of these images is not. The blood, the noose (Figure 4), even the



about-to-ness of the oven (Figure 5) of these images are the readable codes for whom is being depicted. The punctum, the contingency that disturbs the stillness of these images, that strikes me as a viewer is the eyes of the models. Whether closed in an almost cathartic pleasure, lost in a reflection on everything that has lead to the noose, or intently staring into the infernal machine, there is the hint of internalized performance in these models' eyes that invites the viewer to take the very same journey that these models *contingently* may be taking.



Figure 5: Vice Magazine's (2013b) "Last Words": Sylvia Plath

But, for the sake of poetic efficiency and elliptical depth, this chapter focuses on Sylvia Plath's image in order to elaborate upon the way in which the authorized subject is able to remain embodied yet safely beyond being real. For the vast majority of my adult life, I have thought of Plath as something like the ultimate punk rock heroine without really being familiar with her work. This is because of my association of the idea of her

with the simple fact of her suicide in the context of a vague understanding of her confessional style of poetry. In my mind, she was just speaking truth to power. But, then, I had only read “Daddy.” Her image (Figure 5) in the Vice spread made me reconsider my regard of her.

As I subjectively gaze at this model qua Sylvia, Kryn’s suicide looms. Everything in this photograph is only a single symbol. It is normativity turned on itself. She gazes into the machinations of the normative “housewife” role as she prepares to leap headfirst into the void. I think of my brother’s note, his honest confession. I vaguely remember my father reading it to us in a hotel room. It always seemed final to me, and I’ve never returned to it until now. It’s written in a green notebook with not much else. It is dated “December 19.” He hanged himself on December 21, 1988. It reads as follows:

Dear Dad,

If you read this letter it will mean that I succeeded. It was for the best Dad. I loved you and Mom very much. It is just that my life ended a long time ago. All I have known for the last 3 ½ months, actually since Tulane is fear and anxiety. I am already dead. It is time to die. I hope God will forgive me. I still believe in God and I hope that sinners like me do get to heaven. Please explain to Ann and Chas that I was sick as indeed I am. It had nothing to do with them. I will always love all of you. You gave me the best of everything and I felt loved always. Please tell Whitney, Whitman, Thomas, Mike and Chuck how much they meant to me also (Womelsdorf, 1988)

There is no period at the end. There is no signature. It just stops. Rather, the note gazes just before it leaps. The note authorizes the suicide. All one has to do is watch crime dramas long enough to know that the note closes the case. It had nothing to do with us. But, of course, that is a lie. That is merely a symbolic gesture. Within Kryn’s symbolic gesture, the authorized subject and its outbreak stands out. As he looked into his death driven future, he was consumed by an anxious past that passed a judgment on his crime, his original sin, of *not me*. Kryn was still bound up in the magical thinking of a normative

God-creator. He was sick of *us*. He understood the importance of meaning, even in his suicidality and felt the need, the demand, to offer how much people “meant.” Yet, his final act undid all of this meaning, all of *this* us.

Sylvia Plath’s final collection of poetry, *Ariel*, is the collection that made her into the mainstream symbol she is today (Kilkenny, 2014). Katie Kilkenny (2014) observes that “Sylvia Plath becomes herself” is how the collection was described at the time of its first publication. Plath herself wrote, “I am writing the best poems of my life. They will make my name” (Kilkenny, 2014). There’s an interesting ambiguity in “they.” Likely, Plath is referring to the poems alone, but there is also the possibility that the “they” represents future readers that would specifically include critics and scholars. “They” will not “make her.” They will “make her name.” “They” will make the symbol that stands in for her lost persona and decayed body. And it would appear that this symbol is what she aspires to become. Writing is, after all, a kind of suicide. The Sylvia Plath that stands in for Sylvia Plath, Sylvia Plath qua Sylvia Plath, *is* in the fashion spread.

However, the *Ariel* that made her name was not quite the *Ariel* that one could say she intended. Instead, the manuscript Plath left on her desk before killing herself was rearranged and amended with some other poems of Plath’s by her husband, Ted Hughes (Hughes, 2004, pp. xi-xii). According to Kilkenny (2014), Hughes was attempting “reflect his wife’s biographical arc” in such a way that culminated in a suicidal resolution. As retold by his and Plath’s daughter, Frieda Hughes (2004), Ted Hughes was just trying to make a good book with “a broader perspective in order to make it more acceptable to readers” (p. xvi). This is, itself, an interesting variation on Sands’ (2009) “walking” phase of the shoes. While it is a type of creative forensic piecing together of a

suicide narrative, its meticulous attention to detail is purely caught up in the symbolic. It is a corrective rationalization. However, as Sands describes this phase, it is in fact a way of negotiating “the blind spot that is the incomprehensibility at the core of suicide” (p. 13). The “incomprehensibility” must be rationalized *in order* to eventually get those shoes safely off.

Of course, this rationalized rearrangement of the sacred symbol, Sylvia Plath, created controversy. “Wintering,” the original ending to Plath’s manuscript as well as the accompanying “bee poems” according to what was left on the desk ended on a positive, even hopeful, note that looked forward into Spring, not the oven (Kilkenny, 2014). Taken together, however, these explanations and reactions reveal a fascinating point. Ted Hughes was simply adhering to form, because form, even suicidal form, is more palatable than the unconscious reality of the very real emptiness with which the actual suicide leaves *us*. Even more importantly, suicide must be final. It must be dark and sad and sacred. It must be kept in symbolic check and cannot be allowed to breathe the same air as hope. Yet, there it is: “I hope that sinners like me do get to go to heaven” (Womelsdorf, 1988). “What will they taste of, the Christmas roses? / The Bees are flying. They taste the spring” (Plath, 2004). They succeeded. The note is not the prayer. The note is for the reader. The nocturne, the hopeful prayer into the night, is the suicide itself. What Kryn sees in Sylvia’s oven has nothing to do with *us*. Nonetheless, *we* are implicated.

Disconstitutive rhetoric *is* constitutive rhetoric. Disconstitutive rhetoric is not the rhetoric of the disconstituent; rather, it is the way in which the disconstituent is symbolically disregarded. To be clear, disconstituency is the undoing of *us*. Disconstitutive rhetoric is the undoing of *them* even as they have already been undone.

This is not a matter of the “lost object,” it is the “jettisoned object” that is jettisoned because its confessional loss cannot be heard.

In the identifying confession of *us* and *them* and all of the little winks along the way, people are captured in symbolic form. Because the symbolic is the most clearly substitutive subject area, the authorized subject is the functional judge of that for which it substitutes. I, Chas, know that “I” and “Chas” are merely the nominal symbols for my real existence, which is to epistemologically say I really do also exist as separate from both “I” and “Chas” which is why I *know* “Chas” is real. For this to have meaning, the authorized subject must symbolically transmit *me not not me*. Most of this is a protective lie. The subject of identification is a neurotic performance of repression. *We* neurotically projects *we* to make sense of the world together in such a way that posits life as meaningful so as to repress the unconscious reality in which *we* and *I* do not exist beyond an artificial method of interpretation. Intelligence may not be artificial, but identities are. There is a beauty to that, but there is also war. And the idea of intelligence is a divisive construct. When the subject symbolically projects onto others what it needs them to be in order for *us* to maintain its subjective reality, the subject projects onto *them* what *they* are not while telling *them* that this is what *they* are. But, both the authorial and the authorized subjects are impossible to precisely be precisely because they are both not real. Thus, any projection of *us and them* is a continual reminder to the disconstituent as a lived individuality that the disconstituent fails to successfully be either, which is to say that *they* fail to be what *we* desire on the most basic subjective level, all while “the people” compulsively carry out the illusionary performance of successfully being *ourselves*. The authorized subject is the painting. It is the empty denial of the emptiness of rhetoric. It is

the *not me* of *I am*, or at least that *I must be*. It is the *not me* that *I* competitively imitate. And, it is the law *we* most respect. Everything else is disregarded.

The “Last Words” fashion spread and the surrounding controversy repeat the disconstitutive rhetoric of constitutive rhetoric quite well. The repetition is exceptionally clear in the case of Sylvia Plath. As her daughter suggests of the two *Ariels*, “Each version has its own significance though the two histories are one” (Hughes, 2004, p. xxi). Even as she wishes for her mother’s poems to “speak for themselves,” they do not there is no way to let them (Hughes, p. xx). In fact, Hughes (2004) explains this herself very effectively:

But the point of anguish at which my mother killed herself was taken over by strangers, possessed and reshaped by them. The collection of *Ariel* poems became symbolic to me of this possession of my mother and of the wider vilification of my father. It was as if the clay from her poetic energy was taken up and versions of my mother made out of it, invented to reflect only the inventors, as if they could possess my real, actual mother, now a woman who had ceased to resemble herself in those other minds. (p. xvii)

When I think of Kryn now, I know we too were strangers—I am one of those strange inventors and Frieda Hughes is as well. As both Hughes and I attempt to walk in our disconstituents’ shoes, we each force meaning into our walkabout and onto our lost loved ones by retracing their steps in a meaningful way. This entire dissertation is a walking example of disconstitutive rhetoric. Even as I attempt to withhold judgment and let Kryn be, I am passing meaning along to maintain a division—*don’t be not me*. The blind spot cannot be negotiated.

The outrage that Frieda Hughes observes in these inventors of her symbolic mother is remarkably similar to the outrage in the response to the fashion spread because of the truth that is repressed within these responses. When Ted Hughes chose the final

poems to be “Contusions,” “Edge,” and “Words,” he rather brilliantly chose phrases such as “The doom mark,” “The woman is perfected. / Her dead / Body wears the smile of accomplishment,” and “Words dry and riderless” (Plath, 2008, pp. 270-273). In “Contusions,” “The mirrors are sheeted,” and in “Words” there is the “Water striving / To re-establish its mirror” (Plath, pp. 270-271). Hughes seems to almost perfectly capture the suicidal symbolization of his wife through his selection of her own words. Even as his critics railed against him for his objective application of form, they did the very same thing in their critical musings over Plath’s work as being Plath herself (Hughes, 2004, pp. xvii-xviii). So too can one see this as Jenna Sauers (2013) describes these women’s suicides as “their lowest moments.” What authorizes her to make this claim about these women? As Carlotta<sup>79</sup> replies, “decency and common sense” (Sauers, 2013). Even as Katy Waldman (2013) argues that “Authors such as Woolf and Plath endure in part for their unflinching honesty about what it is to face the dark,” and that “their problems don’t always have tasteful resolutions,” she “just sees authors turned into beautiful, violated bodies.” Both of the above writers, and many others, “get” the idea that *Vice* is attempting to be ironic in some way. These critics even read the “objectification” that they suspect *Vice* is attempting to overtly and artistically expose. But, even as they do this and praise the female authors whom are depicted, they subtly articulate a symbolically presumptive idea of those women’s suicides as not being the best performances of their selves. These critics are not simply being corrective viewers of *Vice Magazine*; they are curating the fashion spread with the corrective message that suicidal depression is an illness and cannot be treated lightly.

This normative curating of illness is itself a repression of a possible truth within the suicidal acts of the depicted women. My brother thought he was “sick.” He, and the women depicted in the *Vice* spread, may very well have been ill. But this illness may also have been a dis-ease with subjectivity, particularly the subjective existence represented to them within normative structures of authorized subjectivity. Their suicides may have been the most real and hopeful moments in their lives. Indeed, the symbolic artifacts they left behind may very well point precisely in that direction. But, in disconstitutive rhetoric, the collective more often than not disregards their suicides as unfortunate tragedies that should not be emulated. In other words, disconstitutive rhetoric is the normative repression and outright denial of the disconstituent position, which is the choice of total non-participation in identification practices beyond the symbolic gesture of resignation. This is not the *not me* of *I am* that the authorized subject should imitate or want to imitate. Disconstituency is a philosophical betrayal of authenticity.

As forensic investigators hunting down the clues of how to not be *not me*, every poem written by Plath becomes a suicide note. Every photograph of Kryn is a clue. Each can be edited and rearranged to fit a certain narrative of the horde’s choosing. But, we don’t have to read them as only tragic. The bees will live in the spring without her. As Frieda Hughes (2004) suggests, “It comes down to this: Her own words describe her best, her ever-changing moods defining the way she viewed her world and the manner in which she pinned down her subjects with a merciless eye” (Hughes, 2004, p. xx).

My favorite Plath poem, as the result of my newly negotiated regard of her, is a somewhat obscure one. It is titled “Nocturne” by Plath, and retitled “Night Walk” by *The New Yorker* in which it was first published (Bloom, 2007, p. 80). This is an accidental



connection on my part as far as connecting my metaphor with Sands'. Yet, for the bereaved reader of loss, the overlay is beautiful. While the suicides may be the disconstituents' prayers, the night walk is the readers' meditative nocturne. The poem begins, "Flintlike, her feet struck / such a racket of echoes from the steely street" (Plath, 1958). Flames that offer a little light in darkness are a common feature in her poetry. I wonder which part of the nocturne, the prayer or the night, Plath is. Maybe she is both or neither. Maybe she is the subject or the redemption for which the subject prays. The poem follows this woman as she seems to escape, "Once past / the dream-peopled village, her eyes entertained no dream," until "The whole landscape / loomed absolute" and "unaltered by eyes / enough to snuff the quick / of her small heat out" (Plath, 1958). In that moment, "before the weight / of stones and hills of stones could break / her down," before the immense unconscious reality, "she turned back" (Plath, 1958).

As Bloom (2007) notes, this poem represents, along with another of her poems that was simultaneously accepted, the first time *she* was accepted by *The New Yorker* and an important step in her arrival as the Plath we know (pp. 80-81). In it, I can read a sense of hope and fear and imagine her on the brink of suicide only to turn back at the last moment. I can see her looking at all of the delusional subjects around her as she just misses her encounter at the rift turning back to the security of the collective delusion. I hope that Kryn felt joy after he chose not to turn back into the fear and anxiety caused by the false confession of order.

## CHAPTER 6: ERIC STEEL'S *THE BRIDGE*

My brother, Kryn (1988), wrote these words: "My life ended a long time ago [...] I am already dead." I only pretend to understand what they meant for him. I, after all, am still a subject. My understanding, as a constitutive subject, is that Kryn could no longer pretend to be the "Kryn" that was being invoked by that name. He could no longer be the body in which "Kryn" stood for us. In this regard, he was a disconstituent. But, it is important to note that the state of disconstituency and the disconstituent can exist separately from the authorial subject, the symbolic subject, both constitutive and disconstitutive rhetoric, and the constituent subject. All of these terms are still machinations in the subjective trap no different than that symbolic oven. Imagine a human interpretively being not with us by choice from its beginning to its end, but interpretively experiencing the world nonetheless. My point is not to create some new ideal, but to disarticulate the disconstituent from the symbolic in order to better describe the constituent subject as being within the grasp of the real yet being no more real than the other subjective points.

The constituent subject is the subject of the missed encounter that authorizes the authorized subject because the constituency most desperately believes in the constituent subject. The constituent subject is the subject that most certainly must be because the authorial and authorized subjects cannot, and yet I am still here in the present moment. The subject's bodily presence proves itself to itself in way that is not unlike Kierkegaard's spirited self that is in its own dialogue with itself and God. It is not just that a body bleeds; rather, my body bleeds and I experience myself bleeding as "Chas bleeding." This is "Chas' blood." "Chas" is the way that I reach out into the world from

the moment that I conform, of confess, to “Chas.” “Chas” is merely a signifier for the subject that my body performs, and I venture out into the world collecting more signifiers for this constituent subject who must be. The disconstituent chooses to no longer, or simply not, collect these particular signifiers for the same reason that the constituent subject continues to collect them: because each signifier is yet another subjective failure. Each signifier is precisely not a real encounter. Each signifier is resolutely *not me* so that the subject can imagine each signifier resisting *me*.

As Elkins (1996) puts it, “What is really happening, what I can never really see or else I will go mad, is that I am not the spider who weaves the web, and I am not even a fly caught in the web: I am the web itself, streaming off in all directions with no center and no self that I can call my own” (pp. 74-75). The constituent subject is defined as the presented subject that demonstrates the act that moves and bends the weight of the subject into being. Like the authorial subject, however, the constituent subject too is parenthetically haunted by the always already too soon decay of death’s looming threat. If the constituent subject is the repository for constituency, the real body that proves and produces collective being, it carries with it the repressed material that always threatens to undo subjectivity itself and in its entirety. The constituent subject is the aspect of subjectivity that threatens to wake up.

The trauma of suicide threatens the proximate survivors of loss with the possibility of actually seeing this awakening happening, which instigates the collective disconstitutive disregard. It’s not that the subject sees someone else going through this “happening.” It’s that in the subject’s failed regard of suicide, this “seeing” threatens to happen within the subject. Caruth (1996) has an endnote with regard to the “Burning

Child Dream” that latently introduces the devastatingly traumatic possibility of the father’s ambivalence towards the child. She writes:

Lacan’s text suggests, I believe, that it would be necessary to rethink the drive through the curious resistance of trauma to symbolism, rather than through a conventional interpretation of the traumatic nightmare in terms of the established concept of repression and the traditional Oedipal theory of received psychoanalysis. One notion that such a rethinking would have to engage would be that of ambivalence, and specifically the possibility of the father’s ambivalence toward the child, an interpretation that Freud allows when he suggests that the father may feel some guilt at having left a man who was not up to the task to watch over the child. (p. 140)

Here, Caruth is setting up the Lacanian departure from Freud. Where Freud insists on a substantiated subject, or ego, Lacan points to something other than a subject or the unconscious that also participates in the dream. It is his question of what or who he is between the moment of recognizing that he is dreaming and the restoration of his subject in his waking life. This is the space of ambivalence. But, to clarify the coldness of this untaught ambivalence, she goes on:

Rather than addressing this ambivalence in terms of the individual father in a father-son antagonism, Freud seems to incorporate it into a larger problem of consciousness as such when he says that it is consciousness itself that does not wish to wake up. For in this case the wish to keep the child alive, which Freud originally reads as the motivation of the dream, indeed becomes secondary to the wish of consciousness to sleep, and may only serve the wish of consciousness, even in the face of the death of a child, to protect his own sleep. (Caruth, 1996, p. 140)

The significance of *this* endnote (both parts) is of the utmost importance and is representative of the reason I strongly dislike both endnotes and footnotes for more than their disruptive nature. Whether one regards this interpretation from a Lacanian or Freudian viewpoint, the possibility of *real* ambivalence is passed over, left in an endnote, rather like the knock, but left in its place nonetheless. This is a radical possibility that creates a remarkably disturbing direction for Caruth’s push towards awakening, because

it suggests a conscious reality as abysmal as the unconscious reality. When a subject regards the death of a loved one and fleetingly discovers that it actually could care less, that the subject may almost certainly have to care less in order to remove the shoes for the sake of survival as the subject it desires to be, that subject has had enough of that other in its self-reflection, in its constituent subject self, to sustain its identity within that other's signifying context—so much so that the subject refuses its new potential understanding of that other and insists upon the false confession that was assumed, that fit, rather than the image (real or imagined) with which the subject was left. The ambivalence is clearly found in the (impudent) child's accusatory question: How can you not see? The father's sadness, according to Caruth's buried observation, is first the shock and sadness of loss, *the father's* loss. To awaken to that *conscious* reality of lack, to see this happening *as me*, would, indeed, be devastating.

This is the failed regard within the constituent subject, which is the conscious locale of the potential calculation of both one's subject and one's suicide, that is the focus of this final chapter in its regard of Eric Steel's (2006) documentary film, *The Bridge*. Whereas *Last Days* and "Last Words" were symbolic representations of suicides, *The Bridge* shows actual bodies falling, or leaping, to their actual deaths. While the film is not the real events by virtue of being a recording, it certainly captures something very real in a way that in part defies both the symbolic and the imaginary. The film is like Barthes' camera, his "clock for seeing." The camera is also disconstituent. It reaches without the feelings the subject feels it should have. The camera, as an I/eye, just is. It is hard to nail down the intent of this documentary or to precisely get a grip on what is actually being documented. The film credits Tad Friend's (2003) article, "Jumpers," as its inspiration.

The article is equally ambivalent. It closes with the following paragraph that encapsulates its ambiguity:

As people who work in the bridge know, smiles and gentle words don't always prevent suicides. A barrier would. But to build one would be to acknowledge that we do not understand each other; to acknowledge that much of life is lived on the chord, on the far side of the railing. Joseph Strauss believed that the Golden Gate would demonstrate man's control over nature, and so it did. No engineer, however, has discovered a way to control the wildness within. (Friend, 2003)

The "barrier" references an ongoing movement by some to create a physical barrier to prevent people from jumping, the "chord" is the beam where people climb outside the railing to jump, and Joseph Strauss was the chief engineer of the bridge (Friend, 2003).

The article can be read as a call to action for a barrier, but Friend does not quite make that the only way to read it in the same way that a camera does not do so. It is simply an observation of a relatively cheap and effective way to fix what some see as a problem. But it is difficult to argue, based on this article, that Friend thinks it is a problem. A reader could also argue that Friend buys into the romanticism and poetry of the bridge as an epic symbol for suicide that he discusses in the article. Whether intentional or not, he withholds judgment. His judgment appears to be held in abeyance, a *souffrance* of subjective uncertainty about how to order, or rank, his regard.

In the first half of the article, Friend (2003) offers the story of Roger Grimes, an engineer who "agitated for a barrier" for over twenty years only to give up, "stunned that in an area as famously liberal as San Francisco, where you can always find a constituency for the view that pets should be citizens or that poison oak has a right to exist, there was so little empathy for the depressed." People threw cans at Grimes and told him to jump. But, even as Friend operates as a constituent subject for Grimes and other activist and suicide experts, he also acts as a constituent subject for those who have gone over the rail,

for those who do not fear or hate them, and for those that do. There is a real liberality to his writing, a liberality that seems to say it is also okay for people not to exist. In fact, the conservative view is one that wants to freeze everyone in their subject positions so as to allow the conservative subject to freely change positions. The disconstituent only threatens this viewpoint within the viewer and not the position. The liberal view allows for everyone to have free movement. Both contain the risk for disconstituency, but it may very well be more threatening to a liberal position because of its constant teetering on the edge of unraveling. The liberal view is scary and uncertain. The conservative view is strict and unforgiving. One clings. The other lets go. Grimes clings.

Like the film, Friend (2003) does not seem to take the power of his regard for granted. Friend couches his regard in statistics and expert witnesses throughout the article that point towards not jumping as the better choice without condemning the choice to jump. Choice plays an important role in the film as well. Interestingly, the narrative arrangement of the film articulates, whether intentionally or not, that death is the choice and life is the obligation—suicide is an action and living is mere motion. In fact, this message is repeated over and over. It is the standard response to someone who is suicidal really. You can't kill yourself because of the people around you. You have to be stuck with us. Keep confessing the untruth like the rest of us.

It is more accurate to say that the film is like the article even if the article likely comes to the attentive viewer of the film second. It is perhaps even more accurate to say that both the article and the film are like the bridge. As Friend (2003) writes at the beginning of the second to last paragraph, "The bridge comes into the lives of all Bay Area residents sooner or later, and it often stays." It is a bridge that moves and bends like

the Neutral, like death. It is a suspension bridge after all. Like our bodies, the bridge is a metaphor that the disconstituent possibly reads for clues. *The Bridge*'s narrative arc begins and ends with the story of Gene Sprague's suicide. The center is held up by the story of Kevin Hines' survival—a story also referenced in the article. Throughout the documentary, there are several other stories of suicides that are captured by the camera as well as incidents of successful interference.

If Friend (2003) tips his hat in a particular direction, it may be in the sentence, "Survivors often regret their decision in midair, if not before." This sentence leads off a discussion that includes Kevin Hines. Friend does use the term "survivors" and does not make the assumptive leap of suggesting all "jumpers" often feel this regret. Still, the sentence is a bit of an assumption in that only two survivors are directly linked to the sentiment. Hines is an interesting figure in the documentary as well. He enters the narrative at almost exactly the midway point and is, initially, a shift in the film towards making the choice to live. He enters after a series of comments on "choice" and an observation about love being the only thing that would have saved Gene Sprague. Hines opens with the confession, "The ideas of suicide, if I'm completely honest with myself, have been there for a long long time." What does it mean, here, to be honest with oneself? This is a young man who attempted suicide by jumping off of the Golden Gate Bridge who has agreed to be interviewed in a documentary about suicide attempts like his own. He does not choose to be anonymous as a couple of other individuals in the film do. He seems to be very honest based on all of this evidence. Arguably, the answer lies somewhere in the way his father discusses Kevin's bipolar suicidal reality of having to live between "brackets" because he cannot survive outside of them. In other words,



Kevin may very well have to stay within a particular bracketed area of the symbolic in order to stay alive, which is to directly attempt to repress certain honest thoughts that threaten to be real. His authorial subjectivity falls into a state of disconstituency and requires a strict adherence to the symbolic order of the social. But, repressed material returns in distorted ways. Here, the repressed suicidal ideation returns as the truth.

Kevin continues, “But the real thought process of actually going to do it and commit the act started in ’99 when I cut my wrist.” It is an interesting statement. It can be read as the “real thought process” beginning in the year 1999 that resulted in him cutting his wrists, or it can be read as the “real thought process” beginning when he cut his wrist. For Hines, there is a clear difference between “the ideas of suicide” and “the real thought process” of suicide. It’s the difference between suicidal ideation and suicidality. The former is an authorial fantasy that maintains his desire, his will-to-live, only through its failure to be. And, subsequently, the latter is his disconstituent act that has been de-authorized within his symbolic, or familial, identification. Like the bereaved, he tries on the shoes first, and he walks in them next. He talks about writing a series of suicide notes only to decide they were too “mean.” He ended up choosing to simply write something “nice” along the lines of “mom, you’re not always right” and “dad, stop being so mean.” Beyond advice for life, this nicer version seems to be an indictment. Another way of thinking about the shoe metaphor is that the disconstituent might try on the shoes of the constituent subject and even walk around in them. In the end, the disconstituent takes off *our* shoes.

But, then, Hines is not someone who completed suicide; rather, he is someone who almost completed suicide and arguably de-completed suicide. While his act may be

considered disconstituent to a certain degree, the above sentiment in his note can easily be read as an attempt to violently participate in the symbolic order of things—to be a counter-identifying constituent subject. Earlier in the film, Richard Waters, a photographer who stopped a woman from jumping, described suicide as the “ultimate shortcut to the next level.” He also says that he’s “sure she wanted to be rescued,” in a way that seems to be reacting to his being “freaked out” by her looking at him while with authorities. Waters says, “I didn’t expect her to look back” as if the way she looked back did not fit his rescue narrative. Her stare defied the victory of his “third meaning” subjunctive contingency that really happened. He literally changed the photograph almost as it was happening. She undid his new subjective identity as hero with a simple look. In Hines’ story, Hines looked back as his “hands left the bar” in the way Waters wanted to see *his* disconstituent survivor. Hines thought, “I don’t want to die.”

However, if Hines story is meant to be the “real” story, the one not told by family and friends, then it still misses the encounter. He describes his jump in a very present and moving way. As he says of the moment after the impact with the water, “I was awake, I was alive.” He describes the position of his body at the moment of the impact and how water filtered through his boots, but these are just guesses and the moment between life and death is just out of reach. This is most clear in the fact that the “something” that brushed against his leg was not a shark. He says, Years later I found out it wasn’t a shark, it was a seal.” The seal kept him from drowning. Hines concludes, “You cannot tell me it wasn’t God, because that’s what I believe.” My point is not to discount his version of the event. It is to simply observe that in this very real encounter, the encounter itself was still missed and requires both symbolism and imagination for it to be pieced back together.

There's something about this spiritual shift that chips away at his narrative ethos. His credibility gets lost in his explicit demand for effacement. Unlike Barthes' explanation of the myth that is read as fact, Hines' "mask of meaning" shows itself too much.

Right after this moment, the camera shows a guy who has been on a cell phone suddenly cross himself, as if at church, and jump. Hines says, "It's funny, my family thinks I still haven't learned my lesson, but the lesson was learned a long time ago." Heartbreakingly, he says, "It's hard when you keep messing up and no one in your family believes in you anymore and trusts you." It's as if he needs to believe in God being present at his side because even his own family cannot believe in him. It's not that they are necessarily evil or uncaring. As he notes, they are "always worried, walking on eggshells." In another heartbreakingly honest confession, Hines tells the camera that he's tired of this treatment and that he wants them to know that he's "the same guy, just a different soul, different ideals" as if to suggest that he's the one they used to imagine him to be and now he has finally adjusted his imagination of himself to fit that authorized subjectivity. He pauses and then concludes, "I just wanna be normal again, but I never will be." He can only be corrected, not corrective. He has been de-authorized.

This normative sentiment is a steady trickle throughout the documentary even as the documentary doesn't quite fully become normative itself. The first voice we hear in the film is almost startling. It comes in just after the camera watches the first actual suicidal leap in the film and a kite surfer goes through the scene. The voice is the voice of the kite surfer, Chris Brown. His description of his reaction is a little confused as he says he went over "just to see or maybe possibly help." But, anyone who has passed a wreck on the interstate knows what he means. Most people can also understand his normative

assumption that this “person was at the lowest of the low in their life obviously.” But, not everyone might understand why it’s an assumption that is also normative.

Another suicide that is captured in the film is Lisa Smith’s. Her mother, Tara Harrell, and sister, Rachel Marker, tell her story. Her brother, Lyle, also tells some of it but primarily from a position that refuses to accept that she completed suicide. For him, it was some other kind of death. Her sister and mother have no doubt. The two women struggle to articulate a shared account without correcting one another. Whereas Marker describes her deceased daughter as “more angelic” than her siblings, Harrell points out that their father’s untimely death “didn’t make us [her and her brother] mentally ill.” Lisa was different. She was diagnosed with schizophrenia. This seems important to Lisa’s sister in particular. When the two women discuss the fact that Lisa’s teeth became so rotten that they all had to be removed, Harrell concludes that her sister “looked funny” and her mother notes, “That was a problem.” Harrell is not necessarily a horrible person. She’s simply making a diagnostic observation that leads to her mother’s addition—or edition. Harrell confesses that she always thought of herself as “the strong one,” but marvels at the strength Lisa must have had to jump. Her mother thinks “it was a relief.” The mother concludes their collective retelling with, “She’s in a better place.” Harrell adds, “You have to look at it that way.” As one watches this exchange, an important difference clearly emerges. For the brother and sister, the story tends to lead back to them in some way, whether it is what they have to believe or how they are different. Again, it is not a matter of being a horrible person. It is a defensive measure by siblings who are at a greater level of risk for poor health now. “If Lisa killed herself, maybe it is genetic” is a likely thought process that is repeated more often than they would care to admit. I am

familiar with this thought, and this defense. For the mother, though, it is always about Lisa—at least the Lisa she projects. My mother is the same way. In each case, however, their memory of Lisa and need for her redemption is a substitute for who Lisa actually was. Another family who happened to witness Lisa's suicide recalls that just before she jumped, she turned towards them and she was laughing.

Hines tells the camera about an interaction between him and his father the night before he jumped. The camera has that effect. He told his father, "I don't want to hurt anybody anymore, I have to go away." His father responds, " You have an obligation to me who raised you, who's given you everything you want. You have an obligation to your brother, your sister." As Hines says of his dad, "he was mad the whole time." I can attest to both my own anger at Kryn and my own belief that he must have been brave. I often need to believe that he is in a better place that possibly involves him looking over me. Of course, I know that these are my projections. They are normative representations of my will-to-possess. It is difficult to let the choice to die be his alone. Just as Lisa's brother looks for someone else to blame, my family has done so as well. Friends of our family have shared clues with us, but those clues have faded into somewhere beside the point. Other people's desire to offer a chance of order to the mystery of Kryn is disappointing gossip. It's not that I don't think they care about Kryn and us. What bothers me is that their attempts to claim to know something about his choice efface his being. But, then, I could say the same of my family and me. We retrospectively perform Hines' dad's demands. He is still a father. He *must be* a father. He must transmit the message of the father who remains a father. My heart breaks for my dad. While he is still a father, he also transmits what it is to no longer be the father of Kryn.

Shortly after Kevin Hines confesses his desire and failure to be “normal again,” an anonymous woman confessing her own suicidal desire explains, “It’s a destructive act but there’s a lot of rational thought that goes into an act that a lot of people, you know, just consider irrational.” While there is a normative association between mental illness and suicide in the documentary, there is also a narrative thread that is somewhat counter to that assumption. For instance, in Philip Manikow’s parents’ retelling of his suicide, mental illness is really a metaphor for his struggle with life. Wally Manikow, Philip’s father, seems particularly empathetic. As he describes Philip’s suicidal ideation and suicidality as a “cancer of the mind,” he acknowledges that, “some days you think like that yourself; he just thought about it everyday.” When Philip frequently asked him if he thought suicide was a sin, Wally answered, “that was something man made up” because Wally “didn’t want [Philip] to feel like he was in a cage inside of himself.” Wally explains, “he thought his body was a prison.” Philip’s body, it would seem, was his metaphorical understanding of his life. But, perhaps his body was telling him the story of the social trap of conformation.

Mary Manikow, Philip’s mother, suggests, “He had this idealistic view of things and when it didn’t meet his expectations, after a while, it was like what’s the point.” The symbolic representation of the imaginary idealism can, at the constituent level, be remarkably disappointing. But it is devastating to the will-to-live when one feels that one particularly fails at achieving these ideals. Wally remembers Philip lamenting, “If you and mom are having problems, then what hope is there for me.” There is a temptation to blame Wally and Mary for showing too much, for being too honest with their “troubled” son. Mary considers what other people might normatively think: “What kind of parents

were they?" she hypothetically posits. But then, she recounts a friend saying, "It's not all about you." Kryn wrote this down. It is a strange thing to struggle to accept really, to struggle to accept that someone's suicide really may have had nothing to do with you. As Wally observes a little earlier in the documentary, "But he still had to make a choice," the camera watches as a bird dives into the water. Why were *we* not a better option?

If there is a "main character" in this documentary other than the bridge itself, it would likely be Gene Sprague. Four friends narrate his suicide from early in the documentary until the very end. Three of these friends appear to be peers of his in the sense of age. All three fall into a similar category as Lisa's sister and brother in that their retelling tends to be more about themselves as they struggle with the reality of Gene's suicide. His primary narrator, however, is a delightfully insightful older woman named Caroline Pressley. She is more akin to Philip's father, Wally. She, in a matter of fact way, opens her regard of Gene stating, "It's hard to define Gene as a person." When she suggests that Gene was, "not of this world as we know it," this otherworldliness doesn't ring as imaginary and hopeful as Marker's description of Lisa as "angelic" and "in a better place." With Pressley, it sounds like an observation rather than a wish. She is observing a lost persona that she *knew* as a lost persona. She notes Gene's obsession with the color black and posits, "It's as if he wanted no contrasts." Perhaps, this was Gene's defense against stain of corrective division. Perhaps being a lost persona is too difficult for some disconstituents to bear contrast. Whereas his other friends pass judgment in their diagnostic review of his life, Pressley offers her opinion without blaming him for having done something wrong. She is not corrective in her regard.

Pressley also acknowledges Gene's death as his "choice." She says, "Gene's choice, his preference, had been made years before." She doesn't grant him agency as an authorized subject; rather, she, as a constituent subject, regards his agency as a disconstituent. If Pressley passes judgment, one could see that happening towards Gene's mother. She recounts a moment when Gene confessed his suicidal thinking to his mother. Here, Pressley claims that his mother responded by, "in essence," saying, "I didn't invest a lifetime in you to have you die on me [...] you don't have the right to do that." At the halfway point in the film, just before Hines's entrance, she argues, "Only love, really love, feeling like he was loved and in love was gonna save him." While pondering genetics, Pressley goes on to say, "Who's to say that wasn't the reason his mother chose to have this child because she too was depressed and knew that she could keep herself here and functional if she had a commitment and how do we know that it wasn't on some inner level that he perceived this very young?" Here, reproduction, the stench of me, is also casted as a form of demand for false confession. In each instance, Pressley doesn't come across as judgmental, but there does textually seem to be some judgment—interesting this judgment is pointed at the obligatory approach to making someone not kill themselves, whether it is Gene's mother keeping him or herself from making that choice.

After Gene's mother died of cancer, Pressley knowingly asks Gene "to promise not to go without saying goodbye." This seems to be a subtle tactic of hers to delay Gene's future suicidal act. Later, when he calls to say goodbye, she again subtly forestalls his suicide by requesting that he leaves a note in a plastic bag so that she can find him. Perhaps, though, that's just a specter's desire. Pressley's lack of judgment can also seem



detached and cold, like the camera, the article, and the consciousness that requires no more. I want her to be on my side because she doesn't seem to fully take any side. But, then, that's why I want to be on hers. I am something akin to happy for Gene when I think about Pressley. I still want to be happy for Kryn. Another anonymous woman tells the story of her friend's suicide recalling him telling her, "I'm so ashamed to tell you that I'm thinking about doing this." I want to erase that shame, that fear and anxiety. More than Kryn's suicide, I want to erase the thought of that feeling he could no longer tolerate. But, that's my thought. The anonymous woman told her friend, "You are not in the category of people who get to kill themselves." Who authorized her? Did this de-authorization of his interpretive being make him more ashamed? I understand this anonymous woman. I wish I could have said the same thing to Kryn and that this would have solved his mystery. Then, in her sage way, Pressley answers my desperate epistemologically authorized subjectivity with the following:

I don't know why people kill themselves. And, yet, it's a small step to empathize, to say [pause] because I think we all experience moments of despair, that um, that it would be so much easier not to do this any more. But for most of us, the sun comes out. And, then, oh well, tomorrow's another day.

Sounding remarkably like Lacan, Pressley argues, "I don't have any answers, just a bunch of observations and a bunch of experience of feeling disturbed about that situation." She only offers what she has found even as the camera demands more.

In the lead up to the end of the documentary, Steel makes a similar move to Friend's. He tries to stabilize the bridge as a moving symbol. Various narrators both reject and reify the romantic poetry of the bridge. My poetic self understands this impulse to look for something lifelike in what is lifeless. In pretending to give something a life of its own, I validate my existence. Just before the camera shows Gene's suicide from the

bridge to his impact, Pressley says, “Why he chose the bridge? I don’t know. Maybe there’s a certain amount of release from pain by pain. Maybe he just wanted to fly one time.” One can almost hear the prompt in her answer: “Why he chose the bridge?” I can hear Steel’s desire for the bridge to be meaningfully authorized, to capture the imagination of the suicidal. Yet, Pressley disregards that authorial desire to “control the wildness within.” In her regard as a constituent subject, she lets *her* Gene remain disconstituent. While she is able to think through Gene’s ideation, and recount the details of his adventure into the abyss, she does not need to take his shoes off because she never seemed to have had to try them on. It was never about her. In this way, one might understand the perspective from the standpoint of redemption as the faithful attempt to give ourselves up in order to fulfill the promise of our failed regard.

## CHAPTER 7: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

As I stand back and think, the images have begun to fade. I find myself left with only failed interrogations, an absence of confession, and a regard that will never be recognized by those individuals I am regarding. Like the disconstituent persona, like the object that is reached towards and the organ that reaches towards it, my regard is lost as I adventure it out into these missed encounters. Three things occur to me in this lost regard that normally should be shocking but are not. First, by the last time that I watched *The Bridge*, I often didn't notice when I saw someone die on camera. I would be looking something else up, writing something down on my pad, listening to the audio particulars, sipping a drink, and I would barely think about the fact that one of these individuals, for whom I planned out a type of care and to whom I promised my regard, just jumped again. On my laptop screen, they leapt as I watched my wife sleep. It was as if they became only dreams somewhere near the edge of *her* unconscious machinations. These conscious happenings lurk about all of our unconscious machinations. They are the margins of our imagined centrality. Second, I experienced levels of suicidal ideation that scared me. I always knew I wouldn't actually leap. I was never in a state of suicidality, but that potential new subject position threatened *me*. I found myself needing to walk away from ledges, choosing to not drive somewhere, and generally trying to consciously distract myself. Walking around in *these* shoes is a risky adventure. In taking them off, I am left with bare feet and the possibility of trying on my old shoes or looking for a new pair. Third, there were many times that I stopped caring about my brother as I wrote about his suicide and suicide in general. I thought of him as only text just as my analysis suggested, and I found that ambivalent consciousness staring out from my body. And that regard met

Kryn's image. Maybe this is an aspect of healing, "moving on," but it feels like a betrayal *to me*. There are several choices that are presented by the disconstituent, and each choice is a transformation. I can identify and imitate the form presented in the situation, create new meanings within the old identifications, reject the entire situation, or remain as barefooted as possible and feel for others who are also lost.

The presentation of suicide, meaning all that a suicide makes present, is a rhetorical situation that occurs to an audience within the interstices of day-to-day constitutive practices of identification. The audience's regard is caught in a state of disconstituency—left with the permanence of absence, the fleetingness of presence, and a unique undoing of identification that also identifies the constituency of a people presented by suicide. The very formality of the rhetorical situation, which is the being of the rhetorical forms within a situation, falls away. In other words, the practiced repetition of formative identification cannot maintain its grip in such a way that acknowledges the clinging that has been at play all along. The redemptive regard is a delicate balance of losing one's self in a consciously responsive and active way just enough to momentarily *be* a compassionate ambivalence. Instead of choosing to fall in the midst of a stumble, the subject allows itself to fall away in its regard of a disconstituent withdrawal. It doesn't let the disconstituent go; rather, this regard mirrors the disconstituent's withdrawal in such a way that leaves the disconstituent persona as a state of disconstituency without forcing order upon it. In this way, a new rhetorical situation may emerge in which the regarding subject no longer says goodbye to the disconstituent being regarded, but acknowledges itself to be an old formality which is also withdrawing into a new transformative adventure.

Elkins (1996) concludes, “Perhaps death can be seen after all, but these pictures express only the warning pressure that makes us turn away when we might be in danger of seeing it” (p. 116). Like him, “I am not sure what can be seen and what can’t, but I know that seeing is sometimes extremely difficult” and that there are times when “We have looked directly at the thing and have not seen it, or we have looked away and seen too much” (pp. 116-117). Looking at a dead body is not the same as looking at death. A dead body is far easier to put in the ground. A dead body is more easily transformed into a site of information and demonstration about itself. But to look at death is to look at what a dead body tells us about ourselves. And looking at a death by suicide is very different from looking at any other form of death, because it tells us things about ourselves that we repress more deeply than death. In their discussion of the power of still photography, unfolding disasters in general, and Barbie Zelizer’s “about-to-die” venture into the subjunctive voice of images, Robert Hariman and John Lucaites (2007) argue that the moment of contingent recognition “can be a moment of denial, or one in which one catch’s one’s breath to absorb an impending emotional blow, or a cue for reflection” (p. 276). Like the various iterations of constitutive rhetoric, Hariman and Lucaites are concerned with a civic responsibility. The images that they deem worthwhile are those of significance, images that operate as identification itself in a way that demands a confession. As they put it, the photographs that they choose to regard “are used to orient the individual within a context of collective identity, obligation, and power” (p. 1). In Hariman’s logic, their images are held in a higher regard. They are *the* pictures one *should* hold in high regard, because “They have more than documentary value, for they bear witness to something that exceeds words” (Hariman & Lucaites, p. 1). However,

their sentiment is still salient with this dissertation's sense of regard. The regard outlined in this dissertation is one that does allow for a moment to catch "one's breath" and accept the "cue for reflection" upon bearing a site/sight that "exceeds" the false confessions and demands of collective subjectivity. To regard the disconstituent is to allow yourself to be transformed into an audience member who attempts to redeem the promise of identification that you have already failed to give. The images and experiences that this dissertation regards are ones that present one's regard from a standpoint that begins as failure, and this dissertation resolutely admits this failure.

Though they often overlap, making meaning and making sense are different productions. Meaning making is a demand for a specific order to things. Sense making is a type of outward reaching, a hopeful inquiry with regard to order. But, making sense is still an additional subjective step like making meaning. It is still the subject's gaze and a way of forcing order because order is what it seeks regardless of what the subject finds. The subject clings to itself in its outward adventure instead of giving itself up in the gathering of regard. As such, all formality only appears to be lost because the repetition of either meaning making or sense making is another false interrogation and false confession that also necessarily repeats the trauma of disconstituency. This is, in itself, a form of seeking resolution that can only be found in its release. Another transformation can occur to the audience of suicide loss. A new rhetorical situation can be located in this regard, and accepting implication can reshape the direction of such a fall.

In Chapter 1, the regard that is given to the disconstituent suicide was recognized as being one that is both stigmatized and stigmatizing. Suicide is seen as a betrayal that stains those who survive the loss within its wake. This understanding was first couched in

a consideration of “regard” and “regarding.” This dissertation was designed to attempt to regard without ranking, without marginalizing the individuals being regarded. Chapter 2 suggested a resistance to identification by arguing that order is itself a type of disorder of subjective dis-ease for both constituent subjects and disconstituent individuals. The first two chapters were focused on answering the first research question: what does it mean to regard suicide from the standpoint of beginning as failure? By recalibrating what resistance might be in a psychoanalytically driven approach to constitutive rhetoric, the idea of the individual person becomes truly powerful because individual people are able to deeply alter others by their simple acts of no longer regarding *me*. Thus, the answer to the first question is that, in regarding suicide, the subject attempts to ascribe meaning as a way of deflecting its undoing. The impulse is to shut the regard down. Thus, to regard from the standpoint of beginning as failure is to have already failed before and after the initial encounter because the encounter is always already missed. But, the challenge is to cease demanding the false confession of meaningful being inherent in subjective identification. The analyst must attempt to let go of the subject. This will likely fail, but the attempt itself can be analyzed. More importantly, the attempt can be lived.

The remaining chapters attempted to create this failed contingency through a vanishing methodology of regard that relinquishes the demand of and for meaning. Chapter 3 proposed a methodology of regard in which subjectivity is rethought as a series of formative vanishing points. Through the metaphorical use of the painting technique, the Freudian “primal horde,” and the mythic reading of the photographic subject, Chapter three forged the Rhetorical Structure of the Vanishing Subject to articulate the rhetorical nature of its regard as an individual journey into a deteriorating collective identification.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 each presented exemplary artifacts to offer a contextualized analysis of the three points of subjective withdrawal. Chapter 4 analyzed the deterioration of the authorial logic of the subject into a state of disconstituency by regarding the suicide narrative of Blake-not-Kurt in Gus Van Sant's (2005) *Last Days*. Chapter 5 contextualized authorized subjects' constitutive rhetoric that can also be read as disconstitutive rhetoric through two connected artifacts. First, the chapter focused its regard on the viewing of and reaction to the still photographs in *Vice Magazine's* (2013) "Last Words" fashion spread with particular attention given to the depiction of Sylvia Plath. Second, the chapter focused on Sylvia Plath's rearranged final collection of poetry. The two events mirrored each other in such a way that suggested constitutive rhetoric is disconstitutive rhetoric particularly when its corrective nature of false interrogation and confession become terminally exposed as false. In other words, the "last words" disrupted the doomed reading of their own suicides. Finally, Chapter 6 focused on constituent subjects' relationships to disconstituent individuals in Eric Steel's (2003) *The Bridge* to discover the possibility of an ambivalent regard that still *feels for* the disconstituent. This compassionate ambivalence is a way of framing a regard that forestalls judgment on those who are regarded while still taking in the possibility of implication that may be worked out on some level. It is Burke's ambiguity of adaptation—somewhere between motion and action. It is a conscious body embracing its fall without the demand of recovery.

Judith Butler (2005) concludes her ethical account of the loss of self with the idea that "we must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our



willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human” (p. 136). Butler’s argumentation and analysis is caught up in larger institutions and identifications of a *you* that may materialize like Edwin Black’s (1970) second persona. Her response in the subject that she sheds is one directed towards political action. She suggests, “If we speak and try to give an account from this place, we will not be irresponsible, or, if we are, we will surely be forgiven” (p. 136). This dissertation is not focused on those “larger” political institutions and it does not necessarily suggest any particular action beyond a way of being in the presence of something or someone that undoes the “smaller” institutions of the individual subject relating to another individual subject through *me*, *us/we*, and *them*. But, like Butler, this dissertation embraces unknowingness and the hope for forgiveness. Both Butler and I are after an awakening that hopefully inspires a human awakening whose end may very well unite the consciousness of individuals gathered together within a mutual regard for each other’s sense of the world. This is also the awakening that Caruth seems to cherish—an awakening regard that reties individuals together through the traumatic events that have broken their collective and individual certainty.

The awakening outlined here, however, is not necessarily a rainbow after a storm in the way that some might hope. In these pages, I encountered the overwhelming emptiness of missing my regard. The regard of the disconstituent and suicide is always already incomplete because such a standpoint is always waiting, held in abeyance, looking for punctuation, not quite understanding the interpellation that is never ending. What does a methodology to grapple with the implications of this failed regard look like? I am not sure because it is my regard that has failed and will continue to fail as long as I

remain committed to my self. There is something terrifying about the idea that nothing is missing. Researchers and practitioners of suicidology may very well want to revisit their systems of meaning making and sense making by way of also recalibrating resistance. The question is not how do we help people find meaning in order to move on and resist their own suicides. The question is how do we help people not make suicide mean anything other than another's withdrawal from *us*. How do we stop clinging without necessarily letting go and rescinding our promise to take our regard seriously? How do we allow for redemption?

For Barthes (1981), the photograph becomes one of two possible adventures for the one who regards it: madness or tameness (pp. 117-119). To tame the photograph is to restore social order through it. The way of madness for Barthes, though, is the way of awakening which is also a social confrontation (p. 119). Mastery is an illusion. In regarding suicide, resolution is another form of illusory mastery. These endings will always be elliptical and caught in the subjunctive hopes of a third meaning. But, this does not have to mean that there is no possibility of catharsis. Burke (1966), in his consideration of Goethe, argues that catharsis for a "symbol-using animal" can simply be a matter of "getting something said" (p.159). In allowing oneself to confess to the falling away of one's authorial, symbolic, and constituent subjectivity in a state of disconstituency that reveals one's own disconstitutive rhetoric in the presentation of the disconstituent persona, one's regard can become the new rhetorical situation of cathartic redemption. However, this redemption is not what it may seem to be. *We* do sacrifice others for *us*, and *we* are individually and collectively sacrificed for similar purposes. But, sometimes there is no sacrifice at all, even if a god does not stay your hand.

Sometimes, there is only a death that tells you things about yourself that you do not wish to hear. The one telling you what you do not want to hear is you. Thus, the available catharsis is writing down or speaking out loud those things that you have begun to tell yourself in order to withdraw your own false confession, at least temporarily, within your own regard. This is a rhetorical regard and transformation worth sharing. It is a way in which a new form of disconstitutive rhetoric can become a practice of opening up new possibilities of constituency.

Another way of framing the offerings of this dissertation is through a disconstituent regard rather than a redemptive catharsis. A disconstituent regard is one that allows the subject to fall away on both ends of the regard. In other words, it is another way of conceiving of the same twin vanishing points that perform the illusion of convergence within a symbolic practice. As in this dissertation regarding suicidal representations, such a regard actively seeks out the practices of subjective contour completion to expose the terrain that has been knitted together to complete the illusions of constituency. Once again, the disconstituent is not limited to literal suicidality. Disconstituent practices, or disconstitutive rhetoric, are any practices that undo constituencies through the creation of states of disconstituency within constituent regards. Humans, as symbol-using animals, want to tell stories about being together that forge togetherness. These stories typically make sense and have clear climaxes and resolutions that signify our collective being. The disconstituent undoes that redemptive meaning making and demonstrative sense making. The promise of becoming whole, of becoming a complete life, is forsaken in the disconstituent narrative. Completion is too abrupt and too disturbing in these cases and is read as incomplete because the resolution is unknowable

for those who most desperately seek it. To listen to such a story with the hopes of learning something can be a shattering experience when what is learned seems to only be self-destructive. But, in becoming lost oneself, there is the hope of finding new ways of being together. To realize that everyday practices of inclusion are often as violently assumed as our everyday practices of division can suggest an approach to others whom we regard as our fellow human beings that is given far more care.

Rhetoric has challenged what is unspeakable since at least Gorgias defended Helen of Troy. If there is a resistance that all rhetoricians should hold dear, it may be the resistance to what cannot be spoken. The analysis of this dissertation reveals the disconstituent story. The disconstituent story is one that we, as ultimately unknowable subjects, tell *to* the unknowable and unspeakable within *us*. These stories are a variation of the “closet speech” in which we tell stories to our own individual closets. Our stories are the continuing stories of Babel’s fall, and Babel is still falling. Of course, humans invented Babel and its fall to stand in for our own sense of space. We fill space with our own rhetorical performances of our own prosopopoeia. We stand in for the space in which we find ourselves. It is easy to skip over Burke’s (1966) third clause of his “definition of man”: “separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making” (p. 13). But, it is in this clause that Burke most clearly explains how humans use tools through their use of symbolism to make the natural unnatural and the unnatural natural (pp. 13-16). The disconstituent narrative undoes *our* tools of repression instantly and over time, but this undoing does not have to be re-solved in order to keep speaking its truth.

I struggled for many years with my father's priestly faith. The weight of Kryn's suicide was too much for my faith in my father's religion. As I spiritually broke apart in my adventure of self-destructive choices, I came upon Kwan Yin, the feminine aspect of Buddha. Her story struck me as remarkably akin to the Christ story to which both of my parents cling in their nocturne. Kwan Yin did not precisely bring Christ back into my heart, but she did bring my parents' Christ back into my heart. An image of her is tattooed on my arm as a reminder of that moment when I realized there was hope for redemption for my family, that there was hope that *we* could be truly forgiven by ourselves.

Kwan Yin, also spelled "Kuan Yin," is the female manifestation of Avalokitesvara, the Buddhist deity of mercy and compassion (Chamberlayne, 1962, pp. 45-46). Her name translates into "she who hears the sounds (prayers) of mortals" or "she who looks down upon the world and hears its cries" (Chamberlayne, p. 47). There are various tales of her appearance, but most trace back to the legend of the princess, Miaoshan, who refused to participate in her father's courtly dictates of behavior and marriage. Instead, she chose the life of Buddhist devotion. Her father had her executed for her disobedience. Like Christ, she was resurrected, and, in her return, she forgave her father—even saving his life (Chamberlayne, p. 49). There are other variations on her tale and her execution, but she is always understood as a Bodhisattva, which is an aspect of Buddha who has awakened but remains in earthly form to help those who continue to mortally suffer. Redemption is not about waking the consciousness of others up. That is an arrogant assumption and deception caught up in another round of false interrogation and confession. The Zen master backs away and let's the beautiful butterfly dream.

Redemption is the hope that when and if people around you wake up, you will be able to forgive them. It is also knowing that I have fallen asleep again and forgiving myself again. It is being forgiven by myself for the moments that I turned away, when I was not ready to give my regard. I forgive you.

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## **VITA**

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