April 2019

Watching and Working Through: Navigating Non-being in Television Storytelling

Tiara Lalita Sukhan
The University of Western University

Supervisor
Sliwinski, Sharon
The University of Western Ontario

Graduate Program in Media Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy

© Tiara Lalita Sukhan 2019

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd
Part of the Television Commons

Recommended Citation
https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/6082
Abstract

This dissertation explores various examples of the concept of symbolic non-being within television drama. It seeks to investigate the ways and degrees to which television storytelling can represent and perform the psychoanalytic process of “working through.” The medium of television provides a unique framework for investigation as television does not just illustrate (represent) working through as something a fictional character experiences, but it also performs it structurally, through the incorporation of three medium-specific features: duration, immersion and repetition. Television represents working through on a mass scale – imagining a collective audience by addressing big political, personal and/or institutional issues that shape our understanding of what it means to be human, navigating a complicated, painful, and too often unjust, world.

Symbolic non-being is relevant to this process as it represents a stage in the middle of a loss or trauma, where some element of the self has retreated from actualised personhood, and there are only two possible outcomes: reintegrated being (a successful working through), or non-symbolic permanent non-being (death or irreparable biological damage to that which constitutes personhood). The range of specific issues that television addresses can be broad but working through requires a point of identification for the viewer. Three case studies provide examples representing anxieties about the nature of existence through their depiction of narratives of non-being.: 1) moral injury in the season finale of M*A*S*H; 2) dementia and mother/daughter relationality in Grey’s Anatomy; and 3) prison temporality and social death in Rectify. The non-being that is experienced by the characters in each of these examples is almost always a temporary state – they enter the zone of non-being in different ways, specific to the nature of the kind of loss they have suffered. They may leave this zone by the end of the narrative, but the real-world correlation being gestured to in each case allows viewers to encounter a much broader zone of relationality which can then be more fully addressed in the real world, with a heightened awareness of the full range of implications of what has been lost and what has been taken.
Keywords

Television, psychoanalysis, non-being, working through, trauma, memory, witness, storytelling, social death, loss
Acknowledgements

There are many people, without whom, this journey to completion would have been much more difficult, if not impossible. I believe everyone we encounter has something to offer us, if we can take the time and find the common ground to see it. For this reason, I could make this list of thankyous exceedingly long, but I’ll temper those inclinations and instead focus on the highlights.

My supervisor, Sharon Sliwinski, has been integral in helping me to shape my project and better understand the nature of my own work, particularly in terms of navigating the emotional minefields of the intersection of scholarship and lived experience. Her mentorship has had an enormously positive impact on me, both as a scholar and a teacher. Alison Hearn, my second reader, has supported me in numerous ways throughout my time in grad school, and her feedback has always been thoughtful, generous and challenging – I’m glad that she could be in the room with me at the end. Norma Coates took the time to read a chapter for me at very short notice – I appreciate her good will in doing this, and also in serving on my examining committee, along with Will Straw, Joel Faflak and Susan Knabe. I was assured that the defense would be a great conversation, and it lived up to those expectations. I’m very grateful for the intellectual generosity and engagement of everyone who was in that room.

While I can’t say I would want to repeat the process any time soon, I must acknowledge how deeply rewarding it has been to immerse myself in academic study for the last few years. I am grateful for the cohort and community that I started with – many of whom have moved on now, but still keep in touch – particularly, Andrea Benoit, Richard Davila, Laura Cayen, Lili Dang, David Burty, Conan Masterton, Atle Kjosen, Trent Cruz, Jill McTavish, Luke Arnott, Warren Steele, Siobhan Watters, and Henry Svec. These folks are always there when I need them, whether it’s visits to the hospital, seeing me through surgery and chemotherapy, helping me move, celebrating holidays when we can’t get home to family, offering me a bed for the night, sharing countless meals/drinks and couches at parties, or to copy-edit my entire dissertation days before submission. After my cohort moved on, I found new community with the help of the new building.
While the layout of the 4th floor of FNB might be a quagmire of confusion for some to navigate successfully, I have only seen opportunities, for more face time with colleagues and mentors, shared food, shared stories, shared problems and solutions. These connections have provided a second wind of community support and I’m particularly grateful to Nicole Dalmer (whose inclusive spirit fosters community effortlessly – you are a real inspiration), Lola Wong (the purveyor of mason jar salads and other delicious treats), Claire Burrows (who started FIMS Runs – a legacy I will try to maintain as long as I can), Amy Freier (a fellow Manitoban), Eugenia Canas (our Williams writing sessions have been everything these last 6 months), Zak Bronson (my office-mate and general sounding-board), Yimin Chen (who always knows how to lighten the mood), Kelsang Legden (I’m grateful for all the library hacks) and so many others who congregate in the kitchen, for their friendship and collegiality. All of you guys have been one of the best things that grad school has given me.

I’m also grateful for the people who make the trains run on time at FIMS – particularly, Lili Dang, Cindy Morrison, Ella Young, Shelley Long, and Susan Knabe. Your institutional support, guidance and friendship have been invaluable, and a testimony to your own determination to build community in your workplace.

I want to acknowledge my parents in Winnipeg (thanks for driving to London for the public lecture Dad – it’s many hours in the car for just one day, but it was awesome to share it with you), and my extended family, who have always inquired after me and supported my choices, no matter where in the world they have taken me or for how long. My ladies – Robyn Harrington, Marnie Patterson, Kathleen Barnes and Claudine Rose Kuffner – have known me for most of my life, and I love that I can always count on them for support and encouragement. Knowing that other people believe in you is everything in completing this often-lonely task.

Giles Whitaker was the first person to encourage me to pursue a doctorate, and he didn’t mind that we left New Zealand and travelled to Canada to do it. Neither of us expected to find ourselves still in London, Ontario nearly 10 years after this journey began, but I couldn’t have reached the end of it without his love and support. I’m forever grateful.
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... i
Keywords ......................................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................... iii
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................. v
List of Figures ..................................................................................................................................... vii
Preface ............................................................................................................................................... viii

Introduction: Some ruminations on mourning, dying, and mediation .............................................. 1

1 Television ontologies: Being, non-being, and working through .................................................. 10
   Telling/watching stories .................................................................................................................. 19
   Therapeutic television – history, forms and narrative strategies .................................................... 23
   Uncertainty, closure, and working through .................................................................................... 36
   Case study overview .................................................................................................................... 41
      Being traumatised: M*A*S*H, moral injury, and revisiting the Korean War ......................... 41
      “Anything but ordinary”: (Not) Being your mother’s daughter in Grey’s Anatomy .............. 42
      Rectifying the future: Social death as non-being in the Prison Industrial Complex ............. 43
   Last thoughts ................................................................................................................................... 44

2 Being traumatised: M*A*S*H, moral injury, and revisiting the Korean War ............................... 46
   War, trauma and the non-being of moral injury ......................................................................... 50
   Discarded veterans: Moral injury in the context of Vietnam and Korea ................................. 53
   M*A*S*H – History, genre, conventional reception and suggested reframing ....................... 55
   Hawkeye’s guide: Dr. Freedman and the therapeutic framing of moral injury ...................... 60
      I. “Sometimes the answer is ‘no’.” ............................................................................................... 62
      II. “He’s been trying to kill himself since he got to Korea.” .................................................. 66
      III. “You son of a bitch! Why did you make me remember that?” ......................................... 68
   Korea revisited: Forgetting to remember a war that never ended ........................................... 75

3 “Anything but ordinary”: (Not) Being your mother’s daughter in Grey’s Anatomy .................. 80
   Being mother(ed) and daughter(ed) ............................................................................................. 85
   Mediated mothers, on and off the screen ..................................................................................... 88
List of Figures

Figure 1: *Scandal*, Episode 4:14 "The Lawn Chair" – final scene ........................................... 7

Figure 2: *Black-ish*, Episode 3:12 "Lemons" – montage of Black struggle .......................... 8

Figure 3: Sydney Freedman counselling Arnold Chandler as "Christ" ................................. 62

Figure 4: Michael Yee's hypnosis ......................................................................................... 66

Figure 5: Hawkeye's anguish as his memory returns .............................................................. 70

Figure 6: Honeycutt's final message to Hawkeye (and viewers) ............................................. 75

Figure 7: Ellis doesn't recognise Meredith ............................................................................ 110

Figure 8: Ellis and Meredith embrace in the dream-world ..................................................... 118

Figure 9: Meredith leaves her mother behind ........................................................................ 118

Figure 10: *Rectify* - Season 1 final scene ......................................................................... 144

Figure 11: *Rectify* - Season 2 opening scene ...................................................................... 144

Figure 12: "How do you know that this is real, and what you dream ain't?" ....................... 150

Figure 13: "Because who would dream up something like this?" ....................................... 150
Preface

The dissertation that I have written is not the one that I proposed. I know that this does not make me extraordinary – this is the nature of the task. But I found my way here perhaps more circuitously than most. Poised to build on the momentum of my submitted proposal, back in April of 2013, I anticipated a final summer of funding and four months of uninterrupted writing before teaching would resume and I would need to fund my own tuition payments. But plans like these tempt fate, and instead of style guides and literature reviews, my summer schedule became a patchwork quilt of surgery and recovery, prescription drugs and chemotherapy, hair-loss and hot flashes. Living with cancer takes it all away – not just your plans and your time and your energy and your self-esteem and your optimism, but your capacity to desire anything other than the negation of being that your life has become. If you are really lucky, you get to not die, but that turns out to be a surprisingly complex emotional outcome when you’ve done everything you can to prepare for the opposite. The days were light and dark, friends were loving and inspired, chemotherapy was a surprisingly peaceful weekly drug-trip. Nausea was minimal. Baldness did not become me.

Summer ended and it all came with me into autumn. I agreed to teach a class, because what else could I do? I needed the money, but more importantly I needed to be reminded that I still existed – the part of me that was here before – by people who weren’t inside my world of cancer, either as health-care providers or living with the vicarious terror that it wasn’t going to let me go. The class met at night, once a week, on a Wednesday. The course title was “Women’s Television” and we would meet and view selections from a pre-established canon and discuss them. I finished chemotherapy during that time. I had the port that had been used to deliver the “chemo-wash” directly into my abdominal cavity removed, in an out-patient surgical procedure on one of the last Wednesdays of the semester. I told my students that this might prevent me from attending class later that day, or at the very least incapacitate me somewhat, depending on what kind of anesthetic was prescribed. There were no ill effects – I attended lecture as usual and they applauded because they knew it meant that this part of the ordeal was over. It felt strange because I hadn’t achieved anything – I had just survived.
I offer this brief description of a period of my life to help to frame the way it shifted my thinking about myself, but more importantly, about my project. Prior to my diagnosis I was interested in investigating representations of psychotherapy on television. I intended to redirect the critique of therapy culture by clearly illustrating how capitalism and self-help have intersected to colonise and commodify the mental health industry, convincing cultural scholars that therapeutic interventions are superficial and narcissistic, focusing more on changing one’s life through consumerism than making any real psychological breakthroughs. My take was going to be that it wasn’t therapy that was the problem – it was capitalism. Therapeutic interventions save lives, and minds – they help hopeless people to develop strategies for navigating the struggles of their lives. But this all seems very obvious. What real intervention could I make that would seem significant enough to sustain a project of the scope necessary for a doctoral dissertation?

So, I took a step back. Instead of focusing on therapy culture, I decided to focus on a particular state one finds oneself in when therapeutic processes are called on to help make sense of it all. I call this state “symbolic non-being.” There are all sorts of examples, most involving some kind of traumatic experience which keeps an individual stuck in between – not technically dead, but not fully alive either. It’s not a new idea, so it’s not exclusively mine, but I know it intimately because it’s a state I found myself in for some time after my diagnosis and treatment. As more time passed, my continued survival became a matter of math, much as the dire prognosis had been when I was first briefed on it. “Not dying” became a form of achievement that indicated a future likelihood of not dying, at least according to the timeline which my disease typically follows. This should have been good news, but it’s surprisingly difficult to let go of one’s attachment to death. I was so proud of how I had prepared for it – I had become invested in my identity as a sick person, as a dying person. Becoming a living person again wasn’t just a matter of having new information and trusting it. It was something more profound, something inarticulable.

I discovered Catherine Malabou’s concept of “destructive plasticity” (2012a), which “invites us to consider… the suffering caused by an absence of suffering, in the emergence of a new form of being, a stranger to the one before” (18). It seems absurd to
suggest that my positive prognosis constitutes a form of suffering, yet there is something compelling about acknowledging that the absence of suffering, or rather the recession of it, in this case, could be felt as a loss. Still, how could I be anything but happy about my change in circumstances? Follow-up visits to the cancer centre filled me with shame and guilt – I survived, and yet I couldn’t even be grateful.

And so, I went back to the therapeutic scenarios that had first attracted me – the representations of psychoanalysis on television that moved me and made me believe in the power of that process. I could see the state I was experiencing, and how it was a lived reality for a variety of characters, anchoring stories of trauma and loss. And I began to see how the therapeutic process wasn’t just something being depicted in these stories – it was something central to the process of television storytelling itself, made doubly powerful when the content matched the form. This is not to say that television performs/provides therapy. While viewers may find the viewing experience to be comforting or even therapeutic on some level, it’s not my position that real therapeutic breakthroughs can happen through viewing and listening alone.

Therapy is active, and television is largely, fundamentally, passive, in the sense that the transmission of information is only, always unidirectional. What television does do, however, is rehearse a kind of therapeutic monologue, relying on its key features of repetition, immersion and duration to consolidate the process. This is particular to longer-form narratives. It necessarily requires lots of time and lots of episodes. The particular case studies selected help to exemplify this: Grey’s Anatomy represents a hybridization of two staple TV genres – the episodic (medical) procedural and the primetime soap opera, and it’s also the longest running program of its kind (currently broadcasting in its 15th season); M*A*S*H was initially chosen for two main reasons – it was a sitcom about a real war, and it exceeds all other programs in that genre with regards to its combined popularity and longevity; Rectify isn’t as long-running as the other shows (only 4 seasons, compared with eleven and fifteen, respectively), nor was it broadcast on a mainstream network like CBS or ABC. It was selected primarily for its content, but also to illustrate the ways that television can still perform this work over a much smaller range of episodes; its form meets the necessary criteria, employing the three features noted above.
John Ellis (2002) posits that television addresses cultural anxieties associated with uncertainty by “work[ing] over new material for its audiences as a necessary consequence of its position of witness” (79). This process is “multi-faceted and leaky” as “a constant process of making and remaking meanings, and of exploring possibilities” (2002: 79).

Ellis suggests that this capacity is specific to television in its era of availability, meaning that in the time of scarcity\(^1\), when there were both fewer sets in homes and fewer programs on the air, this was not something television was able to do. Ellis uses Freudian terminology to describe this process – “reconciliation based upon familiarity and repetition-in-difference” (2002: 81) – yet the means through which this reconciliation is meant to take place is uncertain. There are gestures towards closure, but there is also a tension here as while individual series may end, television as a cultural industry resists closures in its products overall. Even within individual narratives, it is only our relationship with them that ends – the characters they represent continue to live on in our imaginations, sometimes resurrected in reboots and spin-offs, even decades later.

Ellis also discusses the idea of television holding onto the things that we can’t bear to look at or engage with – in this respect, it doesn’t work through, so much as contain our anxieties – much like the mother as container, in Wilfred Bion’s (1962b) theorizing of the infant/mother relationship.\(^2\) Television promises to contain us until we are ready to contain ourselves – sometimes indefinitely. This is what allows a text like \textit{M*A*S*H} to have a richness that is particular to its legacy – the longevity of cultural memory and the new points of identification the program now allows for when re-viewed.

\(^1\) Looking back on the history of UK television production, John Ellis (2000) proposes three distinct historical eras: scarcity, availability and plenty. The era of scarcity lasts for nearly three decades in the UK and is characterised by a small number of channels and programs; in the US Michele Hilmes (2007) calls this period the “classical network era” dominated by the “big three” – CBS, ABC and NBC. The era of availability coincides with the birth of cable subscription networks which supplement earlier free-to-air offerings; in the US Amanda Lotz refers to this period as the “multi-channel transition”. Eventually satellite technology allows for a proliferation of channels, both domestic and global, giving way to an era of plenty, characterised by multi-platform content, and an increasingly fragmented audience which could be targeted in niche demographic groupings.

\(^2\) Bion’s theory of containment builds on Melanie Klein’s (1946) concept of projective identification. He saw the infant as projecting its frustrations onto the mother (the container) and that if she took on this burden in order to facilitate healthy development in her child, these anxieties could be considered “contained”.
more than four decades after its initial broadcast. It is also what allows *Rectify* the opportunity to continue to hold onto compelling and significant ideas about race and incarceration in the United States, as a pressing subtext of a narrative about the effects of prison which isn’t yet able to fully articulate Black carceral experience but offers plenty of opportunities for reparative readings which might move in this direction.

As I sat with my case studies and began to pull apart the narrative threads most significant to me in terms of the representation of symbolic non-being, it became clearer that the dilemma I had faced – how to readjust to the possibility of existence after having reconciled myself to a dire threat that was now receding daily – paled in comparison to so many of the kinds of half-lives of symbolic non-being that so many people find themselves subject to. My case studies, chosen somewhat through vague instinct, turned out to be exemplary opportunities to examine zones of non-being in three different realms: the political, the personal, and the institutional. These are realms that we all inhabit, throughout our lives, in complex and overlapping ways. They speak to the structures of power that organize our reality, to the systems and people who control and influence us, but also to those for whom we bear responsibility. They help to map a shared interconnecting world of action and consequence – too often scarred by legacies of inhumane laws, selfish choices, and unjust policies. But there is hope there too. The zone of non-being is a space of suffering, but also a space to transcend it. To move through this space is to be reminded that there are a great many things in this world still worth living for.
Introduction: Some ruminations on mourning, dying, & mediation

Sometimes it is scary – but to think that I’ll not be is impossible because I’m here – and when I’m not here there’ll still be cows and grass and vegetables and radios and telephone machines and cardiologists and soup tins and cookers and hats and shoes and Walkmans and Tiny Tears and synagogues and beaches and sunshine and walks in the rain and films and music and my coat and my shoes and cars and underpants and necklaces and my Mam and Dad and flowers – everywhere there’ll be something in the whole world everything will be full except me – and there isn’t even a hole somewhere where I used to be – and apart from people what remember me and what I was like there is nothing missing from when I was here – there is no space in the universe where people have dropped out [...] 

~ Lee Hall, Spoonface Steinberg (1997: 33-34)

Until now I had been able only to grieve, not mourn. Grief was passive. Grief happened. Mourning, the act of dealing with grief, required attention.

~ Joan Didion (2007: 26)

We start here from lack, from loss – from the anguish that we leave no holes in the universe behind us when we exit. There is a great deal of scholarship that theorizes loss, much of it from a psychoanalytic perspective, and most of it focuses on the loser – the one who is left by a person, or whose professional career is abruptly ended, or whose body fails to perform as it should, or whose possessions become obliterated by a fire or other disaster, or whose culture and entire way of life is stolen by colonizers. Attention is paid to both what is lost, and to what remains, focusing on the implications and opportunities for the future. What is worth mourning is clarified even if just through the subtlety of what is included and neglected in discussion. The parameters of mourning are drawn – the ways, the means, the what, the why. Much of this discourse might collectively be referred to as the “politics of mourning” (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003).
But what does it mean to mourn? Does it involve a fixed and terminating progression – you begin to mourn, you do the work of mourning, and then you complete the ritual – done? Or is mourning a non-linear process where you revisit your losses continuously over time, as they affect you in new and unexpected ways? Is mourning a special designation, for interacting with loss at the moments when it is most “fresh,” or most overwhelming? Some significant losses (most, perhaps) can never really be fully overcome. Is it useful to quantify and qualify an imaginary list of possibilities? Losses of the self, of the body, or of its capacities – these are always with you – you don’t “get over” them, so much as you learn to adapt. But does it matter how these losses occur? If you were born without something, for example, do you still grieve it? As a child, I desperately wished that I could fly – I believed that if I spun around fast enough, like *Wonder Woman*, then I would see a new image staring back at me in the mirror, clad in the 70s trappings of sexualized superhero (but who cares when you can fly)? And each morning that I spun until I collapsed on the ground with the dizziness, I was so sad, so disappointed. Did I grieve though? Is it possible to grieve something that you never had – that was never possible?

Is mourning only applicable to the loss of something external – a job, a partner, a sibling, a child, a friend? These things can sometimes be replaced, in a manner of speaking, by other things that fulfil the needs formerly provided. The loss of a child is probably the hardest to bear, because of the loss of potential, combined with the guilt about the unnaturalness of outliving one’s progeny. Survivor’s guilt is at play here, but also a deeper sense of transgressing some fundamental rule, that a parent’s first job is to keep their child safe. The loss of a parent or a sibling can also be a foundational loss of something that cannot be replaced. Family members are inextricably bound up with our own identity categories – losing them means losing a part of ourselves in the context of how their existence labelled us. But how do we navigate lost jobs, romantic partners, friends? Achieving closure through mourning is directly linked to how implicated the loss is with our own identity. You can lose your job, without losing your vocation. But if you lose both of your parents, you cease to exist as someone’s child. If you lose your children, you are no longer a parent. And if you cannot be reconciled to the loss – if it seems like there is no way forward – then what happens? Is it always possible to recover,
or can mourning perversely be responsible for pushing people even closer to despair?

Writing about her parents who died in old age after some years of debility, Joan Didion comments on the way her understanding of the inevitability of these losses allowed her to maintain some degree of distance between them and the ongoing dailiness of her life: “My father was dead, my mother dead, I would need for a while to watch out for mines, but I would still get up in the morning and send out the laundry. I would still plan a menu for Easter lunch. I would still remember to renew my passport” (2007: 26). This is altogether different from the way she experiences the sudden loss of her husband John: “Grief is different. Grief has no distance. Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life” (Didion, 2007: 26). She characterizes mourning as the act of dealing with grief – something not passive, which requires attention, labour.

Mourning also presumes a loss that is finite – a thing or a person or a time or a way of life, or a belief system that will never be restored to us. Judith Butler suggests in Precarious Life that mourning might have to do with submitting oneself to a transformation without knowing in advance what the result will be (2004: 21). This sounds kind of like the framework for the modern television makeover show: unhappy subject submits self to expert, unsure of what will happen, but hoping for the best. It is not really the same though, as TV transformations involve the subject being emptied of old unsuitable desires regarding self-expression and then being made over in a new image, revealed to astounded loved ones, and used to promote a variety of consumer solutions to low self-esteem. Much joy ensues and there is never any question that many people worked to design the result in advance – the experts, the television producers, the advertisers, and the distributors of consumer goods. As Butler reminds us, “there is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned” (2004: 21).

While the personal transformation that would seem to inhere in the process of mourning certainly implies a foundational change in the self, there is less work regarding loss that thinks more explicitly about the loss of self – both metaphorically and literally – that works through what it means to not be – to no longer exist in one sense or another.
This kind of working through would include preparing for the cessation of one’s life, but it must also consider how one navigates and ultimately exits a period of symbolic non-being. We understand non-being primarily as the inevitable conclusion of being, that is, death. And while we can conceptualize mortality in intellectual terms, we spend so much of our time fighting (often superficially) against the things that mark our place on the journey towards death, that it might be fair to say that in Western society we wage a cultural war against the concept. Diet and exercise rhetoric reinforce our desire to live longer, positing that care of the body is the key to longevity. The cosmetic industry offers other kinds of palliative remedies, designed to hide the physical traces of ageing, so we might distract ourselves (and others) from the reality of our place in the continuum. We recognise death, but we fear it, or at least we fear the unknown potential suffering that could herald its arrival. In this respect, loss, as a matter of mortality, is simple.

The loss of self as a matter of identity is more complex. Who we are – as subjects, to ourselves, within our communities, to the people we are connected to and responsible for by both blood and choice – is constantly changing in tandem with what we learn and experience while contained in a physical body designed to expire. We might be able to theorize being (as Martin Heidegger most famously did), but what does it mean to not be? How do we understand this negative state? How do we prepare for it? How is it distinctly captured by a cultural medium like television? How do we reconcile ourselves to the matter of ceasing to exist? With these key questions, I mean to probe at something more than just how we prepare to die, although that is included in my framework too. Accepting death is something we begin to do the moment we first understand the concept – usually in the first instance, through the passing of a pet or elderly relative. I suspect though, that for many people, this is largely a theoretical exercise – we know that death happens, that people we love will die, and that so eventually will we, but can we really grasp the enormity of it? In this respect, mourning is part of what I am bringing into view in my project, but it doesn’t completely account for the sort of absence that I am thinking of, which is centred around the notion of non-being, and presupposes that instances of it are both temporary and transcendable. While this work begins by broadly considering mourning, loss, and anxiety, these concepts come to be useful specifically in the context of the way television might be viewed as therapeutic and the ways that it might help us to
“work through” our personal and vicarious experiences with threats to being.

Television shows us the world, both locally and globally – it represents particular social and cultural realities back to us, sometimes even enlightening and instructing us through its acts of “ideological smuggling” (Hamamoto, 1989). According to John Ellis (2002) all of television’s genre forms collectively address issues of the day – digesting and demystifying them for us. He refers to this practice as “working through,” borrowing from Sigmund Freud’s use of the term as a key element of the psychoanalytic process.

“Working through” is a key term for this dissertation. In the clinical sense, working through refers to the patient’s process of repeating, elaborating, and amplifying interpretations of psychological meaning.3 The medium of television provides a unique framework for working through on a mass scale – wherein the audience elaborates the meaning of social, political, and institutional issues.

Ellis notes that we are living in a state of anxiety and uncertainty that can often be exacerbated by world events. He asserts that television takes these events (and the larger issues and ideas surrounding them) and re-presents them over and over again across genres and program forms, until the difficult information has been worked through for us. As a UK television scholar, Ellis’s perspective is limited by a number of factors which characterise British TV as significantly different from its US counterpart. While the US television industry has always been unabashedly commercial, British TV began in an

---

3 While Freud (1914) refers specifically to “working through” as a means of helping a patient overcome resistance to the successful conclusion of analysis, Charles Brenner (1987) expands on this explanation by reviewing various meanings given to the term by Freud and others, specifying the nature of this resistance in each case and highlighting how these meanings shift and evolve over time. He argues that “the concept of working through was, in effect, Freud’s explanation of why analysis takes a longer time than it was first supposed it should” (89). While other analysts offer “considerable diversity of opinion” regarding the term, Brenner notes that they each still consistently seek to address the question of why psychoanalysis takes too long (84), but also that no one has provided a satisfactory answer to the question (101). He reminds us that in 1914 Freud saw working through as both a bothersome means to an end, and an exceptionally valuable end in itself, paralleling his similar perspective regarding the role of transference in psychoanalysis (102). He concludes his examination of the literature with this definitive statement: “Working through is not a regrettable delay in the process of analytic cure. It is analysis. It is the interpretative work which … leads to truly valuable insight and to dependable, lasting therapeutic change. It is not especially related to any one component of psychic conflict or of psychic functioning in general any more than it is to the others. […] The analysis of psychic conflict in all of its aspects is what should properly be called working through” (103).
ethos of public service. These two divergent beginnings have now converged to some extent, as UK television has become increasingly commercial, and American TV’s subscription channels have allowed for greater diversification of content, more in keeping with public service guidelines. Some of the key differences, however, remain, and one in particular that I would like to highlight involves the approach to fictional narratives, and more specifically, their duration.

My contention is that television’s working through need not involve a multiplicity of different engagements with difficult information, across various genres – that in fact it works better when it doesn’t. While the collective multiple genre approach has plenty of breadth (repetition), it lacks crucial elements of depth (duration and immersion). Working through can therefore be more fully achieved within a single television series, where the narrative builds and accumulates, performing the necessary labour that the important combination of repetition, duration, and immersion facilitates. It’s important to note that this happens over the course of an entire series, or at least a number of seasons, rather than in one episode alone. The fragmented attempt to work through political, personal and institutional uncertainties by means of one-off “very special” episodes may seem compelling, but it is ultimately ineffective. Two examples from recent years come to mind: Scandal, Season 4, Episode #14 “The Lawn Chair” (March 5th, 2015) and Black-ish, Season 3, Episode #12 “Lemons” (January 11th, 2017).

Scandal uses “The Lawn Chair” to try to palliate the combination of helplessness and rage that African Americans and their allies had been feeling, in the historical moment of broadcast, about the pervasive disposability of Black lives. It features a storyline about Brandon, an African American teenager shot by police, and his distraught father who insists on standing guard (sitting in a lawn chair) over his dead son’s body

---

4 The BBC does still have a mandate of public service, however; it is still funded by a TV licence, and still has ad-free channels.

5 Scandal creator and executive producer Shonda Rhimes has been quite explicit about this in interviews, but even without evidence of the program’s representational intentions, this characterization of the episode is meant to draw attention to how it might be read, in the context of the other kinds of ideological work undertaken in prior episodes. Scandal also enjoyed a strong presence on Twitter, mobilized by the program’s African American actors, who would live-tweet during first-run broadcasts in the US, alongside their fans.
with a shotgun until someone can offer him a convincing explanation for what has happened. Tension builds through the episode as the dead youth is accused of having had a weapon and the police assert that a knife had been found on his body. The father insists that his son never carried a knife. Eventually the truth is discovered – the police officer responsible for shooting the un-armed youth found a weapon to plant on his body after the fact. When confronted with the evidence, by way of the homeless man he took it from, he launches into a long rant at Kerry Washington’s character, Olivia Pope, about “you people” and insists that Brandon is dead because his community didn’t teach him to show enough respect for the badge. The final moments involve Brandon’s body finally being collected by the coroner; the last image is a close-up of his face contrasted against the bright yellow of the body bag being zipped up over it, overlaid with the swelling volume of Nina Simone’s “I Will be Released” (see figure 1). Though there are already many similarities in the story to the case of Mike Brown from Ferguson, Missouri, this episode felt especially palpable as it aired on March 5th, 2015, one day after the Department of Justice concluded an internal investigation of the shooting, clearing officer Darren Wilson of any wrongdoing and asserting that his actions were justified in self-defence.

*Figure 1: Scandal, Episode 4:14 "The Lawn Chair" – final scene*
Like *Scandal*, *Black-ish* also occasionally seeks to address current events. The episode “Lemons” illustrates the main characters’ (negative) reactions by beginning with a series of flashbacks that go from election night until the point in time in January (2017) when the episode was broadcast – about a week before Inauguration Day. The children’s school is closed for a “day of reflection” to prep for a “healing rally” and the older son, who is president of his class, tries to write a speech reflecting on Martin Luther King Jr., to inspire his peers to be more compassionate. Mom channels her fears into donations to leftist causes – her body a walking gallery of supporter gifts – while Dad listens to his work colleagues argue about how each one voted, growing increasingly frustrated by their inability to concentrate on a pressing work deadline. When finally challenged about why he doesn’t seem to care about what happens to his country, he gives a speech noting that the history of the United States indicates that life doesn’t get better for Black people no matter who wins elections. Nina Simone again provides a musical backdrop, with “Strange Fruit” accompanying a sobering pictorial montage of Black oppression and struggle in the US.

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 2: Black-ish, Episode 3:12 "Lemons" – montage of Black struggle*

While each of these episodes provoked a significant reaction from both cultural critics and regular viewers, noting their capacity to stir up an emotional reaction from the audience, neither of them offers a successful working through of the issues prioritized by their stories. They fail on three fronts: 1) duration – they are each single episodes, introducing episodic problems, punctuating them with ad breaks, and attempting to resolve them within the broadcast window (23 minutes for the sitcom, 42 for the drama); 2) repetition – neither program focuses regularly on real-world political issues, making these episodes a jarring departure from the kind of storytelling these programs usually deliver, and the issues are not revisited substantially, if at all, in subsequent episodes; 3)
immersion – the lack of prior or subsequent narrative connections draws special attention to these episodes, so that even new viewers can engage with them, diluting the depth of the emotional connection they can reasonably make. Working through takes time and intensity; like the psychoanalytic process from which the term is borrowed, there is a great deal of labour required.

While the examples discussed above do not focus explicitly on transcending zones of non-being, they are illustrative in helping to delineate the parameters of television’s powers to work through more generally. They are also helpful in establishing a preliminary connection between the thinking here about mourning and loss, which underpins my broader understanding of symbolic non-being, and the ways in which these themes are negotiated in selected US fictive television texts. Chapter one sets out the priorities and scope of this dissertation in more detail, situating its theoretical and methodological frameworks within existing traditions of television criticism, textual analysis, and psychosocial inquiry. Each of the subsequent chapters presents a case study involving a close reading of a fictive television text, in the context of the zone of non-being it illustrates; each of these chapters necessarily contains its own content-specific literature review in order to better contextualise the key themes and narrative scenarios represented in each television series.
1 Television ontologies: Being, non-being, and working through

Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when a wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possession, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.

~ Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller” (1968: 83)

Everything on TV is miraculous and ridiculous and it will still be on after we are off.

~ David Thomson (2017: 384)

This dissertation explores various examples of the concept of symbolic non-being by examining their representation as stories on US television. It seeks to investigate the ways and degrees to which selected fictive television texts can both represent and perform the psychoanalytic process of working through. As a central thematic, the idea of symbolic non-being is relevant to this process as it represents a stage somewhere in the middle (of an experience of loss or trauma) where there are only two possible outcomes going forward: 1) reintegrated being (a successful working through of grief /trauma/conflict/ disruption), or 2) non-symbolic permanent non-being (death or irreparable damage to that which constitutes personhood). The medium of television provides a unique framework for investigating these ideas. Fictive television texts prioritise storytelling that deals with universal themes in specific political, personal and institutional contexts, while the structural elements of television’s narratology and mediation have implications for the reach and influence of the psychoanalytically inflected work these stories can do. Television doesn’t just illustrate (represent) working through as something a fictional character experiences, but it also performs it more structurally as it gestures towards the political, personal and institutional implications of events being represented on television, in the real world. In addition to clarifying the primary thematic and conceptual ideas I will be mobilising – symbolic non-being and
working through – this chapter sets out the priorities and scope of this dissertation in more detail, situating its theoretical and methodological frameworks within existing traditions of television criticism, textual analysis, and psychosocial inquiry.

I theorize symbolic non-being as a state one enters in response to a significant loss. Importantly then, non-being is constituted through the nature of this loss, and the symbolic zone of non-being one enters after a loss of this kind is ultimately rooted in both the loss itself, and its wider material implications. A zone of non-being might be understood as a state of melancholia, even if the subject is not entirely conscious of it. The transition into this state may occur after experiencing some form of trauma that threatens material being, but as non-being directly references an assault on the psychic self, the threat may also be more metaphysical.

Paul Tillich (1952) asserts that “neurosis is a way of avoiding non-being by avoiding being” (2014: 61), suggesting that symbolic non-being can also be a space inhabited by those who can only see being as a frightening reminder of its inevitable cessation. His treatise on the role anxiety plays in our lives, *The Courage to Be*, is helpful as it identifies three types of anxiety, or qualities of non-being as threats to being (39). The first is the threat to ontic self-affirmation (physical being), or anxiety of death; the second is the threat to spiritual self-affirmation (psychological being), or anxiety of meaninglessness; and the third is the threat to moral self-affirmation (social being), or anxiety of condemnation. If any of these three elements of being are compromised (assuming that the threat to the physical self has stopped short of death) then one enters a zone of non-being.

Each of the texts I analyse addresses one or more of these types of anxiety. *M*A*S*H* deals particularly with the anxiety of condemnation, as both soldiers and medical non-combatants struggle to come to terms with taking lives. But the anxiety of

---

6 Freud differentiates melancholia from mourning by focusing on “the disturbance of self-regard” which appears only in melancholia, but is absent in mourning. Thomas Ogden refers to this as “the melancholic’s diminished self-esteem” (2002: 770). Paul Tillich’s conception of non-being is also useful here, as it is framed as a threat to self-affirmation (2014: 39) which can manifest in 3 different ways; these will be shown later to map handily over the three ways I determine being to be constituted.
death is also present in this narrative, as a motivator for deadly self-defence. And the anxiety of meaninglessness is an outcome of the guilt and shame killing produces. In Grey’s Anatomy a formerly high-achieving dementia sufferer battles both anxieties of death and meaninglessness, while her daughter is threatened by the anxiety of condemnation. Rectify illustrates all three as a former death row inmate contends with the lasting implications of a multitude of threats to his own being and to the legacy of a person he cared for in prison.

Some cases of symbolic non-being are temporary while others produce a profound alteration in the self that ultimately results in physical death. Non-being is thus contained within being; it has no conceptual meaning outside of the framework of its opposite. We can only understand non-being as a negation of being and thus part of the fear it produces comes from its inevitability (in terms of our ultimate mortality) and our lack of control over the process. This is what makes us real, present, human. If we want to understand non-being then we have to have some sense of being. What follows is not meant to be read as a full scholarly discussion of trends in ontology. It is necessarily limited to a brief delineation of some well-known and accepted characterizations of being, in order to better describe symbolic non-being.

According to Descartes (“I think therefore I am”), being is constituted by consciousness. Our thoughts are the proof of our existence and proof of the reality we perceive around us, but what if one’s thoughts are delusions? How does one exist in the context of psychosis or some other pathological mental condition that fragments reality? And who decides what is real? How can we trust our own observations when the world is organised by social, economic and cultural constructs? Heidegger (1953), discussing the Dasein, suggests that being is time, and that existence is defined in accordance with its duration. Time is finite, and thus being necessarily ends with death. He inverts Descartes, suggesting that we don’t exist because we think, but rather that we are able to think because we already exist. Sartre’s ideas about being in itself and being for itself distinguish inanimate objects (and possibly even “lower” level life forms like cats and dogs) from human beings capable of self-reflection and informed choice. This distinction might also be regarded as the difference between objects and subjects. Objects are fixed –
their meaning and value is prescribed from outside of themselves. When perceived as objects, they don’t have consciousness, in any kind of metacognitive way – they just exist, and they have certain self-ness that is constituted along with all other objects in the same category of existence. Subjects are conscious, making choices, resisting the imposition of meaning and value from outside of themselves. Being for the subject is constituted by what Heidegger calls “mineness,” which is different from the selfness of objects, as “mineness” differentiates the subject according to what is specifically its own, rather than creating commonality with other objects of the same type, as selfness does. Here being is linked to freedom, and freedom becomes a perverse burden, because it also makes one responsible. This freedom is sometimes characterized as anguish, an anxiety one feels over the choices that one must make over and over again, to reconstitute one’s identity anew, with every action.

This anxiety relates back to Tillich, who comments specifically on the courage that it then takes to be, in the face of relentless freedom and the anguish it imposes. According to Sartre, existence precedes essence in the sense that you are what you do in the moment that you do it – bad acts are committed by bad people, while good actions constitute the goodness of their commissioners. However, as you are able to make different choices with every action, you can change the moral assignation of your character accordingly. This means that there is no essential character which can be ascribed to human beings generally, or to individuals more specifically – Sartre would appear to support the role of nurture over nature in influencing the development of young humans. Yet, as both nature and nurture describe ways that character becomes fixed (through genes or through education, respectively), perhaps Sartre would reject both.

These ideas eventually break down somewhat, in the context of systemic inequality and structures of power which make it much more difficult for being and identity to be constituted as a mere matter of actions informed by free choices. We might be able to understand what it means to have choices in principle, but in reality, we often have very little control over what happens to us or our loved ones, particularly when it comes to suffering and loss. Freud (1917) notes that when we lose someone, we do not always know what is in that person that has been lost (245). Surely this is of even greater
significance when we find ourselves having lost ourselves. Is the quality of one’s being merely a characterising feature that allows us to evaluate the richness of our existence, or does it go to the heart of what it means to be? Can we truly “be” when it is just us, or is being predicated on being seen, being known, or being valued by others? Do we need to think instead about why we should choose to be? If being is an act of courage, as Paul Tillich emphasises, then surely it is a motivated one, and not just a default position. What do we pursue through our being – pleasure (Freud)\(^7\), or meaning (Frankl)\(^8\), or power (Adler)\(^9\)? Is it possible to actively pursue multiple ends or none at all?

If we consider how being is constituted, in terms of what it means to be generally, rather than what it means to be oneself more specifically, then there are three ways that being can be determined (they line up nicely with Tillich’s threats to being, highlighted earlier): 1) physically – this involves the life/death continuum within a framework of normative health outcomes which can be assessed and measured quantitatively, but “quality of life” is also a term commonly used by medical professionals when assessing the viability of a patient in relation to serious illness, injury, or even just the vagaries of aging; 2) psychologically – there are a variety of continuums that measure mental competence and well-being, which may be threatened psychologically by mood disorders, control, isolation, and witnessing, engaging in or experiencing violence; 3) socially – we have obligations to one another and to the communities we live in, but we also depend on others to provide us with a sense of belonging. We negotiate our place in the world through our relationships with others. The social construction of being

\(^7\) Sigmund Freud distinguishes between individuals whose primary goal is to seek pleasure while avoiding unpleasure, and individuals who learn to adapt to reality by renouncing pleasure to some degree, or at least delaying gratification. This balance requires the “pleasure ego” to yield to the “reality ego” and is generally achieved by the end of adolescence, but may begin to develop in childhood.

\(^8\) While Freud theorized that a pleasure instinct was necessarily subsumed by the realities of life which seldom allow for unabated pleasure-seeking, Viktor Frankl argues that the pursuit of pleasure is in fact empty, and that it is a “will to meaning” that ultimately gives life purpose and makes suffering bearable.

\(^9\) Alfred Adler builds on Nietzsche’s concept of the “will to power” to develop his school of “individual psychology” which focuses not on the instincts/drives that Freud prioritized, but rather looks to the relationship between the individual and the world they live in. The power Adler believes one strives for is not necessarily personal power over others, but rather power in one’s own life – perhaps better articulated as a striving for superiority, perfection or mastery, with an ultimate goal of making change for the better in the surrounding world.
considers behavioral norms, power relationships and kinship. Systemic inequality comes into play here as marginalized groups are less likely to be viewed humanely by those with power. In a society that is primarily organized around the needs and dictates of capitalism, it is not surprising that what is socially valued and reinforced is what is of the most use to capital – thus those whose being is negated physically and/or psychologically, are more likely to find themselves equally on the outside of being in a social context. This is a circular problem though, as structures of power which socially organize people also have a significant influence on how their being is constituted both physically and psychologically. It can be difficult to say which comes first.

There are moments that can help to crystallize our understanding of symbolic non-being, which take it out of the abstract and make it thoroughly, materially concrete. While the obvious example might seem to be the event of death (both sudden and pending), this is only part of the story. As the titular character (a 7-year-old autistic girl suffering from terminal cancer) in Lee Hall’s short play *Spoonface Steinberg* muses:

> When you think about dying it is very hard to do – it is to think about what is not – to think about everything there is nothing – to not be and never be again – it is even more than emptiness – if you think of emptiness it is full of nothing and death is more than this – death is even less than nothing – when you think about that you will not be here for your breakfast – and that you will never see Mam or Dad or Mrs. Spud – or the telly or hear the sweet singing opera ladies or feel anything anymore – but you won’t feel sad as there will be nothing to feel of – and that is the weird point – not that there is even anything but there is not even nothing – and that is death. (1997: 33)

Thinking about the termination of one’s existence is indeed very hard to do – the implication here being that we don’t have the knowledge or perhaps even the language to articulate fully what the process entails. For me, these moments of fleeting understanding consistently – and no doubt unsurprisingly – populated the landscape of my cancer diagnosis. As Lana Lin (2017) explains:

> Cancer not only complicates the ideal of wholeness in which people are physically and psychically invested, but it also unveils the unwanted knowledge that from the outset we have never been entirely whole, a knowledge that most of us repress in order to function from day to day. In
short, cancer shows the hole in the whole. It lays bare the illusory aspects of our feelings of bodily stability and the unconscious assumption that our bodies and psyches are and will remain invulnerable to disrepair. (2)

There are practical things we do to prepare for death: we get our affairs in order, ensure that our debts are paid and our desires for end of life care are known. We make lists: of regrets, of things to experience and accomplish, of who gets our stuff, of passwords for the people who will take over the things we are currently responsible for. And then there are the less practical things – our wishes and dreams and hopes for the future made manifest – the legacies we leave behind. To say that these things are less practical is not to imply that they are frivolous. They are significant and perhaps foundational in terms of our thinking about the value of our lives, both while we are still living and after we are gone. Our various lists organize our time and our relationships, and they shape our attitudes about what really matters. But they also distract us from addressing the questions we can never fully answer – what does it mean to no longer be? I was most struck by the ambivalence of my bodily instability at the moment when it finally appeared that cancer was not going to end my life after all, noting as Lana Lin so elegantly articulates, the irony of cancer’s dehumanising objectification – confirming my human embodiment, only to “render … [me] into [an] object … at odds with [myself]” (2017: 2). How do we navigate death’s proximity? And if it recedes, how do we continue to live fully, in the face of the knowledge of non-being’s inevitability?

Mounting the “courage to be,” as Paul Tillich describes it, is not easy, not just because of the very real problem of human suffering, but also because being sometimes seems so pointless. Tillich’s commentary about the anxiety of confronting the precarity of being creates is particularly useful here. In the forward to the third edition of Tillich’s *The Courage to Be*, Harvey Cox defines anxiety in Tillich’s terms, as arising “because the self, as a participant in ‘being’, constantly faces the menace of non-being as its price for staying alive (2014: xv).” By characterising the attitude of confronting one’s mortality head-on and choosing to be as an act of courage, Tillich makes it possible to frame wilful non-being as cowardice. This has familiar echoes of Shakespeare, when Hamlet concludes at the end of his monologue that “conscience does make cowards of us all” (3:1). But significantly, Hamlet’s position is the inverse of Tillich’s, seeing an inability to
choose definitively “not to be” as the ultimate act of cowardice – borne of a fear of the unknown that lurks beyond death. In a practical sense, being is really just the material state of prolonging the absence (or delaying the presence) of material non-being.

The speaker in Alexandra Thurman’s poem “Bridge I Live By, Spanning the Ocean” ruminates at length on a passing fancy to end her life by jumping off a bridge she is crossing with her young son, rumoured to have recently been the site of a suicide. In the excerpt here, she acknowledges how easy it would be to give in to that perverse temptation, even when it might seem that there is everything in the world to live for:

Legs like water, pulse a roar, I walked
the bridge to the other side. Back on firm ground,
my son wrung his crushed hand quizzically.
Quelle chance. Grace of air current. And random possibility.
Or perhaps the urge to jump was nothing more than whim?
Like the jumper, I heard my voice,
felt a wry temptation to climb the rail
and turn the perfect somersault?

Unlike me, she wanted to be taken seriously.
I guess she didn’t hear that one rogue voice
among the lousy chorus who told me
I’d been running not for nothing
but because, goddamn, it hurts.
So you rush past that small life you’re given,
hurling on towards what you dread---
(Thurman, 1997: 28-29)

The poem seems to suggest that both choosing “to be” and “not to be” are acts of courage in their own way. Living isn’t easy – “goddamn, it hurts.” The rest of the poem explains that, having survived the first jump, the jumper swam back to shore, and then climbed up and did it again. The question then, is did she jump the second time because she wanted to die, or because she was certain she wouldn’t? She leaped once into the abyss and the worst thing didn’t happen. Is it unreasonable to imagine that she might try her luck a second time? Had she figured out, as Lin contends, that the intrusion of the threat of death is irreparable – that “the realisation of self-difference cannot be put back” (2017: 3)?
Western culture has socially and politically imbued being with such importance that deciding to end one’s life is a criminal offence in many jurisdictions. Surely if we need to legislate against non-being, we must acknowledge that we see it as socially problematic. Debates over the right to die are passionate – to those who believe that life is precious, willingly choosing to end one’s life seems abhorrent, and something the state ought to intervene to prevent; to those who have watched loved ones suffer in agony at the end of a fatal illness or accident, “death with dignity” is the rallying cry. Still others who suffer the mental torment of suicidal tendencies want their desires to be weighed equally against those who would only call for life to end when all hope is gone. ¹⁰ We care a great deal about the boundaries and regulation of the transition from life to death. Yet we pay much less attention to the often-devastating implications of the various zones of non-being people may find themselves in while trying to navigate the circumstances and anxieties of daily life. Choice is a key aspect around which most debates about life/death policy revolve. Symbolic non-being is significant in that choice is not automatically an element of most zones of non-being – in the case of each of the examples this dissertation will examine, non-being is imposed upon individuals by circumstance.

The representation of symbolic non-being on television may provide opportunities for viewers to come to terms with various root causes, as television performs working through via its narrative, structural and affective approaches. Themes in the examples I am engaging with are primarily structured around stories about war, dementia, motherhood/daughterhood and incarceration – each example involving some degree of disavowal which serves to reinforce the sense of alienation that non-being catalyzes. These examples also incorporate an examination of specific respective losses –

¹⁰ In June of 2016, Canada passed a bill into law, giving doctors the freedom to medically assist in the death of patients who were of sound mind to consent. The bill sought to fill the legal vacuum left by a 2015 Supreme Court decision which had decriminalized medically assisted dying, in that it has created more rigid parameters. The MAID (Medical Assistant in Dying) provisions require patients to apply for assistance and they must be deemed to be in irreversible physical decline and on a fast track to a natural death in order to qualify. The criteria established by the Supreme Court had been broader, constituted as “grievous and irremediable” suffering which is intolerable to the patient. While the 2015 criteria focused on an individual’s perception of their own experience of suffering, the 2016 law is more concerned with a medical evaluation of the body’s future viability. The current lack of recognition of mental illness and emotional suffering in Canadian right-to-die legislation is further evidence of how fraught these debates are.
trust/righteousness, memory/recognition, and community/freedom – ultimately conveying that in these cases navigating through the zone of non-being is not so much about mourning loss as it is about figuring out how to overcome it.

**Telling/watching stories**

Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it.

~ Walter Benjamin (1968: 89)

Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names. Language alone is meditation.

~ Toni Morrison, Nobel Lecture (1993)

Narration, as is well known, is a delicate art – narration ‘reveals the meaning without committing the error of defining it.’

~ Adriana Cavarero (2000:3)

What is television for in these troubled times? It’s a powerful medium (and not just because of its soporific value.) Television tells stories, and it does so in a way that can make it more difficult to turn away from their implications in the real world. Storytelling is one of the key ways we manage our hopes and fears. We tell stories – to ourselves, and to others – we make records of them, we pass them down through families and cultures. Stories give us an opportunity to rehearse mediated representation, as we can see what is possible and imagine how to make it so. Mediated stories can be dress rehearsals for our own grand-narratives. Writing for *New Statesman* about fandom and the UK television series *Sherlock*, British cultural critic and polemicist Laurie Penny
(2014) begs a moment of indulgence for taking a break from serious social justice writing to “nerd out”; her justification is fascinating: “It’s just that I’m desperately interested in stories and who gets to tell them and who has to listen” (np).

The relationship between the story and being is fundamental. The old woman – “wise but blind” – from Toni Morrison’s Nobel speech reminds us of the power of language:

> Word-work is sublime, she thinks, because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference - the way in which we are like no other life. We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives. (1993: n.p.)

Stories mediate us into being, they sustain us through the labour of existence, and they document our experiences for those who follow. If we don’t exist in stories, then what legacy will we have when we cease to be?

The popularity of amateur video and our incessant visual documentation of every little thing we do is a testament to a deep symbolic desire to be the star of our own TV show – to be seen, approved of, and regularly followed. So much is at stake in being, that sometimes we become overwhelmed by the demands of our own desires and the expectations of others. When these things collide, we may find ourselves stuck – unable to move forward, as the possibility of everything has somehow become the impossibility of anything. Stories can also become what Lauren Berlant refers to as “a relation of cruel optimism [which] exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (2011: 1). The stories we tell ourselves can be used to comfort and motivate us, but they can also be used to limit our opportunities for material growth if they involve unrealistic or unhealthy fantasies in which we have become emotionally invested. These stories then become our guiding framework for the choices that we make – the jobs we pursue, the relationships we cultivate, the character traits which we privilege in ourselves and others. We may become so fixated on the rigid achievement of the fantasy we imagine, that we miss out on the messy, imperfect, unpredictable, but ultimately more authentic reality right in front of us. Ien Ang notes the power of storytelling in the context of postmodern audiencehood, where changes in the global contemporary mediascape make it increasingly difficult to understand the implications of audience practices and
experiences. According to Ang:

There no longer is a position outside, as it were, from which we can have a
total, transcending overview of all that’s happening. Our minimal task, in
such a world, is to explicate that world, make sense of it by using our
scholarly competencies to tell stories about the social and cultural
implications of living in such a world. Such stories cannot be
comprehensive, but they can at least make us comprehend some of the
peculiarities of that world. (1996: 79)

Television tells these kinds of stories, like books and movies, but it does so in a
particularly televisual way, which is to say that it combines the intimacy of home viewing
with the imagined community of the mass broadcast audience. Television also offers us a
sense of witness, something that we may experience more purely with television than
through the mediums of photography, radio or film, because of the aesthetic promise of
liveness inherent in television’s address, however indifferently this promise may now be
fulfilled. This sense of witness implies value – it communicates something very specific
about our sociocultural priorities through the experiences, scenarios and themes
foregrounded in programs selected or commissioned for broadcast.

According to Bruce Jackson: “every story implies a theory about what – in the
infinitude of detail that comprises any moment in time or is available to an artist
imagining one – matters and what does not, what was going on and what wasn’t going
on” (2007:5). We consume different kinds of stories, at different times, for different
reasons. Episodic stories fulfill a need to return, repeatedly to familiar paradigms, themes
and narrative strategies. They satisfy because they seldom challenge or truly surprise us –
they offer comfort which can both soothe and perpetuate particular anxieties of non-
being. Sasha Torres (2011) writes compellingly about this in a meditation on what to
watch when depressed. Serialised stories provide a different set of functions: 1) they keep
us watching and continuous consumption translates to money in one way or another,
whether we are being sold to advertisers or market-research firms; 2) serialized stories
provide a richness to our experience of working through because they are content rich –
complex and thematically dense.

We are probably not meant to binge-watch if we want to get the most out of
television’s offerings, but if we are driven by plot, then binge-watching is really no different than staying up all night to finish a good book. We don’t remember things we encounter too quickly – our brains aren’t built to process information carefully when they are overwhelmed by too much of it at once.\textsuperscript{11} So even though television is changing in terms of its ability to deliver vast amount of content all at once via streaming services, the length of individual stories is necessarily shorter in order to serve this market (viewers are less inclined to want to binge-watch 22 episodes, and content isn’t served by this presentation). Television programs in the UK have always told shorter stories (by virtue of both short seasons and an ongoing inclination towards anthology series).\textsuperscript{12} Authorship in the UK has been retained by writers, while in the US the label of auteur tends to be awarded to producers or “hyphenates” – showrunner-creators who oversee script development but don’t actually write episodes themselves (Dunleavy, 2009: 35). For a single individual or writing pair in the UK, the labour of crafting a open-ended narrative on one’s own (rather than by committee, as in the US) is immense, and thus unmanageable. As we can see, television’s stories don’t exist in a pure realm of narrative cultural exchange – they are framed in the context of industrial structures and concerns. In the US, television stories have historically been characterised more as means to ends\textsuperscript{13} than ends in and of themselves. Yet these texts still maintain connections with viewers “through the palpable integration of television into our daily lives” (Silverstone, 1994: 3).

\textsuperscript{11} There is a wealth of research available on information overload, sometimes referred to as “infobesity,” “infoxication” or “data smog,” which addresses our limited neurological capacity to process too much information at one time. While this research doesn’t tend to address the information we consume for entertainment, it stands to reason that the cognitive load capacity remains the same.

\textsuperscript{12} Notable examples of intentionally short series or anthology drama include Boys from the Blackstuff, Cathy Come Home, Fawlty Towers, The Singing Detective, The Office, and more recently, Black Mirror.

\textsuperscript{13} As has been theorized by Dallas Smythe (1977) and others, the US commercial television system in the network era used its programming to captivate audiences so that they could be effectively “sold” to advertisers.
Therapeutic television – history, forms and narrative strategies

In the normal scheme of things the emotional significance of the early, intensely cathexed object is reduced, eventually, to insignificance. The space it occupied is filled with other cultural activities and forms which continue the work of providing relief from the strain of relating inner and outer reality … Our media, television perhaps pre-eminently, occupy the potential space released by blankets, teddy bears and breasts.

~ Roger Silverstone, 1994: 12-13)

In a dream you saw a way to survive, and you were full of joy.

~ Jenny Holzer

In *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*, John Ellis (2002) discusses television’s changing role in an era of escalating social difference and antagonism:

Television offers an important social forum in which the complexities and anxieties of difference… can be explored. It … provides the experience of witness, giving modern citizens a sense of complicity with all kinds of events in their contemporary world. […] It shows the everyday conflicts of meaning and expectations. […] Its programming no longer aims to be definitive; instead, it participates in a vast inchoate process of working through. It shares this role with the press and other media, but with the crucial distinction that television introduces both the experience of witness and the mechanisms of fictions. (72)

This combination of witness and fiction is key to television’s narrative and ideological power and thus the approach to analysis is fashioned to match the content, as it focuses primarily on the stories these programs tell and their implications in the material world.

Ellis addresses the value of the psychoanalytic concept of working through as a form of viewer engagement with television: constituted by reconciliation, based on familiarity and repetition-in-difference (2002: 81). He is particularly focused on the process of working through as it applies to viewer engagement with television news and as a necessary strategy for coping with the problem of information overload; “it is an
important process in an age that threatens to make us witness to too much information without providing us with enough explanation” (2002: 79). He notes that uncertainty is a distinct feature of television in the modern age, one that distinguishes it from other media forms but also one that is useful to audiences as a social good, as working through uncertainty in real life might first be practiced through engagement with a fictional narrative. Similarly, John Caughie reminds us:

The business of screen theorizing today is still to work through the changing configurations of subject and space; to identify the points at which the institution and its routines break open to other possibilities of meaning and engagement; to find new and appropriate ways of testing ideas and aesthetics, politics and ethics; and to imagine them differently. (2010: 421)

While I would caution against any hasty acceptance of claims regarding the impending “death” of television, the medium is currently undergoing a rapid period of change, industrially, technologically and in terms of its conventions for story-telling. Screen theory is most useful in this context then, when it focuses on the practical opportunities afforded by engagement and meaning-making. This supports an approach to textual analysis which seeks to suspend what Paul Ricoeur calls “a hermeneutics of suspicion” and instead strive for a reparative reading wherever possible. According to Eve Sedgwick (2003):

The desire of a reparative impulse […] is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self. (149)

Conferring plenitude on television as an object, and on its stories, more specifically, can then allow television to serve as a repository of nurturing resources available to be retrieved when the inchoate self is most in need of them. This helps us to see how the process of working through, in a psychoanalytic sense, more explicitly connects with television, both as a medium and as a viewer experience. Mimi White (1992) is useful here, noting that “in television drama, therapy is at once a narrative and a narrational issue. It is something that characters might do, and also a way of engaging viewers to participate via fantasy and identification in the worlds of television fiction” (146).
The relationship between television and psychoanalysis, or at least therapy culture, is long and enduring. White’s book *Tele-Advising* (1992) addresses therapeutic discourse in American television by considering a broad range of programming across daytime and primetime schedules. White is particularly concerned with confession as it applies to therapeutic discourse, focusing on “how television itself produces ideas about what therapy is and about the uses of confessional discourse within this context” (19).

The various elements of therapeutic discourse are both represented and mobilised in very specific ways on television, notably in the transformation narratives of prime-time reality programming, where techniques of the self are particularly evident (Ouellette and Hay 2008; Hearn 2008). These representations of transformation (like those which appeared on the daytime television talk-shows that first broke this ground) contribute heavily to our understanding of the mediated signs and signifiers of therapy culture. Laurie Ouellette and James Hay (2008), and Janice Peck (2008), each see therapeutic culture on television as manifesting the consolidation of neoliberal ideology. Peck argues that Oprah Winfrey’s appeal and influence epitomizes the pervasiveness of therapy culture, since:

> Winfrey’s identification as a spiritual healer, her diagnosis of what ails us, and her prescribed cure are rooted historically in the therapeutic enterprise that emerged in the nineteenth century and was fully institutionalised in the United States by the mid-twentieth century. (8-9)

Peck’s detailed analysis of Oprah’s journey, from the “queen of talk TV” to become a cultural icon and public leader, carefully unpacks various strands of therapeutic culture as it has shifted over time to appeal to every demographic, including its early focus on the feminine, the birth of the Recovery cure, the identification of (and prescriptions for) the dysfunctional family, the mystical enchantment of the New Age movement, and the rise of the enterprising self-brand. Peck finds that the “enchanted enterprising self… simultaneously accounts for and naturalises social inequality” (221) reassuring Winfrey’s affluent target audience that they have earned all that they have through positive attitudes and behaviours while absolving them of any responsibility for those less fortunate. This flourishing of individualism disguised as “self-care” has led a state of depoliticisation, which has certainly persisted beyond the final broadcast of Oprah’s daytime talk show. Peck’s suggested antidote is to “reinvigorate political values, reactivate political spaces,
and revive political discussion and debate” (226) by asserting first, that the current economic order can be humanly changed, and second, that we are all ultimately responsible for one another.

Ouellette and Hay examine a wide range of reality programs\textsuperscript{14} which they view as each contributing in some way to the representation and construction of self-managing citizen-subjects for which government no longer needs to take responsibility. While the nature of the transformations involved in some of these programs is not strictly psychological, there is a clear link between the therapeutic ethos and the various subjects of transformation whose selves must so often be made abject and empty before they can be receptive to the expert advice which will help them fix their lives. Ultimately, however, many of these programs merely reinforce the addiction “recovery” message that life can not in fact be cured, but only managed. It is recognising the tension between the limitations of this message and imagining or performing political reform that Ouellette and Hay see as a starting point “for a politics that occurs through networks, programs, policies, and constitutions of life management, which each of us traverse daily” (224).

Of course, “therapeutic” is a broad term which refers to a whole host of strategies and interventions involved in the care of the self. Psychoanalysis is a form of therapy, but not one typically or easily associated with the therapeutic transformations offered by reality television narratives. Returning to discussions of the emotional dynamics of television engagement (Ellis, 2000; Richards, 2007) we must consider the role of psychoanalysis, in terms of what unconscious processes might be involved in television viewing. Candida Yates suggests that “returning to a programme on a repeated basis can imply a creative form of emotional work associated with psychoanalytic theories of transformational objects and transitional phenomena” (2014: 6). Freud reminds us that “the patient repeats instead of remembering and repeats under the conditions of resistance” (1914: 151). In this way we might think of television itself as a patient:

It works over new material for its audiences as a necessary consequence of its position of witness. Television attempts definitions, tries out

\textsuperscript{14} These programs are loosely categorised as Charity or ‘do-good’ TV, Interventions, Makeovers, Self-Defence, Self & Group Governance, and Experiments in Interactive Democracy
explanations, creates narratives, talks over, makes intelligible, tries to marginalize, harnesses speculation, tries to make fit, and, very occasionally, anathemizes. (Ellis, 2002: 79)

But television texts are objects while viewers are subjects. As television narratives are encountered by viewers, these stories can act as a proxy for the viewers’ own experience of working through, something that would depend in particular on the repetition, immersion and lengthy duration of engagement that television offers and requires. Ellis asserts that working through is television’s means of dealing with the psychic problem of unmediated live witness (2002: 36). Like psychotherapy, television returns to its central dilemmas regularly, disguising their significance through familiarity of content and the medium’s own characterization of everyday ordinariness.

Both psychotherapy and television viewing also require a commitment of time, at regular intervals, over a period of weeks, months, or even years; each engagement with the therapist/television program involves uncertainty about what is going to occur – even if one thinks one knows what will happen, one cannot be sure of how it will affect them. Both activities generally take place in an intimate environment where one feels relatively safe, if not relaxed, and both activities can involve other people. More complex similarities involve thinking about the relationship between articulating your own experiences to a therapist and watching events similar to your own life be depicted on television. Roger Silverstone (1994) draws on the work of D.W. Winnicott to theorise television as a transitional object with the creative potential to shape subjectivity. Caroline Bainbridge (2014) applies this work to HBO’s In Treatment, as she considers “the usefulness of the object-relations psychoanalytic approach to thinking through how best to theorise the pleasures of television and its role in shaping our relationships in and to the world at large” (50).

As viewers we identify with characters we meet on screen. As we see them engage with experiences and issues to which we can relate, the repeated narratives of conflict and resolution can become transference proxies for our own re-enactment of foundational hurts and losses. According to Christopher Bollas, “to be a character is to be released into being, not as a knowing entity per se, but as an idiom of expression explicating a human form” (1992: 54). Television characters are “released into being” in
particular ways, not yet fully formed but made more real through the feedback loop of spectatorship. These characters are often the repositories of the blended ideological positions of their various creators – auteurs, writers and actors – but the human form they explicate is also necessarily one with which viewers can engage and form attachments as the stories in which these characters appear expand and multiply. Bainbridge argues that:

Through our willingness to make multiple, fractured identifications with characters and scenarios depicted on screen, we open up spaces for self-contemplation and reflection. … By being able to slide between positions of identification, our viewing pleasure intensifies, and we become more bound up with the complexity of the lives of on-screen … characters. (2014:54)

Character development, then, is one of the primary vehicles through which television demonstrates working through, as a main character in a long-running program serves as a repository of institutional memory of both the character themselves and of their ideological role within the world of the story.

Freud advises that treatment be approached by imagining you are narrating what you see from a train window while expressing the thoughts that pass through your mind, making the idea of a “television window” onto which you can project your own experiences particularly appealing. These ideas intersect helpfully in a program such as HBO’s In Treatment, where viewers do not just watch familiar events being experienced, but they can watch fictional characters actually articulate their own experiences to a therapist – allowing them to identify with the process and experience these articulations for themselves by proxy. Thus, working through is something that television does as much as it shows, and support for this claim can be found in the specificities of the medium itself. Television uses familiar repetition to comfort viewers and seriality to captivate them within immersive narrative worlds, over periods of days, weeks, months or even years.

As discussed earlier, this dissertation’s analysis relies on three aspects of US television production, broadcast and reception that underpin a program’s capacity for narrative engagement: 1) immersion, 2) duration, and 3) repetition. Immersion refers to the way that television viewing has become an increasingly absorbing experience in
recent years. In the US, historically, this is not a foundational characteristic of the medium and it has been compared unfavourably to film for this reason. Television has been both promoted and derided for the way it can be experienced casually, as background noise – something to keep a 1950s-housewife company while she completed her chores, or to distract children in the hours between school and dinner-time. Cinema was lauded for its higher quality and complexity in demanding one’s whole attention, while television was merely the noisy soundtrack of daily life that sought to replace radio as the technological entertainment centrepiece of the home. Television could provide pleasure, but its commercial imperatives generally prevented viewers from producing effective self-knowledge or utilising narratives to work through larger sociocultural anxieties. Beverle Houston speaks to this, writing about television and desire at the height of the network era. She asserts that, compared to cinema:

Television structures a very different relationship between the imaginary and symbolic, between a dream of wholeness and the lack that motors it. Institutionally and formally, television insists upon the repetitive reformulation of desire. Rather than suturing the viewer further into a visually re-evoked dream of plenitude, it keeps the ego at a near-panic level of activity, trying, virtually from moment to moment, to control the situation, trying to take some satisfaction, to get some rest from the constant changes, which repeatedly give the lie to television's fervent, body-linked promise. (1984: 184)

The “repetitive reformulation of desire” was seen at that time as an unsophisticated imperative of a medium that could only tell stories in a fragmented way and undermined

---

15 Network in this context refers to commercial networks, most notably ABC, CBS and NBC – the original “big 3” in the US. While these networks are no longer available free-to-air since the transition from analog to digital, they are still the cheapest television channels a viewing package will offer and as they are funding by advertising revenue, decisions about programming content are based on ratings data. They are differentiated from subscription cable networks which have never broadcast free-to-air and are funded solely through user fees. Ratings data may still influence some of their content decisions, but to a much lesser degree, and they aren’t subject to standard industry dictates regarding content, like sweeps week stunts. Sweeps weeks are particular times in the year when the network recalculates the cost of advertising spots, based the ratings for a given show on that week. The objective is to optimize viewership in target demographics to justify selling ad spots at a premium. Commercial networks programs may also be referred to as sponsored shows.
by advertising breaks.

This structure has changed in recent years, however. The affordability of increasingly sophisticated screen technology has combined with a growing number of content distribution models which allow viewers to curate their own schedules and “flows”\(^{16}\) (Williams, 1974). This has resulted in a significant decline in both cinema-going\(^{17}\) and cable-subscription\(^{18}\), but not in content creation\(^{19}\) or consumption\(^{20}\). Many viewers have discovered how to watch TV without watching ads or succumbing to the necessary fragmentation that has characterised American network television content since the 1950s (Curtin, 2009; Marshall 2009; Strangelove, 2015; Robinson, 2017; Lotz, 2018b). In 1990, the British film-maker Sir David Lean was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award by the American Film Institute. In his acceptance speech he offered a warning to Hollywood film executives that if they didn’t begin to pay more attention to the needs and potential of the creative talent (the writers), then film would eventually stagnate, and the cinema would “lose it all – to television.”\(^{21}\) It appears that he might have been right, as according to many TV scholars and critics (Mittell, 2015; Lotz, 2018b), we currently find ourselves in a “golden age” of TV (the 3rd so-called era since the medium’s inception), with a surplus of choices, many of them illustrating a richness

---

16 Raymond Williams first used the term flow (or sequence) to describe the characteristic organisation, and therefore the characteristic experience which inhabits all developed broadcast systems. He asserts that the “phenomenon of planned flow is perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form” (Television, 86).


20 While Nielsen figures show some decline in viewing figures since 2010 (the year these figures “peaked” at close to an average of 9 hours per day per US household), the numbers still hover between 7 and 8 hours of daily viewing: [https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/05/when-did-tv-watching-peak/561464/](https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/05/when-did-tv-watching-peak/561464/)

21 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILAj6Sbrh6k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILAj6Sbrh6k)
and complexity of storytelling that demands the viewer’s undivided attention. “Appointment TV” was already a popular term in the 1990s, referring to the viewing tendency to not just turn on the television and stare numbly at whatever was on, as critics of the medium claimed so many passive dupes uncritically did, night after night, but to carefully choose only the programs one liked best to make a point of watching in real time, or recording to watch later. “Peak TV”\(^2\) is becoming an increasingly common term for the present state of seemingly endless options. Current technology makes individualised viewing easier than ever, and this capacity, along with the option to “binge-watch” entire seasons or even series at once, suggests that television viewers are now experiencing unprecedented immersion in the stories the medium offers.

One might argue that film can do the same thing, if individualised home-viewing alone were the key. But it’s more than just watching at home, in a dark room, on a large screen. Duration highlights something more specific to television drama as narrative form. US network television has also long suffered the plague of drawn-out seasons and filler episodes which inevitably erode artistic vision in service of what NBC network television executive Paul Klein once referred to as the “least objectionable programming” (1971). The industry paradigm has historically required a program to produce a minimum of 100 episodes in order to be eligible for syndication (this generally happens at some point in the 5\(^{th}\) or 6\(^{th}\) season of a program that makes 18–22 episodes per year). Compared to the British model, which produces an average of 6 episodes in a season, it is clear that American television requires a commitment of time and an investment of emotional energy that is extraordinary. And yet it is precisely the time television takes to tell its stories that is one of the key elements in its ability to “work through” narrative events. A season of television may range anywhere from three 2-hour episodes (the BBC model for *Sherlock* and several other noir procedurals) to forty-five episodes of 30 minutes each

---

\(^2\) The term “peak TV” was first attributed to John Landgraf, the CEO of the FX network, who uttered it in a speech given at a television industry event in August 2015. Landgraf uses the term as a warning that the medium is at peak capacity – that there are simply too many shows, making it difficult for viewers to discern the good ones from the great ones. Quality is subjective though and Landgraf isn’t exactly impartial. He’s complaining that the free market of TV offerings has been flooded with too much competition, and he’s claiming that this is bad for TV consumers, rather than acknowledging that his own interests are also a significant factor in the way he characterizes the current state of the industry.
(the first season of HBO’s *In Treatment*, based on the Israeli original *Be’Tipul*). Eight to ten episodes is typical for a subscription cable program, while network TV has historically tended towards longer seasons of 22-24 episodes. In any case, television is built to tell long stories, over a long period time, and while binge-watching is increasingly popular, especially with time-rich demographics, episodes on traditional TV networks are generally constructed to tell stories as though the initial time delays of a week or more between broadcast still applied.

Duration functions in several ways, depending on your viewing habits, illustrated by various aspects of television temporality: 1) there is the length of time between broadcasts of new original episodes on traditional networks (both ad-carrying and subscription), compounding the amount of time one must ultimately invest to watch an entire season this way; 2) there is the length of time between seasons of a long-running television show, which exists even when content is delivered in seasonal batches, as with original content from streaming provider like Netflix; 3) there is the amount of time one commits to sitting and watching an entire television series from start to finish when all of the episodes are immediately available; 4) while duration mostly functions as an external factor relating to the commitment of time and attention one must give to a television program in order to see a story through to its conclusion, there is also an internal dimension to duration as it relates to television, which involves the amount of time that passes in the narrative world itself, adding further complexity to the time that passes during viewing in the real world. Given the way audience viewing preferences have been trending towards binge-watching, both the third and fourth functions seem most relevant in this contemporary moment. It is important to highlight that for this dissertation, duration is most significant in terms of the longevity of the story itself – how much time it occupies in the world – rather than how much time it takes from a particular viewer, as audience reception research is not a focus of this analysis. Immersion may not seem to be as relevant here then, as it could be argued that it is specific to the viewing experience, but I assert that the kinds of television programs this dissertation takes up are necessarily immersive by virtue of their narrative complexity. To fully understand nuanced storytelling and character development, viewer attention cannot be divided.
Repetition is enabled by extended duration, but made powerful through immersion, and all are linked to narrative content. Repetition is intentionally incorporated as television creators revisit nodes of content across and between seasons to tell richer stories. This is done using a set of medium (and genre)-specific narrative strategies which may include:

- episodic circularity, which involves disrupting the status quo through the introduction of conflict, but then ultimately restoring it at the end to reset for the next episode (Marc, 1997; Todorov, 1977);
- situationally entrapped characters who embody archetypes and stereotypes designed to repeatedly generate conflict as they represent ideologically opposing positions (Lévi-Strauss, 1955);
- the repetition of specific images or phrases;
- flashbacks which highlight individual character memories;
- consistent voice-over narration which provides insight into character interiority and/or status;
- familiar private or institutional settings (homes, hospitals, schools);
- music, which is used to create mood so that the repetition of musical motifs as associated with particular characters and storylines can function as the televisual equivalent of scent memory.

Repetition that subverts character growth by rigidly maintaining the status quo is the most limited form; it is utilised the most in traditional situation comedy or procedural dramas like crime shows. Even these programs can perform working through though, as the multiplicity of times that they rehearse the same narrative scenario, resulting in the same outcome, ironically may function as a kind of cathartic rejection of the futility these outcomes might imply. *Law and Order: SVU*, which has been criticized as perversely revictimizing women who have been raped in each sensationalized episode, has also perhaps contributed to demystifying the legal processes involved in reporting and prosecuting a sex offender while also opening up a wider dialogue about sexual assault in a culture that still has a lot of work to do with regards to objectification of women.\(^{23}\)

---

\(^{23}\) Emily Nussbaum has written about *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, in her capacity as television critic for *The New Yorker*, but this is largely my own assessment of this show – synthesizing a variety of
Other kinds of repetition are more contextual and offer a deepening of the representation of a particular character or storyline.

Together, repetition, duration and immersion are keys to the powerful and unique way that television can serve as a therapeutic aid for viewers. Television narratives may help prepare us for non-being as they represent a variety of means through which one can cease to be even before death, but even more importantly, they can illustrate zones of non-being that exist all around us, which are too often overlooked or dismissed. In the next section, I bring these elements of the medium into dialogue with the depth psychology laid out earlier, in order to clearly delineate the connections between non-being and working through, in the context of this project.

Significant and pervasive examples of symbolic non-being that we see represented on television include: serious accidents or health crises which compromise bodily functioning (mental or physical); traumatic events which undermine a sense of safety and normality (personal or societal); breaches in foundational relationships where one is no longer seen/known by a loved one (a break-up, a loss of friendship, an estrangement, a disease like Alzheimer’s or dementia); and periods of incarceration (inflicted by the state or individuals). While death may be the ultimate form of non-being that these representations are ultimately gesturing towards, we have no information to help us with the final transition, it being “the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns” (Hamlet 3:1). We tell apocryphal stories about near-death experiences, read them in books, watch them unfold on film and television, but there are no guarantees – unlike the finality of death itself, the idea that one could journey near and back again is not a universal promise. The closest we can get is through confronting and attempting to understand various iterations of symbolic non-being, where self-affirmation is negated physically, psychologically, socially, or in some combination. In the world of the story, individuals are seldom able to bear symbolic non-being in the material world for very long – many stories are driven by the tension inherent in the struggle against one or more critical viewpoints I’ve encountered over time. I watch a lot of crime procedurals and I have an ambivalent relationship with this program in particular, precisely because of the tensions I have highlighted between the two primary ways it might be read.
of the structuring anxieties which can threaten being. Within the television narratives that this dissertation discusses, succumbing to non-being in more abstract symbolic ways can lead to a conscious breakdown in one’s conception of self, and by extension, one’s capacity to function successfully in the world. Ultimately protagonists seem to find their way through this minefield, but their experiences gesture toward a series of even more obscured and wide-ranging zones of non-being. These zones of non-being are part of a rich subtext, particularly in terms of their ability to speak to significant events and issues, and their implications for past and present American life.

Identifying and rationalising my three case studies has required me to think about categories – particularly domains of human social experience which can facilitate an exploration of the anxiety of non-being and its various zones. In the interest of maintaining some degree of symmetry, I highlight three of these domains, which can then each be applied to a different one of my case studies in turn:

1. One domain that will be explored is the political, relating to how a nation like the United States of America defines itself and defends its values. This case study focuses on the 1970s situation comedy M*A*S*H to examine depictions of trauma and PTSD, as a result of exposure to and/or participation in politically sanctioned violence. While the police procedural is a seminal television genre, it seldom represents law enforcement as anything but necessary for a safe and equitable society, and a heroic form of social service. As a sitcom, M*A*S*H’s more irreverent depiction of the Korean War is thus better able to explore the complexity of observing, experiencing and/or inflicting violence, while also showing viewers the value of interventions like psychotherapy in dealing with the effects of violence-induced trauma. The loss that catalyzes the primary experience of non-being that I examine in this program is a belief in one’s own goodness.

2. Another domain in which the anxiety of non-being is negotiated is the personal, dealing with our understanding of ourselves, and our relationships to others. Parent/child relationships are especially rich as they are enduring and foundational to being. Mothers literally bring us into being – they are our first teachers and it is in opposition to them that our autonomous sense of self is first
negotiated. Mothers may be kind, abusive, smothering, or absent, but their impact on our psychological development and future choices can be both totalising and irrevocable. This case study looks at *Grey’s Anatomy*, addressing non-being on two fronts – the loss of self of a mother suffering from Alzheimer’s, and the loss of parented subjectivity of a daughter who ceases to be recognised by her mother. These twinned losses of memory and being known provide a framework for understanding the fragility of the threads that bind all of our interpersonal relationships.

3. The final domain that will be addressed in this project is the *institutional*, addressing the ways that various social systems serve and discipline us. While there is plenty to critique in narratives of health and education, this case study uses *Rectify* to focus on the US prison system, looking at the impact of mass incarceration in terms of the way inmates experience isolation and alienation from others. Non-being in this instance is further complicated by the disproportionate representation of African Americans in carceral institutions and there is a strong case to be made that the diminished personhood experienced in prison is a legacy of slavery, even when the subject isn’t Black. The losses depicted here are particularly devastating, as they stem from an egregious mischaracterisation and treatment of prison inmates as less than human.

Effective engagement with these three domains – the political, the personal and the institutional – as strategic tools for negotiating the anxiety of non-being, can be both aided and hampered by the fact that television is narratively tidy in a way that life can never be. Television presents stories full of rich complexity and its characters are seldom just ordinary in the way we know ourselves to be. Part of the conundrum of the attraction to television for viewers is in trying to work out whether we tune in to programs to see ourselves or to escape ourselves and the uncertainty of daily life.

**Uncertainty, closure, and working through**

John Ellis’s (2000) claim that television is an “uncertain” media form is predicated on understanding television as disposed towards a lack of closure. Some of television’s most popular narrative forms (the soap opera, the documentary) are
characterised by their openness, through the features of seriality, complexity, and, in the case of documentary at least, the understanding that real lives are being represented which will continue outside of what is broadcast. In fictional television narratives, the representation of uncertainty can also be viewed as linked to a state of anxiety, such as that generated by a zone of non-being; here the lack of closure is both part of the structure and the content of the stories being told.

Termination and closure in television are always inflected by the political economy of the industry. A program may be forced to halt its narrative journey long before a carefully imagined conclusion if it is cancelled by the network due to low ratings. Programs may also be plagued by an inability to imagine any kind of real closure if the narrative form tends towards the episodic, dealing with a weekly disruption and then restoring order and status quo. Law enforcement and medical programs have these tendencies – they are referred to as “procedurals” because they follow an explicit narrative formula every episode, providing audiences with a stable format of problem and solution that helps to palliate social anxieties about crime and the body’s fragility. Thinking about termination can be equally difficult with a serial narrative form like the soap opera. These programs are designed to broadcast daily, for years, and sometimes decades. They have large ensemble casts made up of complex family networks and they employ the fantastical and familiar tropes of serial melodrama when telling their stories: people come back from the dead, children age years in a matter of months, actors are regularly replaced by others who are just accepted as the same characters, amnesia is a standard explanatory mode for a given character’s back-story, and there is a seemingly endless supply of evil twins. These programs are plot driven; they aim to surprise and entertain, but they come (in the US) from a tradition of providing stories to housewives to keep them company while they completed domestic labour. Many female viewers subverted the intentions of early US broadcasters, by resisting the imperative to consume blindly, and instead finding personal empowerment and community in soap opera stories.24 Nonetheless, the US television industry has not historically valued daytime

24 Janice Radway (1991), in her book on romance novels, addresses the way this genre provides a dual escape for women, in terms of “conditions left behind and [the] intentional projection of a utopian future” (12). Referring additionally to Angela McRobbie’s (1991) work on working-class girl culture and Dorothy
programming or its predominantly female audience and this disdain has extended to the narrative form and content of the serial melodrama, then viewed as a low cultural product in comparison with the serious drama reserved for the prime-time evening viewing schedule when men had returned home from work.

US network television has not historically taken closure seriously as a narrative event for audiences because the industry is predisposed to avoid it, in order to allow an indefinite number of episodes to continue to be produced. The content mattered only insomuch as it could be used as a method of delivery for advertisers to the captive audiences of television viewers. Even now, in an era where the boundaries of these two foundational narrative forms (the episodic and the serial) have blurred and combined, allowing for more complex storytelling with a flexible approach to closure, network TV creators are seldom afforded a guarantee that they will be able to enact a particular vision and see it to conclusion. Viewers have grown increasingly savvy in response to the precarity of a viewing experience entirely dependent on ratings, and many are learning to wait out a whole season before beginning to watch a new show, having been caught short before by the sudden disappearance of something they were only just beginning to grow attached to. The power afforded to fan communities is not insignificant either as social media allows them to campaign more effectively than ever before for their favourite shows and numerous programs have been notably saved from cancellation in this way.

We can think about closure in television in two ways: closure of the narrative itself, which means closure for the characters within a story, but also closure in the sense of the program performing a working through of the psychological complexities of the narrative events and character experiences. A television program, unlike other forms of storytelling such as books, films, and songs, is seldom narratively complete when it is first made available for consumption. Television in the US is a unique medium in that it

Hobson’s (1980) study of the way housewives use radio and television, Radway notes that in all these cases women “use traditionally female forms to resist their situation as women by enabling them to cope with the features of the situation that oppress them” (12). The work of Radway, Hobson, McRobbie, Charlotte Brunsdon (2008), Danielle Blumenthal (1997) and Laura Mumford (1995) all makes significant contributions to a deeper and more complicated understanding of traditionally female cultural forms and this is useful for contextualising the broadcast environment of Grey’s Anatomy.
has consistently offered continuing stories one episode (or in the case of online original content, one season) at a time – nearly always beginning to broadcast a program when later episodes in the same season are still in production or haven’t even been written yet. In this way it can be a risk to commit to watching a newly aired television program. You don’t know where it is going to go – what is going to happen – who will live, and who will die, and all the ways that it might break your heart. You can’t yet read spoilers to alleviate any anxiety that this uncertainty might otherwise cause. You have to commit to going all in, if you hope for some kind of narrative pay-off in the end. You can stop watching any time you want, but even if you tune in faithfully every week, an actual ending may still elude you as the real-world issues and events being represented don’t disappear when the credits roll or the channel changes.

The importance of working through in the context of television and its influential commentary on states of existence is both personal and political. Being and non-being are represented and explored in a variety of circumstances which provide insight into the tensions between mourning and the loss of being and the ways and places where these distinctions collide and collapse. The stories television tells allow the viewer to engage with events, feelings and consequences that may provide a mirror or an escape to/from their own lives, but these stories also facilitate a process of engagement that maps onto material reality in a significant and potentially radicalising way. John Ellis asserts that:

The events [represented on television] cannot be poignant because they are radically incomplete: they exist in almost the same moment we do when we see them. They demand explanation, they incite curiosity, revulsion and the usually frustrated or passing desire for action. We need, in other words, to work them through. Hence the tactical use by news bulletins of narrative speculations. But these alone are not enough. We need to carry out the same kind of process of repression upon these representations that psychoanalysis describes: a process that does not eradicate them but places them elsewhere, which is necessary for civilized life to remain possible. (2002: 80)

Ellis’s comments refer specifically to the presentation of news reports on television, and he deploys the notion of working through in relation to the specificity of current events and the affective dimension of news reporting on viewer psyches. He sees the process of
working through in this regard as a means of allowing viewers to maintain some degree of emotional distance from the daily horrors of the world they live in, thus transferring the process from the television broadcast to the viewers themselves.

Building on Ellis, I argue here, conversely, that the television narratives I explore demonstrate that television need not lack poignancy or be radically incomplete, and that it can, in fact, perform this working through on its own. At the very least television representations are no more radically incomplete than social discourse itself. This gets us back to storytelling. People do lots of things repetitively every day to help themselves cope – they cook, they exercise, they listen to music, they read self-help books, they play video-games, they visit online forums and converse with strangers. With my case studies, however, I’m trying to get at something less overtly within the realm of more general routines and strategies for self-care and anxiety management (or in some cases, anxiety avoidance, which actually forestalls working through via distraction which allows one to defer addressing fear, anger, trauma, or loss).

As the case studies will illustrate, sometimes television addresses the absence (or even disavowal) implied by a lack of completion, in subversive and potentially radical ways. More importantly, a lack of closure ensures that meaning (and possibility) can remain unfixed. As Bill Nichols (1994) reminds us:

> The sense of partial knowledge and suspended closure, the sense of incompleteness and the need for retrospection, makes of the text what we must make of history: the site of an active continuous struggle within representation to bring into being those radical and utopian transformations that exceed any text. (147)

Nichols highlights the transformative power of representation which is always held in tension with our reading of the text. Narratives become sites of struggle as we balance a deferral of closure against imposing and fixing meaning on texts to fulfil our need to label and categorise. Once meaning is fixed, knowing becomes increasingly more narrow and rigid. In order to keep ourselves open to transformative possibilities, we must actively resist becoming “stuck” and concretized. Identifying the hopeful potential offered by such an “incomplete” television text is one modest goal of this project.
Case study overview

Each of the television programs selected for analysis engages with a domain of contemporary life – political, personal and/or institutional – highlighted above, to comprehend and negotiate the anxiety of non-being. These programs focus on character as much as plot and they delve deeply into the exploratory territory of the mind and of what motivates behavior. As representations, these stories mostly25 shy away from tired archetypes of heroes and villains, their creators perhaps understanding that complexity (Mittell, 2015) is both more interesting and more authentic. These narratives may at times seem less like stories, in the traditional sense, and more like vignettes or character studies. Television has changed narratively from what it used to be, as repetition and entrapment are balanced against character growth and narrative momentum. These selections reflect a desire to explore diversity in television production as much as possible within the confines of the topic, and so balance is being sought between programs produced for what were originally free-to-air broadcast networks (often viewed as generic and populist) and those made for (so-called higher quality) premium cable subscription channels.26 Television reflects contemporary social concerns back to us: M*A*S*H, the political; Grey’s Anatomy, the personal; and Rectify, the institutional.

Being traumatised: M*A*S*H, moral injury, and revisiting the Korean War

M*A*S*H (CBS) was produced during a time of heightened reflection on television about pressing social issues and functioned as part of the push for relevancy in the story-lines of programs created by Norman Lear (All in the Family, Archie Bunker’s Place, Good Times, The Jeffersons, Maude, Sanford and Son) and Grant Tinker’s MTM Productions (Mary Tyler Moore, Lou Grant, Rhoda). It is not hard to see why these

25 M*A*S*H does have a few supporting archetypal characters which operate as foils, folksy wisdom or comic relief. They include Major Frank Burns, Father Mulcahy and Corporal Radar O’Reilly.

26 The creative teams for each program reflect gendered and racial diversity. Their broadcast seasons vary in number from two seasons to twelve, but this is perhaps better understood in terms of episode number, as a season in this case can be as short as 6 episodes and as long as 42. The programs in the first case study have completed broadcasting, while the others are currently broadcasting and/or have been renewed for at least one additional season.
programs were all 30-minute situation comedies, or “sitcoms.” Comedy affords a certain opportunity for subversive ideological critique that the more serious programming could not risk without alienating their audiences. While situated in a military medical unit during the Korean War, \( M\!*A\!*S\!*H \), was read as commenting on American involvement in the Vietnam War, which was ongoing at the start of its broadcast in the 1970s. The evolution of the character of Hawkeye Pierce over eleven seasons allows the program to offer nuanced (if relentless) critique of the effects of the conflict on soldiers, medical non-combatants and civilians, both home and abroad.

The zone of non-being experienced by the characters explored in selected episodes of \( M\!*A\!*S\!*H \) is framed as a response to a “moral injury” – a term used to describe a trauma-induced betrayal of an individual’s sense of what is morally right. It is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a common element of battle-zone PTSD, as combatants must too often behave in ways (or witness others behaving in ways) which induce an internal conflict. \( M\!*A\!*S\!*H \)’s depiction of Hawkeye’s moral injury, while devastating for him, spends very little time with the object of his distress – the woman who killed her baby at his urging. This diminishment of the local subject’s suffering in order to prioritise the personal pain of the person who caused it, almost functions as a disavowal – mirroring the American relationship with Korea, both at the time of the war and in all of the years following. The US has never quite come to terms with Korea, politically or culturally, and the irony of \( M\!*A\!*S\!*H \)’s undisguised representation of this conflict being almost immediately subsumed within a discourse of anti-Vietnam War protest is also addressed in this chapter.

“Anything but ordinary”: (Not) Being your mother’s daughter in Grey’s Anatomy

Both Meredith and Ellis Grey negotiate the anxiety of non-being as Ellis’s Alzheimer’s Disease turns her from a cold accomplished mother into a bewildered stranger whose inability to recognise the daughter she used to be so hard on, sets Meredith emotionally adrift. The first episode of Grey’s Anatomy (ABC) sets up Meredith Grey’s relationship with her mother as foundational to both the character and the narrative. The fact that the once gifted surgeon, Ellis Grey, is presently institutionalized, isn’t revealed to us until the end of the pilot when we discover that
Meredith’s voice-over narration of the events of her first days as a surgical intern has actually been her recounting them to Ellis, who asks this “stranger” where her daughter is. The program illustrates how the effects of this form of dementia on memory are not only destabilizing for Ellis herself, but also for Meredith as her daughter. While Ellis fights a losing battle to keep track of her past and present realities, Meredith struggles to reorient herself in the world, too much her famous mother’s daughter to everyone else, and too little, to her mother herself.

Catherine Malabou’s (2012a) concept of “destructive plasticity” is useful in theorising Ellis’s neurological transformation, and its implications, as she becomes what Malabou terms “an ontological refugee, intransitive [...] without any correlation, genitive, or origin” (24). Meredith’s transformation is less final, but perhaps more painful, and it requires both the symbolic and literal death of her mother, in order to begin. Even though Ellis’s death occurs in the third season of the program, the spectre of Ellis is never completely gone from Meredith’s life, as she struggles to come to terms with the loss of her mother both before and after she dies.

Rectifying the future: Social death as non-being in the Prison Industrial Complex

Rectify (Sundance) narrates protagonist Daniel Holden’s release from prison and his transition from formal incarceration to the limiting structures of a “freedom” which he is ill-equipped to navigate. Daniel’s description (above) of his state of mind in prison echoes the statements of many people currently incarcerated in American prisons, particularly those who have endured solitary confinement for even short stretches. Notably absent, however, is an acknowledgement that the temporal experience of incarceration that the program so effectively conveys to viewers, is largely and disproportionately a Black one. This absence functions as a kind of disavowal of the racial politics of mass incarceration, further complicated by the intermittent appearance of Daniel’s African American friend, fellow death row inmate, Lee Kerwin Whitman. Kerwin’s primary role in the series is to provide a frame for Daniel’s breakdown in prison, and a touchstone to his time on death row after he is released, when he visits Kerwin’s family at the latter’s request.
Unlike most other television programs which engage in some way with the machinations of the US justice system, *Rectify* is, for much of the series, not especially concerned with resolving the original question of whether or not Daniel Holden is in fact guilty. The program explores the effects that incarceration has had on Daniel, following him as he works to negotiate the anxiety of being in the world once again, both literally and figuratively. Death row, with its prolonged solitary confinement, is what Lisa Guenther refers to as “an experiment in living death” (2013, 3). Guenther asserts that prisoners held in prolonged solitary confinement suffer a “social death” from which they may never recover. This analysis focuses on the program’s representation of the processes and implications of an inflexible and inhumane system that is unconcerned about actual justice, too often reinforcing structures of dominance and subjugation that are as old as the United States of America itself. It also explores the implications of life *after* social death and the fragile power of hope and forgiveness.

**Last thoughts**

This project explores a variety of examples of working through a crisis of non-being, moving from the political (nationalism, the military, leadership, trust) through the personal (kinship, memory, gender) to the institutional (the state, history, racial struggle, community). Each case study is fairly discrete but these chapters are brought together by the central thematics of working through and symbolic non-being. Arguably, the discussion of *M*A*S*H* in chapter 2 implicitly takes up many of the arguments and themes of the chapters to follow, thus illustrating how permeable the boundaries can be between television’s programs and genres, and the real world scenarios and implications they represent.

John Ellis seems to suggest that working through is best utilised as a means of letting go of troubling events, thoughts and feelings, in order to move past them and continue our lives unencumbered by the burden of grief over suffering, whether our own or of others. But perhaps we can do better. Maybe we can work through not just to overcome, but to come alongside – to better understand the work that still remains and to

---

27 This term has a long history, which will be expanded on in this chapter, rooted in scholarship about both the experience of slavery and medical liminality.
discover that we are not alone as we tackle it. When it gets it right, television can help us do this. Representations of symbolic non-being on television resonate with viewers because they tell compelling stories. They offer solidarity, but they can also be instructive in offering a way to imagine what comes next. Loss is so often the end of a story, but in the case studies explored, it is frequently just the beginning.
2 Being traumatised: \textit{M*A*S*H}, moral injury, and revisiting the Korean War

Moral injury is about the damage done to our moral fiber when transgressions occur by our hands, through our orders, or with our connivance. When we accept these transgressions, however pragmatic (for survival, for instance), we sacrifice a piece of our moral integrity.

~ Tyler Boudreau, former Marine Captain (2011)

The United States has been involved in some form of war for as long as it has had television.\textsuperscript{28} The Korean War was not presented in living rooms the way the conflict in Vietnam was, largely because the medium was still new. TV sets were not yet in every home, and “the new television channels did not yet have news networks capable of timely, gripping disaster coverage” (Young, 2014: 157). There was no imperative for television to be the primary source of reporting on Korea as radio was still a more familiar and consistent source of information about world affairs in the 1950s. The most memorable representation of the Korean War was brought to television two decades after the conflict officially ended; it lasted nearly three times as long as the war it depicts, and it punctuated the seriousness of its subject matter with a somewhat dissonant laugh track.\textsuperscript{29}

Historically specific, \textit{M*A*S*H} (CBS, 1972-83) was the first scripted television entertainment program broadcast in the US with a central “situation” predicated on the comedic representation of the human experience of, and response to, suffering in the context of war. \textit{M*A*S*H} the film preceded \textit{M*A*S*H} the television show. It was based

\textsuperscript{28} Arguably, accordingly to Andrew J. Bacevich, the US has been in a state of perpetual war, almost since its inception. [https://harpers.org/archive/2016/05/american-imperium/](https://harpers.org/archive/2016/05/american-imperium/)

\textsuperscript{29} Creators Larry Gelbart and Gene Reynolds didn’t want the laugh track, and they convinced CBS to compromise in not permitting it during any of the surgical scenes. When the program was shown in syndication in the UK, there was no accompanying laugh track in any of the episodes.
on the 1968 novel of the same name (*MASH: A Tale of Three Doctors*, by Richard Hooker) and screened in 1971, achieving both critical and popular acclaim. It was directed by Robert Altman and is viewed by David Diffrient as a revisionist deconstruction of the war-film genre, notable because “the film’s generic hybridity, tonal schizophrenia, and crisscrossing plotlines seem to have later influenced the creators of the television series” (2008: 24). While the film demonstrated that audiences clearly had a taste for non-traditional narrative forms, particularly when framed by a counter-cultural sensibility, the television show provided its creators with an even greater opportunity to approach the topic of war with a critical irreverence and satirical cynicism. Over the many years of broadcast, shifts in characterization are represented by literal shifts in actors portraying particular roles (B.J. Honeycutt follows “Trapper” John McIntyre as Hawkeye’s sidekick and sometimes conscience; Colonel Potter takes over after the death of Henry Blake; Charles Winchester assumes the role of camp pedant after Frank Burns goes AWOL). These shifts also reflect a change in American culture post-1975.

The grim futility of the MASH unit surgeons, drafted into service and expected to do their best to repair wounded soldiers so that they might go out and kill some more, provides a substantial scope for investigating representations of symbolic non-being in the context of trauma. Kelly J.W. Brown (2016) notes that:

> *M*A*S*H* utilised social realism, cinematic filming techniques, and character development in order to contemporize its storylines and redefine the traditional structure, content, and purpose of the television military sitcom. By focusing more on the psychology, morality, and maturation of its characters than the absurd situation they might find themselves in (as in a traditional sitcom), *M*A*S*H* could allow itself to explore the physical and psychological effects of war in new and more personal ways. (140)

This prioritisation of character over situation is key to the way the program performs the psychological labour that Freud (1914) described as “working through” repressed psychic resistance. Here memory, repetition and the passage of time are integral elements in the process. These elements are present both in the program’s production and reception, first as characteristics of the ongoing narrative strategy throughout the program’s eleven seasons, and then again as inevitable aspects of the viewing experience. In *M*A*S*H*
narrative working through is a function of the various stories the program tells, as characters repeatedly work through various manifestations of psychological distress brought on by wartime experiences, while receptive working through operates in a more complex way, particularly in terms of the life the program continues to have long after its initial broadcast.

Taking a psychoanalytic approach, we can read the television texts which resonate with us, and to which we return, as transitional objects,\textsuperscript{30} which can over time be “use[d] to engage in deep unconscious work, an effort that enable[s] us to experience and articulate something of [our]sel[ves]” (Bollas, 1992: 58). Roger Silverstone (1994) draws on Donald Winnicott (1974) to extend this argument in relation to television, noting that:

Television survives all efforts at its destruction.... Television is, as many observers have noted, constantly present. It is eternal. This quality of the medium is one that also guarantees its potential status as a transitional object even for those who may have grown up without it ... [It] continue[s] to occupy potential space throughout an individual’s life, thought obviously with different degrees of intensity and significance. (1994: 15)

According to psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas (1992), “each entry into an experience of an object is rather like being born again, as subjectivity is newly informed by the encounter, its history altered by a radically effective present that will change its structure” (59). The effects of history on the present and future, and vice versa, in terms of the way we come to reconsider history over time, are thus also germane to this analysis.

Public discourse and scholarship surrounding \textit{M*A*S*H} has settled with curious ease on the belief that the program was really a proxy vehicle through which to deliver critical commentary on US involvement in Vietnam, even though it was set in Korea during a much earlier Cold War era US military intervention (Freedman, 1990; Worland, 1998). This belief was readily established during the time of the program’s original

\textsuperscript{30} From the \textit{International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis}: “The term transitional object was coined in 1951 by Donald Winnicott as a designation for any material object (typically something soft—a piece of cloth, say, or part of a plush toy) to which an infant attributes a special value and by means of which the child is able to make the necessary shift from the earliest oral relationship with the mother to genuine object-relationships” (2005:1793). Television programs are obviously not material objects, but the special value we may attribute to them allows them to function in a similar way.
broadcast, illustrating that progressives at that time were so eager to recognize a subversive narrative that commented critically on a current and controversial war effort, they completely overlooked the significance of the text taken at face value. In addition to exploring some of the ways that \( M*A*S*H \) performs working through in its representation of moral injury, this analysis aims to trouble the widely accepted position that the program is essentially a Vietnam War text. In reflecting on the program now, considering world affairs in this contemporary moment, perhaps \( M*A*S*H \) can be reinterpreted as a text where the pretense of an indirect critique (which could be more easily disavowed at that time if it encountered too much political resistance) was also a casual continuation of the erasure of the Korean War from American consciousness. It is entirely consistent that the Forgotten War could appear in plain sight on American TV screens for over a decade, and yet be viewed merely as a strategic narrative device facilitating an indirect critique of a more pressing and controversial military intervention.

This seemingly benign erasure is very telling, given that as David Diffrient notes, “one cannot ignore the fact that – over the course of its eleven seasons – \( M*A*S*H \) did more to inscribe the idea of ‘Korea’ in America’s collective unconscious than any other cultural production of the twentieth century” (2008: 104). The tone and character of these representations of Korea are that much more significant, given the lack of competing cultural depictions on American television at that time or since, and Diffrient notes a wide variety of unflattering stereotypes that the program must bear some responsibility for perpetuating. A re-reading of this text with a closer eye to its depiction of both the Korean War and the Korean people is particularly timely given the current state of affairs between North Korea and the US. This reading adds an extra dimension of complexity to the way this program performs working through as a face value interpretation of its stories and their implications can come to be seen as deferred and discoverable anew in this contemporary moment. The moral injuries depicted within the text may also provide a framework for better understanding the psychic wounds that North Korea continues to nurse today as the root of its impasse with the US – one that cannot be resolved until the latter acknowledges its culpability. To provide some context, this discussion will also offer a brief summary of the conventional reception of the text, but first we must unpack the concept of moral injury.
War, trauma and the non-being of moral injury

Television is a medium that is narratively dependent on conflict to drive stories, and violence is the ultimate manifestation of conflict – one with which we are intimately acquainted in terms of representation, if not experience. Given the pervasive regularity of depictions of violence on television, verging on the banal, it might be surprising that the medium could be adept at representing trauma authentically, in terms of its resonance with both empathetic viewers and trauma experts. But the longevity of television’s broadcast address (11 seasons for M*A*S*H) allows for a repetition of conflict that can leave many viewers deeply moved even as others find themselves inured. In these narratives, trauma is often a catalyst for both primary and episodic characters to experience states of symbolic non-being as they grapple with the physical and emotional toll of the violence of war.

These characters may be positioned in relation to the violence as victims, perpetrators, witnesses, or some combination of these subject positions. Psychological shock can have profound consequences as one struggles to comprehend both what has happened and what to do about it, and this can be further complicated still by one’s self-perceived complicity in inflicting suffering on others. Reactions to trauma vary in accordance with the particulars of the event, and the life experiences and temperament of those affected, but there are a number of key mental health tropes that television utilises regularly to illustrate the implications of a traumatic experience. These include dissociative behaviour (memory loss, confusion, bravado, and recklessness), psychological break-downs, vivid recurring nightmares and suicidal tendencies. These tropes are meant to illustrate the degree to which the individual is struggling to both process what has occurred and to prevent themselves from being (further) fractured through having to confront a potentially insurmountable incompatibility between the person who used to be (pre-trauma) and the one that is afterwards. Though rendered through fictional narratives, when these tropes succeed in effectively representing instances of trauma-induced symbolic non-being, it will be in part because they are based on the authentic experiences of trauma sufferers, inflictors, witnesses and those who find themselves simultaneously experiencing multiple subject positions.
Pamela Moss and Michael J. Prince write about “weary warriors”, who they define as “soldiers who have suffered deep emotional distress during combat” (2014: 1). This emotional stress is as old as war itself, and Moss and Prince note that names for “soldiers’ ravished minds” have ranged widely and include: “barbed-wire syndrome, battle dreams, brain fog, debility, effort syndrome, fatigue, hysterical disorder, irritable heart syndrome, lassitude, mental trouble, nerve strain, nerve shaken, nerve wrack, nervous breakdown, soldier’s heart, traumatic hysteria, traumatic neurasthenia, war neurosis, and war psycho neurosis” (2014: 4-5). Moss and Prince work to understand the organization of military and psychiatric power in relation to soldiers’ experiences of war neuroses, highlighting the shift in the nature of the neurosis which has been signalled by the shift in official name, from shell shock to PTSD (2014: 11). There is a certain amount of guilt and shame at the root of most cases of war-induced PTSD; in the last decade, research has revealed guilt to be a possible cause of PTSD, rather than merely a symptom, and this theoretical concept has come to be referred to as “moral injury” (Drescher & Foy, 2008; Litz et al, 2009; Maguen et al, 2010; Shay, 2011; Dombo, Gray & Early, 2013). Nash & Litz (2013) explain moral injury as:

A model that has been developed to better understand how service members and veterans may develop PTSD and other serious mental and behavioral problems in the wake of war-zone events that inflict damage to moral belief systems rather than threaten personal life and safety. (366)

Earlier work on PTSD theorized its causation as solely based in fear and victimization, as with the shell-shocked soldiers of the World Wars, but for many now serving in combat zones, fear is often replaced by or supplemented with guilt. Typically, soldiers will experience guilt over either killing (taking lives or watching them be taken) and/or not being killed (surviving when others didn’t). The level of geographic distance from the target being killed can be substantial, as has been evidenced by combat related PTSD manifestation in drone operators.  

The nature of the guilt experienced in moral injury is a manifestation of a feeling that one’s identity has been violated – that the actions

---

perpetrated or witnessed are a negation of what the self believes is necessary to be a good person. The cognitive dissonance that this negation produces requires the psyche to necessarily be alienated from itself in order to tolerate the inconsistency, and when this strategy eventually fails, it creates an entry into the psychological zone of non-being.

Jonathan Shay (2011) argues that moral injury is a better term than PTSD, as what is being suffered is not an illness, but can instead be likened to a wound complication, which will only fester if left untreated (181). Shay agitates for this distinction because there is far less stigma attached to experiencing injury in the military than to becoming ill; while the former is externally imposed, the latter can imply a failure of personal constitution (181). Shay also offers a narrower definition of moral injury:

My current most precise (and narrow) definition has three parts: moral injury is present when (1) there has been a betrayal of what’s right (2) by someone who holds legitimate authority (3) in a high-stakes situation. When all three are present, moral injury is present and the body codes it in much the same way it codes physical attack. (2011: 183)

Here Shay highlights an element of “leadership malpractice” to point out that a key aspect of the moral injury suffered in these instances is loss of trust which then “destroys the capacity for social trust in the mental and social worlds of the service member or veteran” (2011: 184).

This loss of trust can have a devastating effect on affected individuals, and on television, depictions of moral injury may have a doubling effect, as the loss of trust can then be passed on to empathetic viewers. There is no shortage of evidence in this contemporary moment that Americans have lost trust in their government institutions, and by extension, in each other. This loss of trust has developed over time, having been engendered through a variety of mediated presentations and re-presentations of political power, of which television is certainly a part. In M*A*S*H this element of “leadership malpractice” is complex as it often involves a diffused relationship between the sufferers of moral injury that I will soon highlight, and the authority by which they may feel betrayed. In some cases, it is more a matter of self-betrayal, while in others it is the entire military system which represents a so-called “legitimate authority” using chain of command to direct ambivalent combatants to kill an enemy they have no personal quarrel
with. In this case it is worth considering if in fact all war trauma doesn’t involve some degree of moral injury. Soldiers don’t choose to go to war, but governments do, and then military chain of command determines the logistics of what must be done and who must do it. Even if you believe that all-out war is necessary – if you accept the ideological propaganda of defending a vague notion of freedom and you thrill to nationalist speeches attempting to sanctify the infliction of suffering in the name of some sort of ineffable greater good that begins with *us* and ends with *them* – can you ever be reconciled to the moments when your actions bring devastation to individuals, families and communities? Under these circumstances, maintaining a clear conscience hinges on a deep-rooted cognitive dissonance, one which ironically is so often unable to hold out under the sensory assault of the conflict zone – the sounds of agony, the smell of burning flesh, the images of bodies broken and bleeding. It’s no wonder so many returning combatants retreat into self-destructive spirals of depression or psychosis. As the psychiatrist Sidney Freedman explains to Hawkeye Pierce in *M*A*S*H*, “You dream to escape, but the war invades your dream and you wake up screaming. The dream is peaceful. Reality is the nightmare” (*M*A*S*H*, Episode 5:14, “Hawk’s Nightmare”). PTSD and moral injury can thus be seen as terms that also characterise one’s subject position in relation to the experience of violence-based trauma. Victims of trauma suffer PTSD, while (remorseful) perpetrators experience their trauma as moral injury. For veterans, more often than not, these categories overlap.

**Discarded veterans: Moral injury in the context of Vietnam and Korea**

PTSD and moral injury can be further complicated by the status of a given war effort within the discourse of the society that military personnel return to when their tours have ended. The Vietnam War was (and perhaps continues to be) a sobering source of national shame for the American public, which was already divided over both the draft and the ideological motivation for American involvement in this Cold War proxy conflict. The timing of the Vietnam War collided with the counter-cultural social revolution of the 1960s and public opposition to it can be viewed as the beginning of an anti-war movement in the US that persists today. As Peter C. Rollins (2008) notes: “The Vietnam War is not over for the United States. It is still being fought in our popular culture, and the struggle provides rich opportunities for researchers and teachers of contemporary
literature, mass media, and culture” (367). When it became clear that American forces could not achieve victory in their goals, national discourse shifted to a subtle disavowal of the country’s involvement in this military conflict and this had profound consequences for veterans returning home, bewildered by the lack of welcome they received. Like the Korean War before, the military intervention in Vietnam was officially termed a “police action,” as the US never formally declared war on either country. Stuart Schneiderman explains that, “a policy failure was compounded with a failure to admit error. As a consequence, the nation divided itself into warring camps contesting the true story of what happened, why it happened, who made it happen, and what it meant” (1995: 59).

These contested accounts of real events are evidence of how important memory – both individual and collective – is, in shaping public opinion in the moment, and then further fixing it within historical discourse. Television, as a kind of repository of screened memories in the 20th century, became uniquely positioned to offer narrative rehearsals of these accounts, both real and imagined – blurring the boundaries between news and more populist infotainment. According to Frank Garro:

The war in Vietnam left American foreign policy in a tentative state with regard to the possibility of any intervention of involvement that might require American boots on the ground. As a result this Vietnam Syndrome had an effect on more than just the foreign policy of the United States. As the American century entered the latter half of the twentieth century, American exceptionalism limped on its way. It had been damaged by American involvement in a war that came to be seen by many as unwinnable, even questioning its legality and morality. American political will and effectiveness had faltered on the world’s stage and its national confidence had been gravely wounded. Such events and ennui seep into a society and bring with them an effect upon its popular culture. The way in which stories would be told after the Vietnam War found much in the way of legacy in popular culture. (2017: 306-307)

---

32 The term here refers to Freud’s 1899 paper “Screen Memories” which, using himself as the primary example, addresses the role of (some) childhood memories as functioning to “screen” out things which are unacceptable to the ego. According to The International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis: “A screen memory (like forgetting and amnesia) is a compromise between repressed elements and defense against them” (2005: 1555).
The Vietnam War has also been referred as the first “televised war” (Mandelbaum, 1982; Steinman, 2002). Michael Mandelbaum noted in 1982, correlating the daily news broadcasts of war with the clear defeat that US forces suffered for the first time ever, that it was widely believed that the US lost the war because it was televised (157). Mandelbaum clarifies that the key aspect of television’s coverage of the war in turning public opinion against it lies chiefly in the power of the image:

The belief that television had a decisive influence on the conduct of the Vietnam War does not rest on the editorial content of the network news programs, however. It was not the conceptual framework for interpreting the pictures of violence that appeared on American television screens that shaped public attitudes toward the war, according to the conventional wisdom, but the pictures themselves. An image is thought to be many times more powerful than words. These images, of shot and shell, blood and death, produced a particular set of reactions in those who saw them: dismay, disgust, and horror, all of which fed the desire to stop the war, or at least to stop American participation in it. When Americans could only read about war, they could contemplate it with dispassion. When they could see and hear it in their living rooms, they turned against it. (1982: 161)

While the images of war from television news footage proved to be a powerful incentive to public opposition of the Vietnam War effort, fictional narratives also played a role, and few were more popular than M*A*S*H. Ironically though, the televisual representations of war that finally caused the American people to turn against policy advocating further intervention in Vietnam, were too-little, too-late in terms of the war M*A*S*H literally represented – a war that would seem to be no more over in the minds of North Koreans, than Vietnam is in the collective pop cultural imagination of the US.

**M*A*S*H – History, genre, conventional reception and suggested reframing**

*M*A*S*H is an example of working through from relatively early on in the history of American television. The program attempted to respond to the complexity of
US involvement in Vietnam, while simultaneously maintaining a level of distance as the narrative content depicted the Korean War. The program took some time to build in popularity, but its final episode in 1983 was the most watched American television broadcast of all time. Joel Swerdlow, writing for the Washington Post in 1980, notes that one of the reasons for the program’s success was its lack of controversy, contrary to its anti-war reputation. Swerdlow asserts that the strongest indicator of this fact is that the program was never complained about by the Veterans of Foreign Wars organization, which worked to protect the military’s image in terms of representations in popular culture. I would argue, however, that this could be viewed instead as evidence of how subversive the program was in doing its ideological work, protected (and equally derided) by its genre status as a sitcom. People seldom bother to complain about things that they don’t take seriously. According to Abel Rios:

The show provided a space in American culture in which the Vietnam war could be discussed without the polarizing ‘antiwar’ or ‘defeat of Communism’ labels attached to it. Although the show was clearly opposed to war, the use of comedic non-combatants to address various issues enabled its content to be easier to appreciate for audiences. (2017: 112)

Rios argues that M*A*S*H broke new ground by focusing on the perspective of medical non-combatants, not presenting them as war heroes because of their service to the system, but rather showing how their heroic actions are instead too often thwarted by the military apparatus – limited by bureaucratic red tape, incompetent leadership, and the lack of necessary resources (2017: 112).

---

34 Gene Reynolds has said in many interviews, that while M*A*S*H was literally in Korea, it was figuratively in Vietnam.

35 Nielsen ratings data indicate that the first broadcast of the M*A*S*H final episode, “Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen” was viewed in 50.15 million households, constituting 60.2% of available viewers (households who owned TV sets) and 77% of actual viewers (households watching TV at that time). The total number of viewers to have seen the program will have increased with syndicated broadcast and the availability of the series box-set, but this initial number is significant in that it represents the largest single number of people ever to be gathered together at one time for an American television event. Even though the number of possible viewers continues to grow with the population, it is unlikely that the American television industry will ever see numbers like this again, given the current fragmented nature of viewing with time-shifting technologies and unprecedented channel proliferation.
Once the Vietnam War ended, along with Richard Nixon’s time in the White House, the tone of *M*A*S*H* became less urgent. It no longer criticized an ongoing war but instead shifted to a critical reflection on what happens afterwards, by exploring the interiority of the non-combatants that are the program’s main focus. David Diffrient (2008) notes that introduction at this point of the characters of Hunnicutt and Potter – both monogamous and trustworthy – “signalled the beginning of a transition in the show’s treatment of both masculinity and femininity, not to mention a desire in the American culture at large to put the nation’s inglorious past behind it” (51). Arguably it is at this point that the program’s framing of its Korean War setting becomes most significant. As *M*A*S*H* creators, Larry Gelbart and Gene Reynolds, attested to aiming for the greatest degree of verisimilitude they could (even going so far as to visit Korea for research), it now seems absurd to suggest that *M*A*S*H* was primarily a proxy narrative for social commentary on the Vietnam War. The program ran for 11 seasons and featured Local Indigenous Personnel in a significant number of episodes. Clearly it also had a great deal to say about the Forgotten War, and it’s ironic that even while the text was speaking for itself, both viewers and producers were often too eager to overlook some of its most compelling statements about Korea, its people and the nature of American involvement in that military conflict. Bruce Cummings notes that “by calling the Korean conflict a ‘forgotten war,’ we both name it, and we remember it – a paradox: what is it that we are remembering to forget?” (1990: 767). *M*A*S*H* is complicit in this paradoxical simultaneous naming and forgetting, as the program’s creators revisit the conflict two decades after the actual events of the war, showing us Korea, while telling us to think of Vietnam.

Yet if we read *M*A*S*H* as primarily concerned with the exploration of the physical and psychological effects of war more generally, then it becomes much easier to see how the program was telling the story its setting indicated, regardless of how cultural critics at the time continued to insist that *of course* both the film and the TV show were about Vietnam. The conversation that films and television shows enter into with their respective audiences characterises the interpretation of content, which is often informed

---

36 Local Indigenous Personnel (or L.I.P.s) is the official American military term for civilians in a war zone.
by the context of the historical moment in which the interpretation is made. The program becomes a signifier of collective memory – first through its literal depiction of the Korean War, again through the re-interpretation of receiving audiences in the 70s and 80s and yet once more every time the program is re-viewed in syndication by new audiences who have already been culturally conditioned to receive the program in particular ways. We might be tempted to say that this is true of all television programs – that once dragged from the archives they each come to have new meanings for new viewers – but this program is unique, in that, as I have argued above, the significance of its narrative setting was not fully appreciated or understood when it was first broadcast. The use of Korea was believed to be strategic, as Charles S. Young notes when discussing the paucity of American film and television narratives about the Korean War, particularly when compared with Vietnam:

The long-running *M*A*S*H* began in 1972 and was really about Vietnam. Its irreverence and pacifism were distinctly of the counter-culture era, which the producers knew they could not pull off if directed at an ongoing war, so Korea it was. (Young, 2014: 158)

Young argues that the program’s producers wanted to criticize Vietnam, but they would have risked the wrath of industry executives and advertisers if they had made this critique too overt, and Korea must have seemed like a logical alternative, as the most recent conflict the country had been involved in – with a similar ideological agenda. Thus, it’s not surprising that audiences, industries critics, and even academics, all read *M*A*S*H* as a commentary on and social critique of US involvement in the Vietnam War. It’s also not surprising that the creators of the television show reinforce this reading themselves, through their assertion that this is what they intended. The historical time of broadcast influences both the reception of this text and the feelings that its creators had about it, in terms of both the power and the limits of its social and political influence. This reading of *M*A*S*H* has become fixed in our collective memory.

Susan Sontag sees collective memory as a tool “not of retrieval but of reconfiguration [that] colonizes the past by obliging it to conform to present configurations” (Sontag, 1977: 20). *M*A*S*H* does some of this colonizing work quite literally as the discourse around the program allowed (then and continues to do now) the
Korean War of the past to stand in for anti-war arguments, which Vietnam War detractors were eager to capitalise on in the (then) present. But ultimately, the text speaks for itself – the implications of the choice of setting serve as evidence of an as yet unacknowledged continuation of the disavowal that has contributed to the characterisation of the Korean War as “forgotten” in the first place. All three iterations of M*A*S*H (novel, film and TV show) are set in Korea, during the Korean War, with protagonists that have been compelled by the draft to work in a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital. All three incorporate colorful depictions of Korea and its people; the novel does so through a series of discontinuous vignettes which seem somehow more nostalgic than critical (perhaps a way for the author of this semi-biographical fictional account to work through his own feelings about the war), while the film maintains an anarchic irreverence towards all things military throughout. The television show, however, injects an unexpected degree of pathos for a situation comedy, and the emotional response that it provokes with the stories that it tells lends it a weight that demands an arguably more consistently responsible depiction of Local Indigenous Personnel than is offered. However, the primary narrative trajectory in the program, aside from a framing which suggests that the war has ended when the program does (more on that later), is the psychic evolution of its central protagonist, army surgeon Hawkeye Pierce.

Benjamin Franklin “Hawkeye” Pierce is a foundational character in M*A*S*H, who travels from the book to the film and finally to the television program. His role is quickly established in the opening moments of the pilot episode, as the first real dialogue comes from actor Alan Alda’s voiceover reading a letter Hawkeye has just written to his father:

Dear Dad, you said I sounded a bit callous about my job here in my last letter. […] We work fast and we’re not dainty because of lot of these kids who can’t stand two hours on the table just can’t stand one second more. We try to play par surgery on this course. Par is a live patient.

This letter, which explains the brutal nature of surgery in a war zone, both indicates the significance of Hawkeye’s character to the narrative and allows viewers to connect with him on an emotional level as they empathize with his predicament. He is an ambivalent protagonist, having been drafted into service, unlike the enlisted men, and he has little
regard for men in uniform. The character goes through something of an evolution in the march across mediums – in the novel he is married with children, and somewhat less interested in chasing women than his counterparts in film and television. But over the course of the 11 seasons of the CBS program, this iteration undergoes an evolution of its own as it deepens in complexity. Hawkeye’s emotional trajectory, culminating in a mental breakdown when he is ultimately unable to keep the horrors of war at bay with cynicism and humour, is a compelling example of the way working through can be facilitated by character development. The deepening of Hawkeye’s character relies on a layered tension between depictions of suffering and Hawkeye’s increasing inability to cope with what he has to see and do. The program employs a notable (for its time) variety of narrative strategies and devices,\(^{37}\) that explore and stretch the limits of its characters, in a genre (sitcom) that is typically dependent on their fundamental incorrigibility\(^{38}\). While Hawkeye is framed as incorrigible for the first few seasons, his charismatic tomfoolery is balanced and ultimately tempered, as episodic storytelling is increasingly blended with elements of serialization, incorporating significant recurring characters like Major Sidney Freedman. Hawkeye is the primary recurring symbolic location of the problem of moral injury as narrated in this program, but there are additional episodic examples throughout the program’s many seasons, two of which will be highlighted in the next section.

**Hawkeye’s guide: Dr. Freedman and the therapeutic framing of moral injury**

In this section, I focus on scenes where Hawkeye’s increasing emotional fragility is filtered through and explained by the recurring character, army psychiatrist Sidney Freedman. Freedman is a useful framing device for this analysis for three reasons: 1) his appearances always signify the breaking through of the realities of war into the otherwise whimsical plot-lines that a program advertised as a network comedy must frequently

---

\(^{37}\) These include handwritten letters, voice-over narration, dream sequences, the use of documentary conventions like breaking the 4th wall, filming in black and white, and unexpectedly killing off main characters like Commanding Officer Henry Blake.

\(^{38}\) Writing about sitcom genre conventions, Barry Langford (2005) notes that “even though teaching the principal character(s) a (moral, ethical, social) ‘lesson’ may be the central thrust of the series, it is the generically obligatory incorrigibility of the characters that underpins the continued life of the series itself” (17).
indulge in; 2) the representation of Freedman’s point of view and his psychoanalytic approach to helping various people he encounters in the MASH unit work through their individual traumas provides a useful framework for understanding the parallel process the program itself engages in as it works through the social issues which contextualise its narrative; 3) he provides necessary exposition to help the viewer better understand the nature of the moral injury which has been suffered by both Hawkeye and other episodic characters.

There are 11 out of 255 episodes, plus the feature-length series finale, which incorporate Freedman into the main storyline, showcasing his perspective with increasing significance. He makes an appearance roughly once each season, in episodes which include a variety of tropes television commonly uses to indicate emotional distress: an air force pilot experiences a psychotic break and believes himself to be Jesus Christ (Episode 4:9, “Quo Vadis, Captain Chandler); an American serviceman of Chinese heritage becomes suicidal when unable to cope with having to kill his cultural compatriots (Episode 8:21, “Goodbye Cruel World); an army medic loses his memory, including his own name, and only under hypnosis recalls finding his younger brother dead in a bunker, having failed to protect him as he’d promised his mother he would (Episode 7:6, “The Billfold Syndrome”). Although each of these stories is introduced and resolved episodically, they have a cumulative effect over the life of this long running series, familiar in their thematic repetition which relentlessly explores the often-tragic consequences of war-time suffering. Freedman is a relatively static character – a consistent but infrequent visitor, who is less affected by the events of the plot than the other regular members of medical team. In this way he serves as a useful backdrop against which to juxtapose the changes in Hawkeye’s character that occur over time. Freedman is also a useful reference point for better understanding the nature of the process of working through that the program engages in as he himself employs classic Freudian psychoanalytic strategies in his engagement with patients, and particularly with Hawkeye. As represented, he “contents himself with studying whatever is present for the time being on the surface of the patient's mind, and he employs the art of interpretation mainly for the purpose of recognizing the resistances which appear there and making them conscious to the patient” (Freud, 147). In order to better understand the significance
of Freedman’s character and the relationship that he develops with Hawkeye, it is worth first considering two of the aforementioned examples more closely: “Quo Vadis, Captain Chandler” and “Goodbye Cruel World”. This is then followed by an examination of Hawkeye’s mental breakdown in the series finale.

I. “Sometimes the answer is ‘no’.”

Captain Arnold Chandler turns up in the MASH with a variety of injuries that include a superficial head wound, and as he has lost his dog tags, he is initially unable to be properly identified. When asked his name, he insists that he is Jesus Christ, and so Major Sidney Freedman is brought in to do a psychological assessment. Colonel Flagg, a covert CIA operative embedded with the military, is alerted by members of the MASH unsympathetic with Chandler that he is likely to be discharged on the basis of mental incompetence. Flagg arrives determined to stop this from happening, even threatening Freedman with charges of sedition based on his having failed to sign his loyalty oath if he doesn’t find Chandler fit for service. Freedman’s conversation with the fighter pilot quickly establishes that this is no simple case of pretending, and Chandler’s mental state illustrates the lengths to which a mind might go to protect itself from having to confront the abhorrent acts of violence which war compels the body housing it to commit. When Freedman presses him about the 57 missions he’s flown in the past two years, Chandler’s eyes fill with tears, as he insists that he would never hurt his “children”.

**Figure 3**: Sydney Freedman counselling Arnold Chandler as "Christ"

SF: What are you doing here in an army hospital?
*AC: I’m Christ, where should I be?*
- Should you be in the nose of a B-29?
- *A B-29?*
- That’s where you’ve been a good part of the past 2 years – up in a B-29, dropping bombs.
- Bombs... On people...?
- On the enemy.
- I have no enemies, I love all men.
- Even the North Koreans?
- My children. Why would I hurt my children? I’m sorry. I’m not this Captain Chandler you’re looking for, but I hope you can find him. I hope you can help him. (M*A*S*H, Episode 4:9, “Qui Vadis, Captain Chandler”)

It isn’t entirely clear if Chandler really knows who he is, but the ambiguity of his last statement here suggests a few significant internal conflicts. What is it that he is sorry for? Sorry not to be the man who has committed the atrocity of hurting others? Or sorry that he is? “I hope you can find him – I hope you can help him” is an imploration, particularly given the exchange that follows. Freedman asks if it is true that God answers all prayers. “Yes,” Chandler replies, a tear spilling over and down his cheek. “Sometimes the answer is ‘no’.”

Part of the narrative tension in this compelling representation of a particularly extreme response to war and trauma is that it also addresses the typical reaction of agents of the state in cases like these. Higher-ranking military authorities are depicted as cold pragmatists who view traumatic mental debilitation as an insincere ploy to be excused from service or a sign of a gross weakness of character which the military is obliged to correct. Flagg is also concerned that if Chandler is released from service it will be demoralising for the war effort: “One man decides he’s not going to fight, it catches on, next thing you know what you got on your hands?” BJ Honeycutt’s innocent reply of “peace?” is ignored, but it’s clear here that the “legitimate authority” Jonathan Shay looks for in a case of moral injury is present and compelling. Flagg represents a military establishment that takes any threat to the totality of its authority very seriously. His name is also a literal stand-in/signifier for the state. Flagg may not be able to compel Chandler to return to duty, but he won’t let him go quietly: “I either want Chandler’s highly trained thumb up there, pushing the button, or I want to get him for dereliction of duty.” Although Flagg refers to Chandler as having “turned chicken”, it clearly isn’t fear that motivates him. Nothing in his speech or demeanor suggests that he is afraid for his own
life – he just can’t keep on killing, and in his refusal, he’s willing to risk punishment. These aren’t cowardly actions. How can we view an authority that limits your options to killing, or being punished for refusing, as “legitimate”? It becomes apparent that the biggest threat to Captain Chandler’s ability to return to a more authentic state of being is ironically not the trauma that he has experienced, but rather the military institution’s approach to fixing him. The narrative offers a critique of war that transcends space and time as Freedman is forced to stand up to Flagg and make it clear that Captain Chandler’s psychological recuperation depends on his being permanently released from military service:

Colonel, some men lose an arm, or a hand, or a leg. Chandler lost himself. He’s not playing a game. He spent two years dropping bombs on people who never did anything to him, until finally, something inside this kid from Idaho said, ‘Enough! You’re Christ, you’re not a killer – the next bomb you drop, you drop on yourself.’ … I think that with a lot of the right kind of help, we may be able to turn him back into Arnold Chandler. We’ll never be able to turn him back into a fighting tool. And it’s my professional advice that we don’t try. (M*A*S*H, Episode 4:9, “Qui Vadis, Captain Chandler”)

“Chandler lost himself” when his moral injury caused a psychic rupture which placed him in a state of symbolic non-being, leaving him fixed on the belief that he is the Christian saviour of mankind; how comforting to see oneself as a saviour instead of a killer. His Messiah complex provides an opportunity for a complete erasure of his complicity – if he is Christ, how can he have spent two years of his life dropping bombs on innocent people? The critique of the Korean War effort offered here doesn’t pull any punches; it’s unequivocal in its condemnation of “kids from Idaho” dropping bombs on people in foreign countries that they have no beef with. But it also mobilizes sympathy through the representation of Captain Chandler’s moral injury. His dissociation is severe and could be viewed as evidence of weakness – as a foundational flaw in his character which has made him unfit for service – but instead it positions him as somehow more noble, even after two years of killing strangers. His guilt is depicted as reparative – in one way it has set him free, both literally and figuratively, but it has also put him on a path of psychological confusion that he may not be able to deviate from. He has to first cease to be everything that he once was in order to gain even the smallest chance of making his
way back to himself, the way he was before it all started. In this sense, Chandler’s case is not individually a true representation of working through, because he hasn’t yet come to terms with what he has done, but it is instructive in helping to provide parameters for moral injury and it contributes to the larger labour of working through being performed by *M*A*S*H* as a complete text.

The idea that some of the effects of trauma are irreversible is seldom addressed on television. Most narratives imply that with time and effort, trauma can be overcome, and life can return to how it was before. Freedman’s assertion that Captain Chandler can never be turned back into a “fighting tool” is significant, in that it doesn’t just reinforce the irreversibility of trauma’s effects, but it also suggests that the trauma one experiences from inflicting violence on others may ultimately be the only thing that renders one incapable of continuing to inflict further violence in the future. This kind of trauma is represented as a necessary outcome of an unsuccessful attempt to suppress empathy. Here the human psyche has reached a point where the moral injury sustained leaves only two choices – a self-aware individual who chooses to cease the infliction of suffering, but must live with what he has already done, or a complete reboot of the self, where past misdeeds are forgotten along with everything else. The rules of military service make only one of these choices possible, as there is no honorable discharge afforded without loss – in this case the loss of one’s mind. The dilemma is an extension of Joseph Heller’s deftly articulated “Catch 22”, only the “concern for one’s safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate” (1963: 43) relates in this case to the moral dangers of continuing to act as a destructive aggressor towards an arbitrary enemy. When the psyche is unable to reconcile one’s complicity in the commission of atrocities with feelings of guilt and shame, then psychic retreat into non-being becomes the only option.

---

39 Episodic genres like police procedurals and sitcoms are particularly guilty of this, as they require a narrative reset of the status quo at the end of every episode in order to set up an infinite number of new stories which can be broadcast in any order when sold into syndication. While narrative complexity has allowed for increasing genre hybridity, serialization and character development in recent years, this approach to story and character was rare at the time that *M*A*S*H* was first broadcast.
II. “He’s been trying to kill himself since he got to Korea.”

In order to disavow the things he has done, Arnold Chandler ends up disavowing his own identity, but psychosis isn’t the only response to moral injury depicted in M*A*S*H. The case of the Chinese-American serviceman, Sergeant Michael Yee, represents moral injury as a catalyst for suicidal ideation, as Yee’s national identity comes into conflict with his ethnic one. It is a rare moment for television and film in this time period, which tended to only offer wartime narratives that rendered individual ethnic heritage invisible in the context of the larger patriotic identification with the homeland one is fighting for, often masking systemic racial divides (Anderegg, 1991; Desser, 1991; Nadel, 2005). This is further evidence of the deeper specificity of M*A*S*H’s ideological critique, as the significance of this plot resonates better in the context of the Korean War than Vietnam.

Yee is a known “bonafide decorated hero,” having fought in Europe and in WWII and featured in Stars and Stripes. When he is brought into the MASH with a serious leg injury, proud and visibly marked by the scars of past battles, he laughingly shares a story about encountering a fellow American in enemy territory, where he had to prove that he wasn’t a spy by providing evidence of his knowledge of baseball, the great American pastime. When a nurse remarks that it sounds awful, he jokes that it was, but only because he was a fan of the team that lost the World Series that year and he’d had to recount the victory of their rivals. He’s eager to get back to his unit and the front line but is told that the only fighting he’s going to be doing is “for a window seat on the plane home.” Yee repeats the word a few times, “home? Home… well I gotta let that sink in,” and it’s clear that he is ambivalent about the idea. Home becomes a relative concept when one’s whole life has been focused on fighting for so long. When he later breaks a water
glass and uses the shards to slit his wrists in an unsuccessful suicide attempt, Freedman is called in to assess him, but he isn’t eager to talk to the psychiatrist. The only explanation he can offer for his actions is that he wanted to go back and fight, as “only goldbricks go home!” It isn’t yet apparent why he would rather kill himself than return to the US, and whatever Freedman learns from him next takes place off camera – the last shot we see of this scene is the pencil Freedman asks him to focus on as he puts him under hypnosis. Later Freedman explains Yee’s dilemma to Hawkeye, who wants to know if a twitching pilot can really be trusted to not try and hurt himself again after Freedman has asked that Yee be released from his restraints.

SF: It’s a matter of deep-seated guilt. In all his ten years in the service, this is the first time he’s ever fought an Asian enemy. He’s been looking through a gun-sight at people who could be members of his own family.

HP: No wonder he felt guilty. It’d be like my declaring war on Crabapple Cove.

- Exactly. Only in his case it’s worse. He has to kill Chinese to be a good American, and then he has to kill himself to be a good Chinese.

- A man without two countries. Freud would’ve flipped over this one.

- All I did was give him a substitute symptom. I told him under hypnosis, that when he feels the guilt, instead of punishing himself with suicide, he should twitch his hand. He’s not even aware he’s doing it.

- Better to twitch your hand than take a second try at killing yourself.

- Second try? Remember all those dangerous missions? He’s been trying to kill himself since he got to Korea. (M*A*S*H, Episode 8:21, “Goodbye Cruel World”)

Here the program invokes Korea directly in order to complicate the guilt and shame experienced by American combatants involved in these overseas police actions. Freedman describes the zone of non-being that Yee finds himself in through the observation that “He has to kill Chinese to be a good American, and then he has to kill himself to be a good Chinese.” Yee is unable to withstand the cognitive dissonance of “looking down a gunsight at people who could be members of his own family” but
because the nature of his guilt is so specifically ethnically oriented (rather than a complete rejection of the act of killing altogether, as experienced by Arnold Chandler), his retreat into non-being is framed by a Chinese cultural imperative to take one’s own life rather than face the shame of dishonour.

This brief exploration of what happens when a soldier experiences race-based self-identification with an arbitrary enemy provides a palpable opportunity for the program to comment more broadly on the treatment of race in both the war itself and in fictional depictions of it. Unfortunately, however, this thread is not followed very far, and it can also be read as a token gesture that in some ways neatly illustrates the symbolic erasure of the Korean War, as the program so quickly turns away from exploring the deeper implications of this depiction for Chinese and Korean Americans still struggling with conflicted loyalties and a desire to belong. This erasure extends to the serviceman himself, who isn’t even given an opportunity to tell his own story on camera but must rather have his internal conflict first discovered through hypnosis (but not actually revealed to him) and then neatly explained to Hawkeye (and to viewers) by his Psychiatrist. Importantly, the program does make it clear that therapeutic interventions are both complex and necessary, and that moral injuries aren’t always easily discerned. Hawkeye points out that his job as a surgeon might be easier than Freedman’s, as “at least [he] can always see where they’re bleeding.”

III. “You son of a bitch! Why did you make me remember that?”

The most powerful example of Freedman engaged in therapeutic work is the depiction of Hawkeye’s breakdown in the series finale. Hawkeye’s trauma appears different, initially, from the other cases that Freedman intervenes in, as here Hawkeye is framed as a witness to violence rather than a perpetrator. It becomes clear, however, that his moral injury has manifested through his feeling of complicity in what he witnessed, and as I will argue, this feeling is not unwarranted. Kaethe Weingarten (2003) refers to “the witnessing of violence and violation, events that fall on a continuum from the ordinary to the extraordinary, jolt[ing] us into a response [she] call[s] common shock…[where] the more we witness, the less we register” (4). Hawkeye registers the horrors that he sees, but he can’t dwell on them, and thus humour becomes a useful
coping mechanism. The program makes it clear that Hawkeye’s service is under military duress, yet it is also careful to represent his surgical skill as extraordinary. Both of these elements are part of the established character sketched out in the pilot episode and the latter is often used to excuse a series of inappropriate behaviours that stem from frustration over the former. By the end of the series Hawkeye seems to have lost both his ability to operate and to cope, leading to a moral injury narrative which is the central story in the series finale (Ep#11:16 “Goodbye, Farewell and Amen”).

This feature length final episode opens with Hawkeye in a psychiatric institution, having been institutionalised for mental fatigue after he drove a jeep through the wall of the officer’s club and ordered a double bourbon. But that was only after he had earlier that same day tried to operate on a patient without anaesthetic, claiming the anaesthetist was trying to smother the patient with the mask. The precipitating cause of all this chaos is eventually revealed to viewers through a series of flashbacks of a bus journey. Each time Hawkeye revisits this memory, at Freedman’s prodding, the tone darkens, and the details sharpen as he comes closer to engaging with what has been suppressed. What he first describes to Freedman as a “hilarious, amusing, genial, joyful, raucous, funny” journey home from a day at the beach, where the members of the MASH unit were all laughing, singing and passing a bottle around, is immediately made uncanny by the flashback of a jovial Hawkeye teasingly requesting that a bottle be passed to the back of the bus where he is sitting, because a very serious looking unfamiliar man in the seat in front of him “can’t wait!” Freedman affirms, “so you had a great time on the bus,” to which Hawkeye responds, “And so we had a great time on the bus, and so we enjoyed ourselves, and so, and so, and so, and so, and so, and so, and so.”

This is figured as Hawkeye’s reoccurring coping mechanism – he ceases to say anything coherent when a real memory comes too close to the surface and he doesn’t want to deal with it. The next time he revisits his memory of the bus, the unfamiliar man has become a soldier desperate for a drink, and then a wounded soldier that Hawkeye is desperate to attend to with a bottle of IV fluids. Freedman wonders aloud why Hawkeye has repressed this memory. Hawkeye tries to redirect the conversation, suggesting that there are other patients more in need of Freedman’s help, but Freedman is unwavering, and Hawkeye returns to his story, somewhat more readily remembered at first. He recalls
that they had to stop the bus, first to pick up some refugees and then again for some wounded American GIs. One of the soldiers alerted them that an enemy patrol was coming down the road and they needed to get the bus into the bushes and wait quietly until it had gone past. Freedman asks what happened next, to which Hawkeye replies, “We sat, and waited, and the evening passed, and then this happened, and that happened, and this and that, and so, and so, and so, and so, and so, and so.” Later Hawkeye and Freedman are playing cards in the rec room and two other inmates get in an argument over a checkers game. As they start to become more heated, one of them knocks the table over and Hawkeye suddenly screams at them “Shut up! Just be quiet, would ya?! Somebody shut these guys up!” An orderly intervenes and an immediately calm Hawkeye returns to his hand of cards and remarks that they don’t bother him until they start squawking like chickens. He continues to riff on chickens and common stereotypes associated with them, before joking that “in a recent survey, two out of three chickens prefer to take the bus.” Freedman sees his opening; “chickens take the bus?” Hawkeye then remembers that there was a chicken on the bus, and it was driving him “crazy” as every time it made a noise, as he was sure that the Chinese would hear it and find them: “everybody’s life was in danger because of that damn chicken!”

*Figure 5: Hawkeye’s anguish as his memory returns*
We return in images to the bus for a final time, and the squawking chicken. Hawkeye sees the panicked faces of other passengers reacting to the sound and looking to him to do something about it, and he advances to the rear where a young Korean woman is holding and desperately trying to calm the agitated bird. He whispers fiercely at her to “keep that damn chicken quiet!”

SF: And then what happened?

HP: And then I went back towards the front of the bus.

- And what happened next?

- There was something wrong with it. It stopped making noise. It just... it just stopped! ... She killed it! She killed it!

- She killed the chicken?

- Oh my God! Oh my God! I didn’t mean for her to kill it...! I – I just wanted it to be quiet! It was – it was a baby...! She – she smothered her own baby... You son of a bitch! Why did you make me remember that?

- You had to get it out in the open. Now we’re halfway home.

This is the moment of moral injury for Hawkeye, the moment when he acquires the knowledge of this breach of his own sense of right and wrong in becoming complicit in the death of a child. It is guilt and shame that have caused him to repress his memories, and then they continue to drive him to anger as he lashes out at Freedman for making him remember. Ultimately, he is deemed fit to be released from mental health confinement, but not to return home to Maine as he expects, and he isn’t happy about it: “You’re sending a crazy man back to the place where he got crazy in the first place – are you out of your mind?” Freedman’s response is to remind him that when a soldier reacts to the stress of combat, they get him back to his foxhole as soon as they can.

This is a significant departure in approach from Arnold Chandler and perhaps it is evidence that the program’s critique of the war has dulled in the seven years since it aired “Quo Vadis, Captain Chandler.” The difference in Hawkeye’s case though, is that he not being returned to combat, to be used as a fighting tool. His skills as a surgeon are crucially required back at the 4077th, an intensification of the battle is depicted as both sides struggle to take the largest amount of territory before control becomes permanently fixed by ceasefire and the signing of the armistice. He returns to the unit, but he continues
to struggle there, hanging back amongst groups of people, when he was once the life of the party, and confessing to Freedman during a follow-up visit that he feels panicked in the operating room, and he isn’t comfortable being around little kids. Hawkeye’s precarious mental and emotional state must be acknowledged, both by the narrative, and by the character himself, as it demonstrates how working through extends beyond the resolution of a particular narrative event:

**HP:** Surgery used to be like falling off a log. Now it’s more like falling off a cliff.

**SF:** *You know, just because you’re a doctor, doesn’t mean you’re supposed to be perfect. Your patients aren’t. They have pain, they’re afraid. Actually, they’re probably better off if you know how they feel. Might make being a surgeon a little harder. But it might make you a better doctor. Anyway, that’s something to think about.*

- I can’t sleep.

- *Well then you should take something.*

- No, if I sleep, then I talk. If I don’t talk, I think. I think too fast – if I could just slow down my thinking… I just think too fast, that’s all. I mean, I don’t think we have to make a big deal out of this, you know… So I think too fast, and I’m afraid of children. That’s – that’s not terrible…

Hawkeye exits the zone of symbolic non-being once he remembers what he has repressed. In this way he is unlike Arnold Chandler or Michael Yee, who still appear to be in this zone when we leave them. Hawkeye has begun the necessary labour of working through, and in making this the last story that the program tells about him, *M*A*S*H* is gesturing towards a similar therapeutic ending. But as Jonathan Lear reminds us, “the psychoanalytic process is not something that comes to an end with the termination of the actual analysis” (2004: 13). Hawkeye’s time with Sidney Freedman in the institution may be over, but his self-reflexive work can be read as only just beginning. The program’s legacy post-broadcast affords it a similar opportunity for catalysing this work within the collective imagination of the US public.

Hawkeye’s memories are horrifying. They don’t just horrify him – they are meant to horrify us too. The complexity of his guilt – of his protestation that he didn’t mean for her to kill her baby, that he only wanted it to be quiet – hails viewers in quite a startling
way, as it points out a clear link between bearing witness and complicity. If Hawkeye is complicit in the death of this woman’s child because he urged her to silence it in order to save everyone else, then what does this make us as viewers, having watched, laughed and cried at these representations of a largely forgotten conflict? A television program is like the psyche: it holds onto memories, but it has no need to repress them – this only occurs in relation to the larger unconscious to which television belongs, which might be individual or collective. In the case of M*A*S*H, television can be seen as the psyche of a collective unconscious (the US public), which has, as a matter of political and cultural discourse, resisted acknowledging responsibility for the Korean War in any meaningful way. The program re-enacts the roles played by American medical personnel in this conflict zone multiple times over the course of 11 seasons – it replays and resolves numerous conflicts representing various war-time events – some based in reality and others in the imagination.

The culmination of the program’s narrative trajectory for the character of Hawkeye Pierce serves to highlight the emotional journey the character has been on throughout the series, but it also allows him to stand-in for a viewing public that was always meant to identify with him most of all. The rupturing moral injury that Hawkeye experiences in the series finale essentially breaks him, and as he works through it, so too must the viewer work through what it represents. It’s difficult to imagine how Hawkeye could continue to do his job effectively – either as a surgeon, or as the chief wise-cracker – after what he has experienced and finally remembered. And if Hawkeye is no longer able to function in the same way, then what would audiences be tuning in to watch? It’s no coincidence then that this end to the program also depicts a notable departure from sitcom conventions, which typically rigidly delimit character growth in order to reset the “situation” to the status quo so as to play out a similar conflict all over again in the next episode. This is “the end,” and so the rules no longer apply.

M*A*S*H deftly and poignantly deals with the psychological trauma of simply having to be in a warzone – just to see the suffering – not necessarily to inflict it or to experience it directly, but to still lose oneself in the horror of it and in the helplessness of being unable to leave. There is fear and danger of being collateral damage, but there is also the dread that what has been seen can never be forgotten – that the old life can never
be returned to, even when the war is over. And the show is not (only) about guilt and
shame, alienation and fear. It depicts deep psychological wounds –injuries to the
empathetic psyche that must bear witness to suffering and offer help even with inevitable
consequences that one is utterly helpless to prevent. Medical professionals must learn
early on in their careers to cope with losing patients, but in this narrative, where they are coerced into warzone service, they are unable to maintain the emotional distance they are trained to keep in a ‘normal’ environment and they depend on one another especially, to help them navigate this disorientation.

Hawkeye spends the remainder of the finale trying to get his closest friend and colleague, BJ Honeycutt, to admit they are never going to see one another again when they finally return to their homes on opposite coasts of the US, and to say goodbye as an acknowledgment of the loss and the ending, even in this hellish place, where there is nothing they are going to miss when it’s over, except each other. As Dan Gunn notes, “if an ending ever does occur, then it will have been brought about by words, words spoken, among others, about what it means to end” (2002: 2). The final conversation between Hawkeye and BJ exemplifies these words, resonating beyond the characters themselves as they hail an audience tuning in for the final time after more than a decade of dedicated viewership:

HP: Look, I know how tough it is for you to say goodbye, so I’ll say it. Maybe you’re right, maybe we will see each other again. But just in case we don’t, I want you to know how much you’ve meant to me. I’ll never be able to shake you. Whenever I see a big pair of feet, or a cheesy moustache, I’ll think of you.

BJH: Whenever I smell month-old socks, I’ll think of you.

- And the next time somebody nails my shoe to the floor…

- And when somebody gives me a martini that tastes like lighter fluid…

- I’ll miss you.

- I’ll miss you. A lot. I can’t imagine what this place would have been like if I hadn’t found you here.

It’s a touching tribute to male friendship, which also addresses the durational commitment viewers have made to see the narrative through. The Korean War, which
lasted 3 years in reality, occupied the television sets of American viewers for more than 3 times that long while _M*A*S*H_ was on the air. There was an ending of sorts when the fictional men and women of the 4077th MASH were finally returned stateside, but the conflict has been resurrected countless times since, in syndication. Honeycutt’s final message to Hawkeye is an attempt to close the door on the program, its stories and the historical conflict it depicts, but how can a forgotten war ever be ended, even in fiction, until it has first been properly remembered?

Figure 6: Honeycutt’s final message to Hawkeye (and viewers)

**Korea revisited: Forgetting to remember a war that never ended**

Charles S. Young contends that even though the (relatively) recent marking of the 50th anniversary of the Korean War has prompted an outpouring of new research in the last decade, this conflict remains a fundamentally forgotten one in terms of mainstream popular knowledge. According to Young, “in the west, the Korean lacunae, was and is
real” and this is particularly significant given that the US has not been a peacetime society in a global context since 1950: “measured by the height of the event and the shortness of its shadow, Korea may proportionally still be the most forgotten war” (2014: 156). When the war finally ended in 1953, it was with neither a clearly victorious or vanquished party. But the amnesia that had already begun when news reports began referring to the war as forgotten as early as 1951 (Young, 2014: 157) was now free to really take hold in the public consciousness. An embarrassing chapter in American history had been concluded when the fighting finally ended – anticlimactically making complete what had long been anticipated. Young asserts that practically speaking, the primary element upon which all this forgetting hinges, is the matter of voluntary repatriation – an issue of major contention throughout the peace negotiations which lasted more than 18 months, and furthermore, a secret that was kept from the public even once it was settled, as it was never formally declared an aim of the war. The opportunity for a kind of moral victory, by holding onto anti-communist POWs who didn’t want to return to their homes in China or North Korea was very appealing to the American government, having been unable to achieve any other kind of lasting victory through fighting.

However, this victory came with a certain amount of ambivalence, as it could never be loudly celebrated. There were some concerns about retaliation against American POWS, and the American public was unlikely to be sympathetic to the plight of anti-communist POWs if they ever discovered the degree to which coming to terms on this matter had prolonged the war unnecessarily. The lack of knowledge the public had about the war aims and outcomes was no doubt a significant contributor to the collective forgetting that followed, but there is something subtler, and yet also more complex, at play here too. Young suggests that “when a nation is moved to fight by existential threat, but the war is pursued according to expediency and empire, the memory becomes unmanageable, and it may be better to just forget” (2014: 168-69). The cognitive dissonance that one may experience when noting a significant difference, between what is intended or unacceptable and what actually occurs, seems to lead to this state of unmanageable and ultimately forgotten memory. When that noted difference is accompanied by feelings of guilt and shame, it results in moral injury. The representation of moral injury, in this context then, may be a key to activating and then working through
the collective memory of what has been forgotten, but the trouble with *M*A*S*H* is that for too long the focus was on the wrong war.

The credit that *M*A*S*H* has been given for its impactful contributions to the public discourse of anti-(Vietnam) war critique in the 1970s, only solidifies its reception as a Vietnam War text in that historical moment. This reception bears some resemblance to the way in which images of Nazi war atrocities ultimately “facilitated a partial undoing of memory, where bearing witness produced a failure to remember salient points” (Zelizer, 1998: 141). Unlike the waves of memory work which characterised the rising and falling of the Nazi atrocities in the public imagination over time (Zelizer, 1998: 141), the failure to remember, which *M*A*S*H* is implicated in, comes from a more complex misrecognition of representative events. The US turned away from Korea as soon it was able, and it has continued to collectively repress the memory of what was done there. Forgetting is not benign – the erasure of events also erases the material reality of the people who lived through them – and it symbolically erases their existence. The horror of Hawkeye’s moral injury signals a fracture in the fictive quality of the text, creating a point of identification (and potential complicity) for the viewer. Like Hawkeye, America turned away from something it was unable to face. The smothered baby became a chicken, and, through *M*A*S*H*, the Korean War became an amassed assembly of pathos-ridden anecdotes designed to end a different conflict in a different place (i.e. Vietnam). Instead of turning away from something it witnessed, however, America has repressed the memory of its behaviour – it is complicit not because it watched, but because it acted as an aggressor in a foreign land. Until the injury is acknowledged – until Korea is recognized – healing cannot truly begin.

The baby exemplifies what Hawkeye is most afraid to remember. He readily recalls the bus, and a spirit of camaraderie, which eventually turns to tension and fear. He eventually remembers the woman, and an object in her arms (the “chicken”) that is threatening everyone’s safety by making noise, which could alert the enemy to their presence. The thing he continues to resist remembering – the thing that breaks him open when he finally does – is that the object the woman was holding was actually a baby. Remembering the baby makes the woman a mother. The horror isn’t just that a mother killed her child, but that she did it at his urging. She did it because he made her believe
that other lives were more important than her child’s. This is not a new, original story.
The long history of the denigration of the other in the United States of America has always forced poor women and children of colour to pay the highest price. African slaves, Jim Crow, the Trail of Tears, Japanese internment – the road to South and Central American family separation at US southern borders in 2018 has been paved with few good intentions. The loss of the child is surely far more traumatic for the mother that we never meet outside of Hawkeye’s recollections. Making this just a story about Hawkeye, and the catharsis of his remembering, only underscores how much easier forgetting is than making true reparations.

*M*A*S*H* may still have the power to contribute to a national working through of the Korean conflict, made both old and new for a fresh audience via the current ubiquity of streaming services. It’s curious that the program is not currently available\(^{40}\) through any of the services with significant market saturation. It was on American Netflix for just over a year between February of 2015 and April of 2016, but it appears that during that time it was mainly taken note of by long-time fans, and more importantly, this predated the escalation of tensions between the US and North Korea that have been ongoing since Donald Trump was elected. Barbie Zelizer asserts that television could never be as explicit as still photos in representing atrocity (1998: 172), and perhaps she is right; the televisual form (in the US at least) has had a long history of struggling to be taken seriously against the backdrop of an unabashedly commercial system where its images were predominantly about entertainment and the peddling of commodities. Television, as a form, has come a long way in the last 70 years, in terms of technology, accessibility, platform and prestige, but this might be beside the point. What is the value of the explicit image? Sontag reminds us that “for a long time some people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war” (2003: 14). Looking at the state of the world, past and present, it is

\(^{40}\) As of June 2018, the program was added to Hulu’s catalogue. While Hulu’s subscription numbers are significantly lower than both Netflix and Amazon Prime (Netflix had amassed nearly 55M domestic users in early 2018, whereas Hulu only had 17M worldwide), it is experiencing fast growth, as it begins to release its own original content, like *The Handmaid’s Tale*. It is unclear yet if it has been discovered by many new viewers. [https://observer.com/2018/03/amazon-netflix-hulu-handmaids-tale-lord-rings-jeff-bezos/](https://observer.com/2018/03/amazon-netflix-hulu-handmaids-tale-lord-rings-jeff-bezos/)
eminently clear that horror is not enough. But perhaps television’s use of narrative and character, combined with its qualities of duration, repetition and immersion, allow it to do something else with affect and memory – something powerful and as yet not fully understood – something that in this relatively old medium might only be just beginning.
3 “Anything but ordinary”: (Not) Being your mother’s daughter in *Grey’s Anatomy*

[...] I needed you. I didn’t want a boy, only a girl, a small milky mouse of a girl, already loved, already loud in the house of herself. We named you Joy. I, who was never quite sure about being a girl, needed another life, another image to remind me. And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure nor soothe it. *I made you to find me.*

~ Anne Sexton, “The Double Image” (1960)

This chapter explores non-being in relation to mental illness – insofar as we can conceive of dementia and its implications as an incurable illness of the mind. The particular television example of non-being examined is framed and deepened by the mother-daughter relationship between the characters – a child struggling to separate from her mother even as the latter becomes an ever more dependent stranger. While the mother experiences non-being through her loss of memory and her inability to fully exist autonomously in her own life, the daughter experiences it through the negation of her identity as a daughter, which occurs at the point that her mother ceases to recognize her. The mother could cease only to remember herself as a mother, and yet still *be* – she was a person before motherhood after all. But daughterhood is the subjectivity that brought the child into being – without it how does she orient herself in the world?

A four-episode story arc in the middle of the third season of *Grey’s Anatomy* depicts a crisis point in Meredith Grey’s relationship with her ailing mother Ellis, however the analysis in this chapter will also engage with episodes from the first and second seasons of the program to provide necessary context. The program is framed in its first episode by this mother-daughter relationship, which continues to inform the narrative of subsequent episodes, particularly in the unusually short (nine episodes long)
first season. This is an unusual framing device in a program that initially appears to be a generic medical procedural, and it is key to the program’s ongoing depiction of narrative complexity and nuanced characterisation, as it necessarily evades episodic closure. Each of the three structural elements of television drama narrative – duration, immersion, and repetition – is apparent in this representation as storylines are seeded, developed, revisited and resolved over multiple episodes and seasons.

In her book, *Narrative Medicine* (2006), Rita Charron discusses the importance of storytelling in a medical setting, focusing on the value of narrative competence as a way of creating shared meaning:

We are at the same time *alone* and *with*, strange and similar. The presence of the other is both mystery and identity. We are simultaneously outside the obscurity and within the familiarity of another’s being. Like planets in a solar system, we revolve around and are warmed by a common sun while hosting lives of absolute distinction. In the end, we live with one another as best we can, trying … to convey these all but unutterable thoughts and feelings and fears. Indeed, we are revolving bodies, attracted to one another and held aloft in orbit by the gravity of our common tasks. (2006: xiii)

There is perhaps something of use in thinking about narrative medicine and the underlying appeal of the medical drama which facilitates the telling of stories of these revolving bodies, both “*alone* and *with*.” As stories of illness and health provide substantial fodder for audience engagement and entertainment, they may also serve as ways to help patients and their loved ones work through the implications of mortality as it relates to embodied fragility and suffering. This project is about the power of story, but of particular kinds of stories – narratives of working through the anxiety of non-being in political, personal and institutional circumstances. War, illness, and incarceration are three powerful means through which we can find ourselves separated from others or even become othered ourselves. In doing so we enter a zone of symbolic non-being, which we may then struggle to leave, or succumb to.

The discourse of motherhood and its representation in popular culture is the starting point for this exploration, as motherhood represents an essentialized potentiality – something that is biologically promised to (most) women, but also expected of them.
The labour of motherhood, both at the moment of birth and then forever after, crystallises a fragmenting of maternal time and attention that is mostly irrevocable. Can we imagine that there are zones of non-being adjacent to motherhood – formed in relation to both the presence and absence of a child? If motherhood is framed as a particular female rite of passage, then surely it might also be reasonable to feel a sense of loss if one doesn’t take this journey, even if not doing so was an informed and unregretted choice. Motherhood itself has the potential to act as a catalyst for a particular kind of non-being as one traditional cultural expectation of the mother is that she subverts and represses all non-maternal subjectivity that doesn’t operate in the interest of her child(ren). Even progressive ideas about motherhood, which see child-rearing as reasonably balanced against a more self-centered maternal subjectivity which seeks fulfilment outside of home-making, ultimately become co-opted under capitalism, thus resulting in women becoming alienated from both their professional and domestic labour (Hochschild, 2003).

The character of Ellis Grey is a former surgeon, stricken with early-onset Alzheimer’s disease, and the mother of the main protagonist in *Grey’s Anatomy* (ABC, 2005 –). In this representation, Ellis’s refashioned reality sometimes involves a retreat into the past, before she became a mother, while at other times, she seems to be living a completely new and separate life, a complete reconfiguration of the one she has been separated from by her illness. She largely exists off screen, but the weight of this existence – and of the space she occupied in the world before her illness – is made to hover like a spectre over her daughter Meredith. The first episode of the program, which follows the exploits of a group of surgical interns, makes it clear that Meredith Grey’s relationship with her mother is foundational to both the character and the narrative, particularly within the first season of the program, and up until her mother’s death in the third season. The opening monologue of the show references her mother as “one of the greats,” and later in the episode her colleagues discuss Meredith’s status as “royally inbred” because her mother was one of the “first big chick surgeons” who practically invented the abdominal retractor and a living legend who twice won the (fictitious) prestigious Harper Avery award for her contributions to medical research.

The fact that her famous ground-breaking former surgeon mother has been institutionalized with Alzheimer’s disease and no longer recognizes her, is only revealed
to viewers at the end of the pilot. This revelation is longer in coming to Meredith’s colleagues, deepening her emotional distance from them. We discover that Meredith’s voice-over narration of events is not just a narrative strategy, but actually part of the story, as the episode ends with her recounting them to Ellis when she visits her mother in an assisted living facility. This is our first sense that the program’s concern with the effects of this disease will not only address it as destabilizing for Ellis as the sufferer, but also for Meredith as her daughter. In a mirroring effect, we viewers also find ourselves destabilised. We initially feel ourselves hailed by the voice-over narration, only to later understand that this framing device incorporates us into the larger story of Meredith’s first day as a surgical intern – a stressful and exciting time that is complicated by having to both care for an ill, formerly imposing parent, as well as being forced to keep it a secret from everyone else. As the season progresses it becomes increasingly clear that Meredith is “stuck,” both in terms of her literal relationship with her mother and its larger implications in other aspects of her life. Ellis is not present, but she is not absent either – she exists as a shifting signifier of both origin and control, that Meredith is responsible for, and profoundly affected by, but ultimately unable to confront or fully separate from. Meredith lives in her mother’s house, she is in the last stages of her training to do her mother’s job in the same workplace where her mother began, and she is an involuntary secret keeper regarding her mother’s illness. Her colleagues and teachers take note of her because she is her mother’s daughter, while her roommates unearth videos of old surgeries her mother performed, watching in rapt attention. The presence of Ellis Grey in both her professional and personal life is a substantial burden, with little direct reward because her mother doesn’t remember her.

To cease to be known by your mother must surely be disorienting, but it is also potentially liberating. It invokes a different form of non-being than might be experienced if the mother were to simply die. The still living mother, unable to recognise her daughter, deprives the latter of a foundational reference point. The daughter is not yet able to grieve the loss of the actuality of the mother – she must settle instead for attempting to mourn the idea of the mother, even as she continues to interact with her in “stranger” form. A central tension in the early seasons of Grey’s Anatomy is Meredith’s struggle with her competing desires to be seen/accepted by her mother, and to be free of
her altogether. It becomes increasingly clear over the course of the program’s first three seasons that Meredith is unable to bear the burden of non-being that comes with caring for her mother, being solely responsible for her assets, and regularly confronting the implications of her disease. But the sense of being that is fostered in a parent-child pairing more generally is further complicated in this case by the specificity of the mother-daughter relationship.

Julia Kristeva refers to the fantasy of incorporation of the mother that one employs in order to escape one’s fears: “I incorporate a portion of my mother's body, her breast, and thus I hold on to her” (1982: 29). With female children this incorporation is particularly significant as it serves as a tangible reminder that, through a shared biology, a daughter is a literal reproduction of the mother – the latter is the former and vice versa, attached by both a past connection and a present imitation. The central dilemma here is a psychoanalytic one – must we “kill” our mothers in order to fully and finally separate from them? Meredith isn’t able to even partially experience this separation until Ellis dies midway through the third season. Prior to this point in the narrative, it is within Meredith’s power, legally and professionally, to be the agent who ends her mother’s life, but while she yearns for the result, she is unwilling to assume the responsibility.

A four-episode story arc in the middle of the third season begins when Ellis has a rare period of lucidity, waking up with completely intact memories right up until the time her disease began to manifest. Since this results in a four-year gap in her cognitive awareness, which she struggles to grasp, she is essentially reintroduced to her daughter. Her last memories were of Meredith deferring post-secondary education to travel in Europe with a friend, but now her daughter is a 3rd year surgical resident, following in her mother’s footsteps. Ellis is clearly pleased to see the influence that she has had on Meredith’s professional choices, but when she discovers that her daughter has seemingly compromised her pursuit of a singular path to professional greatness by allowing herself the distraction of a romantic life, Ellis chastises her for having turned out “so ordinary”.

41 Arguably she doesn’t fully experience it until she too wins the illustrious Harper Avery Award, proving her legitimacy as medical research pioneer in her own right. It takes her 14 seasons to get there, finally experiencing this honour in the show’s 300th episode which was appropriately full of call-backs and ghosts of the past.
This moment when her mother finally recognises her as an adult, after so many years of present-absence, ends in judgement – Meredith has wasted her potential, she can only be known by her mother as lacking. This multi-episode arc culminates in Meredith nearly dying from injuries she sustains while trying to give aid to accident victims. While having her near-death experience, Meredith encounters a variety of people that have died during her time at Seattle Grace Hospital, and at first it seems like their presence is to help prepare her for the inevitable. Then she meets her mother in this liminal world. Ellis tells her that she is extraordinary, and implores her to run, to resist death. She knows now that her mother has died, and this allows Meredith to leave the zone of non-being.

The personal quality of the narrative address in *Grey’s Anatomy* (Meredith’s voice-over, consistently book-ending episodes throughout the series) contributes appreciably to the program’s ability to successfully interweave personal and professional stories. Dorothee Birke and Robyn Warhol posit that direct address “can be easily naturalised as a device that is directed to fictive recipients” (2018: 142), thus incorporating an imagined and acknowledged viewer into the narrative. Although the program is categorised primarily as a workplace drama, the richness of its narrative strategies effectively allows the personal domain to be prioritised as a site for investigating relevant zones of non-being – here relating to a debilitating neurological condition and its implications for already fraught mother/daughter relationality. The universal application of these themes and scenarios helps to consolidate their narrative power.

**Being mother(ed) and daughter(ed)**

The figure of the mother is present in stories throughout varied histories and cultures. She is at different turns loved, worshipped, praised, and blamed – due all responsibility, but seldom significant credit for how her offspring turn out. She represents our birth into the social world, even if she didn’t literally birth us. Jacqueline Rose asserts that “motherhood is, in Western discourse, the place in our culture where we lodge, or rather bury, the reality of our own conflicts, or what it means to be fully human” (2018: 1). Mothers are first caregivers, and the early moment at which we begin to cease to see them as extensions of ourselves, is the moment when we become profoundly aware of our own individuality and its implications. Once we understand our separation from the
mother we must also contend with our dependency on her and the inevitability of her loss. The mother keeps us alive, but she also prevents us from experiencing true loneliness, if she is “good enough”. Even when we are grown, the specter of maternal relationality looms over us, and over all of our other relationships. As Rose notes, “there is no getting away from mothers. They are there where you least expect them, most troublingly when you thought you had left them behind” (2004: 149).

Mothers are also an essential part of the human condition, whether our most affective experiences are as mothered or mothering. And thus, while it is easy to lay all of our hopes and fears at the feet of the mother, begging her to save us from ourselves or at least absolve us of responsibility for our own choices, it is also worth considering what else she might offer us. Rose, noting a key difference between the psychoanalytic works of Freud and Christopher Bollas (the former famously avoided the mother, while the latter has put her central to his thought) suggests that, “the question here … is: does the woman, do mothers, only enter the frame as culpable; or does the mother, when she makes her appearance, usher in something unspeakable, exposing the limits of what any language can know about itself?” (2004: 149). In a sense mothers have become the gatekeepers of what is unsayable in each of the case studies examined in this project. In \textit{M*A*S*H} the figure of the mother in Hawkeye’s horror-stricken recovered memory is what turns the chicken in her lap into a dead baby, smothered by a terrified woman at his urging. In \textit{Rectify}, Kerwin’s mother reminds us that in the US carceral system, it’s always the white folks who “didn’t do nothing,” while her own dead black son was never given the benefit of that doubt. In \textit{Grey’s Anatomy} Meredith’s mother appears to represent something much more straightforward – the tension between how we understand ourselves as parented subjects and what we’re forced to confront when that subjectivity is fractured by a parent’s death or incapacitation.

Psychoanalytic clinicians, D.W. Winnicott and Thomas Ogden are useful here as Ogden (1992) helpfully expands Winnicott’s (1965) initial provocation: “there is no such thing as an infant [apart from the maternal provision].” Our first order of literal being depends upon the mother. Yet our second order, of socio-emotional being is also constituted through her ability to survive our symbolic destruction of her as she becomes real and separate from us. Perhaps there is also a third order of being, in relation to the
mother, which involves what happens to us when she has been literally destroyed – first through her inability to recognise her children or herself as a mother, and finally through her death.

While the parent-child relationship has been quite extensively theorised in psychoanalytic literature, there has been decidedly less scholarship addressing the specificity of the mother-daughter bond. This is not to say that there isn’t any such work, just that much of it lacks the capacity to fully speak to the last line of Anne Sexton’s poem about her daughter Joyce, “The Double Image,” quoted in the opening epigraph: “I made you to find me.” The double image Sexton refers to here can be interpreted in a number of ways, but I find it most compelling to think of it as a kind of reverse Lacanian mirror stage. In this case, it is not the child seeing itself in the mirror to discover that it is in fact a separate being from the mother, but it is rather the mother seeing the child as a mirror – a reminder of her own past infancy while simultaneously reconstituting her as no longer just a daughter but now additionally a mother. In becoming a mother, Sexton is at once also reconstituted anew as a daughter, but perhaps the burden, of attempting to reconcile both subjectivities, became ultimately too much for her to bear.

Ellis Grey has a much less ambiguous relationship with her daughter in the context of this “double image.” Meredith (at this point in the program) has no children of her own, and Ellis’s own subjectivity as a daughter is unaddressed in the world of the program, so there is no duality of roles represented here for either woman in terms of the very specific form of doubling constituted by Sexton’s experience. Meredith is struggling to find herself, though – looking to her mother as a mirror, so that she might replicate her experiences and be her “double” in the world, both as a gift and a challenge.

There are also other ways that a kind of doubling manifests, not the least of which involves the role reversal which occurs when Meredith finds herself in a position of pseudo-parental

42 Meredith is deeply ambivalent about her surgical future – she wants to live up to her mother’s legacy, but she is also afraid that she can’t. We know that her mother was disappointed in her decision to defer post-secondary education to travel, but also that her mother discouraged her from pursuing medicine, explicitly telling her that she lacked the capacity to succeed. Meredith is motivated by the desire to prove herself, but not just to be good – to be extraordinary. This desire is about more than validation – it can be read as an ultimate sacrifice – an expression of love for a lost mother, in the language that only Ellis could understand. Meredith must become her mother in order to pay tribute to her – to ensure that Ellis’s professional legacy lives on.
responsibility for her mother, in terms of Ellis’s legal state of diminished capacity. While her class position (through family wealth) allows Meredith to avoid having to literally be her mother’s caretaker, she must still assume responsibility for decisions that impact her mother’s care.

Meredith also functions for Ellis as a proxy for her own professional drive and skillset – an opportunity to continue the work that illness has prevented Ellis from doing herself. In her brief period of lucidity, Ellis’s admonishment of Meredith’s choice to try and balance personal and professional fulfilment, instead of sacrificing the former for the greatest possible success in the latter, is a stricken cry in the face of the apparent loss of a last opportunity to ensure a compliant legacy. Ellis may not have initially made her daughter in order to find herself, but when faced with the implications of her uncontrollable detour into dementia and the unfinished life it has taken from her, her desperation to remake Meredith in her own image is entirely understandable.

**Mediated mothers, on and off the screen**

Television’s mothers have been present since the beginning of broadcast storytelling – some pre-dating the visual medium and making the transition from radio to the small screen. Motherhood on television has followed (or facilitated?) a similar trajectory in the real, mapping pivotal shifts in the strictly gendered divisions of the world – public vs. private, home vs. work, professional vs. domestic. Mothers have been depicted as both saints and sinners, supportive and resistant, Madonnas and whores – categorised no differently than childless women, but with the important addition of the burden of perpetuating the species and bearing responsibility for how each new member turns out. Early TV mothers reflected wholesome values back at the family circle gathered around the technological marvel which continued to occupy the living room as comforting hearth, like the radio had done only a few years earlier. These maternal figures were presented as having no interior lives or desires of their own save to be in domestic service of their husbands and children, unlike the married, but child-free, Lucy Ricardo (*I Love Lucy*) and Alice Kramden (*The Honeymooners*), whose narratives resisted the normative roles prescribed for them, with variable success.43

---

43 Lucy Ricardo does have a child – in the 2nd season, timed with the birth of Lucille Ball’s real-life
The representation of motherhood on US television unsurprisingly reflects the evolution of cultural ideas about mothers and mothering in US society. The history of these representations and the discourse which frames them has been well-documented by scholars in the fields of media studies, sociology, women’s studies, film and psychoanalysis, including E.A. Kaplan (1992); Bassin, Honey and Kaplan (1994); Douglas (1994); Hall and Bishop (2009); Plant (2010); Feasey (2012); Podnieks (2012); Nathanson (2013); and Rose (2018). The edited collection of Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan (1994) builds on the earlier work of E. Ann Kaplan (1992), which combined a historical investigation of the mother with psychoanalytic approaches and analysis of maternal representations in film and literary texts. Kaplan looks at the mother across three representational spheres, each distinct, but ultimately related: the historical, the psychoanalytic, and the fictional (1992: 6). She sees these spheres as corresponding to three types of discursive mothers: 1) the socially constructed mother in her institutional role; 2) the mother in the unconscious through whom the subject is constituted (understood first by Freud as the split-mother, and later theorised more extensively by feminist analysts); and 3) the mother in fictional representations, who combines numbers one and two (there is a fourth, “real” mother, who Kaplan does not believe to be representable as such) (6-7). Kaplan ultimately seeks to destabilise the category of mother as a subordinated and fetishized position:

Once this position is opened up as only a part of any specific woman’s subjectivity, not the all-consuming entirety of it; once any specific woman is seen to be constituted “mother” only when interacting with her child; once “mother” is no longer a fixed, essentialized quality, then women may be freed from [these] kinds of discursive constraints and burdens. (1992: 219)

What Kaplan fails to reckon with, however, is that many women are uninterested in this kind of freedom; her analysis doesn’t fully grapple with how a woman might be able to retain her maternal subjectivity, but still resist its subordination. This is a gap that the edited collection of Bassin, Honey, and Kaplan seeks to address as it charts the evolution of sociocultural views of the mother from a need-satisfying other to an autonomous and pregnancy and birth – but this does little to diminish her fervor for show business.
separate subject in her own right (1994: 8). The editors note in the introduction that “motherhood is overdetermined on many levels; it is complicated on a social and cultural level, and it is difficult on a personal plane (we all have mothers). The difficulty is compounded to the extent that we are mothers ourselves. There is, however, great value in this complexity” (1994:9). They locate the cultural shift in the desire of feminists to “redirect [their] gaze and explore mother-as-subject” in the relationship that these feminist daughters now have with their own children, thus allowing them to have a newly invested appreciation of maternal selfhood (9).

This collection is also informed by the speech then vice-president Dan Quayle gave in May of 1992, where he addressed the Commonwealth Club of California regarding family values and had this to say: “It doesn't help matters when prime time TV has Murphy Brown - a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid, professional woman - mocking the importance of fathers, by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another lifestyle choice.” The sitcom Murphy Brown, starring Candace Bergen, had just concluded a season in which its titular character gave birth to a child after agonising over whether or not it would be the right decision once it became clear that the father did not want to be involved. Quayle and other Republicans quickly back-pedalled his comments in the face of criticism over what his remarks seemed to be saying about single-mothers more generally, but when Murphy Brown resumed in the fall for a 5th season, the program addressed Quayle directly in a narrative breaking of the 4th wall. While watching the news on maternity leave, Murphy sees his speech and is upset to have a decision she did not make lightly characterised as a lifestyle choice. Her friend Frank encourages her to forget about it, as “it’s Dan Quayle” who addressed the United Negro College Fund saying, “what a waste it is to lose one’s mind,” in an attempt to articulate the Fund’s slogan: “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.” He assures her that the news cycle will soon be occupied by the next thoughtless confused thing Quayle has to say. Instead she returns to her job as a news anchor to acknowledge his comments on the air, having invited to the studio a variety of non-traditional families in protest of his narrow characterization of what a family could/should be. The engagement of the program’s writers with this debate, as evidenced by their response to it, is indicative of the way
compelling television narratives are aligned with or informed by real events and discourses.

Of course, Quayle’s remarks didn’t emerge from a vacuum – they represented a pervasive and growing anxiety many Americans were beginning to feel about the lack of “care” in a market-driven society. Arlie Hochschild astutely notes how this discomfort gets laid at the feet of the mother:

As the market advances, the family moves from a production to a consumption unit, as it faces a care deficit, as the cultural landscape of care shifts, individuals increasingly keep an anxious eye on what seems like the primary remaining symbol of abiding care—the mother. The more the commodity frontier erodes the territory surrounding the emotional role of the wife and mother, the more hyper-symbolized the remaining sources of care seem to become. And the more the wife-mother functions as a symbolic cultural anchor to stay the ship against a powerful tide. The symbolic weight of ‘the family’ is condensed and consolidated into the wife-mother, and increasingly now into the mother […] the more shaky things outside the family seem, the more we seem to need to believe in an unshakable family and, failing that, an unshakable figure of mother-wife. (2003: 38-9)

The social expectations of motherhood then are also inextricably bound up with an idealized two-parent household where the gendering of domestic labour is normalized, even if mom “has to” work. While contemporary representations acknowledge and even celebrate both maternal autonomy and a diverse range of family structures, television has a long history of demonizing mothers who deviate from this ideal. In Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media (1994), Susan J. Douglas recalls that:

TV shows … insisted that good mothers, like true princesses, never complained, smiled a real lot, were constantly good-natured, and never expected anything from anyone. When our mothers sat back to relax in front of the TV after a twelve-to-fifteen-hour day, they were surrounded by allegories about masculine heroism and the sanctity of male gonads. Rarely, if ever, did they see any suggestion that the incessant, mundane, and often painful contortions of a woman’s daily life might, in fact, be heroic too. They didn’t even see any representations of working mothers on a regular basis, and when they did, all they saw and heard was that working mothers were, by definition, bad mothers. (44)
Douglas puts television’s early representations of women, and mothers in particular, in the context of the post-war backlash against the kind of feminist ideology that had underpinned the Rosie the Riveter campaign. Once women’s labour was no longer required to fill in for absent soldiering men, discourse shifted accordingly. The Cold War only heightened social anxieties about working women, as the US was determined to differentiate itself from the communist Soviet Union in every way possible, and a key element of this strategy was to ensure that American women were sufficiently feminine and domestic in comparison to their masculinised Soviet counterparts. Douglas notes that television quickly became an effective means of disseminating heteronormative messages about the importance of the stable nuclear family and a women’s primary role in it as wife and mother, and these messages remained consistent for many decades (1994).

Katherine N. Kinnick (2009) highlights how media narratives cast motherhood in moral terms, illustrating that little had changed in the fifteen years since Douglas reported the same thing. Good mothers prioritise the family and sacrifice their own interests to this higher calling, while conforming to expected standards of hegemonic femininity; bad mothers are self-centered, neglectful, preoccupied with their careers or lacking in traditional femininity (9).

Part of the ideological work that the representation of motherhood in popular culture does is to frame maternal feelings as natural and effortless. This suggests that women who do not come to these feelings easily are “unnatural” women, locating fault within them rather than in systemic shortcomings in a wider society. Rebecca Feasey (2012) points out that these representations reproduce mythological conceptions of motherhood, which she cautions against:

Although the ‘good’ mother myth might encourage us to assume that the ideology of intensive mothering is somehow fixed, stable or natural, or that women have always taken sole responsibility for their children’s emotional, physical, intellectual and social growth, it is worth noting that motherhood is primarily not a natural or biological function; rather, it is specifically and fundamentally a cultural practice that is continuously redesigned in response to changing economic and societal factors. (7)

While research shows that many women do indeed feel an immediate, intimate and inexplicable bond with their children, this connection does not exist for all women, or at
all times (Feasey, 2012). Additionally, this connection is only a very small part of the material labour of practical mothering. Education, resources, and economic security play a much larger role in the sustained success of maternal effort as they help to ensure both safety and higher degrees of social privilege for both mother and child. Aside from creating unrealistic and anxiety-inducing expectations for new mothers, depicting maternal practices as somehow natural or innate, undermines the laborious skill-set that informs modern caretaking and childrearing.

In their edited collection *Mommy Angst* (2009), Ann C. Hall and Mardia J. Bishop explore representations of motherhood in popular culture, ranging from film, television, the internet and Cuban literature, to politics, post-partum cosmetic surgery, maternal disability and Jewish cultural stereotypes. Hall and Bishop seek to unpack “the American cultural tendency to praise the maternal in theory but abuse it in practice” (2009: xvii). The history of this shift in the characterisation of motherhood, to something less valorised and more suspect, is also painstakingly documented in Rebecca Jo Plant’s (2010) book *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America*. Plant begins in November of 1937, with some closing remarks given by Smith College president William Allan Neilson at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City, to the nearly 1,000 alumnae, parents and supporters gathered for the evening to honor him. Towards the end of his speech, he made a little joke at the expense of the assembled mothers, who he claimed undermined Smith’s mission by competing with the school for their daughters’ attentions: “Mother love used to be regarded as one of the [most] beautiful things in the world. I do not believe in mother love. I think nine times out of ten, mother love is self-love” (2010: 1). While the comment seemed innocuous enough at the time and the audience responded with laughter and applause, a heated debate was ignited in the public sphere – invigorated by a variety of newspapers stories and letters to the editor.

The concept of Mother Love, rarely spoken of today, “connoted a love so powerful, enduring, and selfless as to border on the divine” (2010: 2). The disappearance of the term from common parlance is seen by Plant as a consequence of the demise of “moral motherhood”. Her work traces the emergence, in the interwar period, of an “antimaternalist” critique which viewed “mother love” as pathological and damaging, particularly for male children: “prolonged mother-son intimacy increasingly came to
signal male effeminacy, homosexuality, and even political subversion” (2010: 8-9). Plant notes that while anxiety over the effeminizing influence of mothers dated back to the late nineteenth century, antimaternialism didn’t become mainstream until the 1940’s:

Critics argued that what appeared like self-sacrificing mother love could in fact be narcissistic, possessive, and pathogenic. They claimed that medical advances had dramatically reduced the suffering and mortality associated with childbirth, rendering the age-old analogy between mothers and soldiers obsolete. They pointed to labour-saving devices in the home, lower birth rates, and longer life spans, arguing that many women had become idle or even parasitic. And they cynically mocked suffragists’ earlier predictions that women, acting as virtuous mothers, would purify politics once they attained the vote. […] Some critics who advanced these claims hoped to push women in the direction of liberal individualism, while others simply wanted to undermine the old model of female moral authority. What must be stressed is that their critiques could sound strikingly similar, even when fueled by radically different motives and political visions. (2010: 8)

Plant draws on Philip Wylie’s 1942 essay “A Generation of Vipers,” which referred derisively to an American “cult” of motherhood, that he labelled “momism.” She charts a path from the spectacular misogyny contained in that work to Betty Friedan’s 1963 feminist treatise The Feminine Mystique. While Friedan’s work was clearly motivated by a desire to help women become self-actualised, it also inadvertently employed a critique of motherhood that would have resonated with Wylie’s supporters. Both works attack the mother-homemaker role – the first in order to castigate mothers, while the second seeks to liberate them. Elizabeth Podniek’s 2012 edited collection Mediating Moms: Mothers in Popular Culture attempts to intervene in some of these debates in new ways. Contributors engage with motherhood “as being and yielding feelings that are variously and often concomitantly instinctual, rewarding, magical, fulfilling, communal, ambivalent, conflicting, isolating, and oppressive; [they] quer[y] if and how [motherhood] is driven by feminist and postfeminist choices or by age-old imperatives of patriarchy” (Podniek 2012: 5). The book “examines the mother according to three intersecting themes: the good versus the bad mother; intensive mothering; and the new
momism” (8). The key to resisting momist myths in American popular culture, according to Podniek, is mothers who talk back:

Dramatic, comedic, and satiric animated, live-action, and fictional maternal characters challenge and negotiate prevailing notions of normative motherhood as they seek employment outside the home, breastfeed in public, use IVF to conceive, or parent in lesbian families. [...] Their real-life counterparts talk back through their auto-biographical narratives and performances in documentary film, reality television, blogs and online forums, interviews, memoirs, and magazines. (2012: 26).

It would be tedious to examine all of television’s representations of “talking back” mothers, but I would, however, like to note a handful of examples which have been significant for the ways they have challenged the status quo in terms of their complexity, likeability, vulnerability, diversity, self-awareness, or psychopathy. These include Edith Bunker (All in the Family, CBS 1971-79); Claire Huxtable (The Cosby Show, NCB 1984-92); Roseanne Connor (Roseanne, ABC 1988-97); Livia Soprano (The Sopranos, HBO 1999-2007); Lorelai Gilmore (The Gilmore Girls, WB/CW 2000-07); Lynette Scavo (Desperate Housewives, ABC 2004-12); Betty Draper (Mad Men, AMC 2007-15); and Jane, Xiomara and Alba Villanueva (Jane the Virgin CW 2014—).

I have chosen to look at motherhood in Grey’s Anatomy not because Ellis Grey is an especially notable mother figure to pluck out from this history of television’s maternal depictions, but rather because the program is framed in its first episode by this mother-daughter relationship, which continues to inform both the primary narrative and subtext of subsequent episodes, throughout the series. The expected filial bond is complicated both by Ellis’s Alzheimer’s induced current memory dysfunction, and her past neglect of her daughter through workaholism, an extra-marital affair and a childhood separation.

44 The importance of the mother/daughter relationship is reinforced by Ellis’ sporadic appearances throughout the series. Notable examples include: episode 8:13 “If/Then,” which features an alternate universe where Richard leaves his wife and marries Ellis (who never gets Alzheimer’s) and they raise Meredith together as a loving family; episode 11:4 “Only Mama Knows” where Meredith is forced to come to terms with her unreliable childhood memories in the face of the discovery that her mother gave up a younger child; and, more recently, episode 15:6 “Flowers on My Grave” where Meredith is visited briefly by Ellis’s spirit in the hospital on the Day of the Dead.
from her father. Ellis’s dementia is represented as fracturing her sense of self, her relationship with her daughter Meredith, and Meredith’s own subjectivity, as a now doubly unrecognised child of a parent she must then take responsibility for in a maternal role-reversal. The location of both of these characters within a program often disregarded as “chick TV” is also significant, as I will highlight in the next section.

**Gendered medical melodrama**

The relationship between medicine and melodrama on television is an old one, dating back to daytime soap operas like *The Doctors* (NBC, 1963-1982) and *General Hospital* (ABC, 1963–). The genre found its way to primetime too with *Dr. Kildare* (NBC, 1961-66), *St. Elsewhere* (NBC 1982-88), *Chicago Hope* (CBS, 1994-2000), and *E.R.* (NBC, 1994-2009), the latter being the first to break the kind of ground now being occupied by *Grey’s Anatomy* (ABC, 2005–), and to a lesser degree, it’s former spin-off *Private Practice* (2007-13). There have been medical procedurals as well, notably *Trapper John MD* (CBS, 1979-86), *House MD* (Fox, 2004-12), *Code Black* (CBS, 2015-18) and airing currently on ABC and Fox respectively, *The Good Doctor* and *The Resident*. These are more limited, however, both in the scope of their storytelling and in their cast of characters, by the formulaic way they prioritise a narrative in which medical cases of the week are solved/concluded by the episode’s end, in keeping with the procedural format shared by most cop shows.

Melodrama as a narrative form has been seen as a feminine mode of storytelling (Modleski, 1983; Brunsdon, 1983; Kaplan, 1992; Warhol, 2003; Mittell, 2013), due to its relationship with early “sentimental” novelists like Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters, with films pejoratively referred to as “women’s weepies,” and with the early daytime radio and television serials commonly known as “soap operas.” As Jason Mittell notes, it’s not so much that melodrama or seriality is an inherently “feminine” narrative form but rather that “such narrative modes have been discursively linked to female practices as to signify a nonessential yet significantly gendered cultural realm” (2015: 246). Melodramatic narratives are characterised by an excess of feeling (and sometimes termed “tear-jerkers”), which are culturally coded as female. But the key element influencing melodrama’s gendered characterisation is ultimately who is watching (Mulvey, 1977; Doane, 1982). In her early work on film spectatorship, Mulvey defines the family
melodrama as a form that explicitly addresses the female viewer and deliberately functions to provide an alternative to dominant male cinema genres like Western and Gangster films. Certainly, data show that a great many of these programs are watched by a significantly larger portion of female viewers than male; programs like *Mad Men*, *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, on the other hand, employ a healthy amount of melodrama in their storytelling, yet they aren’t characterised as feminine, because male viewers equal or outnumber females and the mode of address is arguably male, as are most of the protagonists.

Other elements influencing the gendered dynamic of viewing preferences and critical universal appeal, include the genders of both the production team and the central protagonist. In the case of *Grey’s Anatomy*, the main character is the female surgical resident referred to in the title: Meredith Grey. The program was also created and produced by a woman of colour, Shonda Rhimes, now established enough to be considered a television auteur. The *New Yorker* TV critic, Emily Nussbaum (2010), then writing for *New York Magazine*, characterised *Grey’s Anatomy* as an auteurist melodrama, remarking that “it’s a medical soap opera, structured like any procedural, but each line is stamped with the voice of its creator, Shonda Rhimes – who returns, almost musically, to certain obsessions, from workaholism to mistress psychology”, and who has built a distinct ensemble of spiky, intimacy-averse heroines” (n.p.). The initial cast of the program was notable for its diversity in both race and gender, and early ratings showed that the program was popular with both men and women (Arthur, 2005). However, viewing figures have always indicated that the program’s primary audience is female (Carter, 2013), thus sometimes making it a target of both critical and populist derision. This is in spite of its consistent ratings performance over 325 episodes (currently broadcasting in its 15th season).

A brief comparison between medical dramas *Grey’s Anatomy* and *ER* will further illustrate the ways that gender impacts social discourse about television programs. This is

---

45 Rhimes dedicates a good deal of attention in her programs to heteronormative adultery, focusing in particular on the point of view of the mistress, conflicted and caught between desire for the husband, post-feminist sexual freedom which resists monogamous views of sexual partners as each other’s property, and feminist solidarity with the wife.
important as it highlights the degree to which even a widely popular television program can become something of an example of symbolic non-being itself – visible but disregarded. While the program’s status in the realm of cultural critique is not my primary focus in this chapter, it does have implications for the content I will be analysing – it tells us something about how these issues are prioritised in society and the role that gender can play in diminishing some stories, while elevating others. In this way critical response to *Grey’s Anatomy* gestures towards a gendered form of non-being that informs narrative representations and reception across a range of genres and programs. Alessandra Stanley (2005), reviewing the first season of the show for the *New York Times* referred to it as the “Girl Power” version of *ER*. John Leonard, writing for *New York Magazine* at the same time, went with the headline: “When the Scrubs Come Off - *Grey’s Anatomy* plays out like Desperate Surgeons: a medical drama driven by sex and giggles” and went on to characterise the program as “a dramatic series that seeks to be a sort of ‘*ER* goes to the senior prom’” (2005). While the show has been nominated for numerous awards since it premiered in 2005, most of the few it has won are People’s Choice Awards, determined by public votes.

Conversely, the medical drama *ER*, which aired from 1994-2009 on the NBC network, won more industry awards, attracted a more gender-balanced audience, and continues to enjoy both popular and critical acclaim in syndication, as evidenced by the response to its addition to the streaming service Hulu earlier this year. *ER* shares many similarities with *Grey’s Anatomy* – in its time, it was a reliable tentpole46 in the primetime broadcast schedule for NBC, while *Grey’s Anatomy* currently remains a flagship show for ABC, its viewing numbers exceeded only by *The Good Doctor* (2017) when compared with other shows on the network. Both programs feature diverse ensemble casts and narratively they each employ a mixture of procedural episodic plot resolution with more flexible approaches to closure. But while *ER* is likened in academic discourse to the gritty *Hill Street Blues* in terms of its realism and flexi-narrative (Nelson, 1997) approach to storytelling, *Grey’s Anatomy* tends to be compared to the daytime soap opera, a genre

46 “Tentpole” programs prop up a network financially while also serving in the schedule to anchor a night’s viewing as hopefully audiences will tune in to watch newer content scheduled before or after. For the first 10 years of its run, *ER* and *Friends* bookended NBC’s Thursday night line-up, branded as “Must-See TV”.
also denigrated as the viewing purview of bored housewives. Thus, *ER* retains more prestige status than its ABC network counterpart (no one refers to it as a “guilty pleasure”), while gender seems to figure largely in the diminished characterisation of *Grey’s Anatomy*. As a side note about guilty pleasures, Jennifer Szalai (2013) asserts that they:

> refer to cultural artifacts with mass appeal – genre novels, catchy pop songs, domestic action movies (foreign action “films,” no matter how awful, tend to get a pass), TV shows other than *Breaking Bad* and *The Wire* – that bring with them an easy enjoyment without any pretense to edification. (n.p.)

While Szalai doesn’t address the issue of gender in her larger argument that people should just enjoy their pleasures without feeling the need to articulate a pseudo-guilt largely borne of condescension, its absence is curious. No one refers to watching the Super Bowl (or any televised sport for that matter) as a guilty pleasure either, even though many of the characteristics listed above apply. According to Robyn Warhol (2003):

> Serial forms and sentimental texts exist for the purpose of consumption. For many of us who live, however reluctantly, under the sway of dominant culture, of course, consumption is a mixed pleasure, always structured by ambivalent feelings of having gotten too much and of wanting still more. (120)

Warhol finds sentimentality inextricably linked to female embodiment. Thus, the excess of emotion generated both by *Grey’s Anatomy’s* preoccupation with giving its stories about relationships equal priority with its more formulaic medical narratives, and its embrace of a hyper-present musical soundtrack (each episode is named for a popular song), often leaves it found wanting in terms of its valuation as “quality”47 television, by critics and casual viewers alike, while regular viewers may demur when asked if they watch it.

---

47 Debates about quality, taste and aesthetics abound in television studies – some notable contribution include Nelson (1997), Geraghty (2003), and the edited collections of both Hammand & Mazdon (2005) and McCabe & Akass (2007). Robin Nelson argues that these judgements should be based on “our commonality of being in the world” and on the role that television drama can play in “bridging the gap between subjectivities . . . on the contested ground of what it means to be human” (1997: 228-29).
*ER* was created by Michael Crichton (*Jurassic Park, Westworld*) and produced by Steven Spielberg, two men held in high regard within the film industry at a time when television was still struggling to be taken seriously alongside cinema. Shonda Rhimes was a relatively unknown African American woman when she first pitched *Grey’s Anatomy* to ABC executives, but four hit shows later, she has consolidated her power as a key player on network TV by cannily collaborating with the network on the marketing campaign “TGIT” (“Thank God It’s Thursday), which is reserved exclusively for a Thursday night line-up that features only her programming. In the 2017-2018 season, this line-up consisted of *Grey’s Anatomy, Scandal,* and *How to Get Away with Murder,* all three dramas centred around female protagonists, with the latter two being African American.

*ER* was built around actors including Anthony Edwards, George Clooney and Noah Wyle, who were eager to move on after a call from the “Big Movie people” (Carter, 1996) while Ellen Pompeo, who plays *Grey’s Anatomy* main character Meredith Grey recently negotiated an expansive contract which establishes her as the highest paid female actor in a prime-time drama, covering her until the end of a potential 16th season. Pompeo acknowledges that at one time she felt she was giving up a film career by choosing to stay on the same television show for over a decade but has since realised that her financial power and security more than make up for what some might perceive as a lack of relevance or success in her chosen field.48 Pompeo’s revelations do, however, reflect some common historical characterisations of both television and its depiction of women’s stories. The social disregard for “women’s genres” and the stories they tell has certainly played a role in sustaining the lack of regard we see for women every day in the public sphere. This diminishment can ultimately function as an erasure – itself a form of non-being, as first women’s concerns are dismissed, and then, eventually, women themselves. While the lack of power held by women in the public sphere compared with their male

---

48 In an interview with Lacey Rose for the *Hollywood Reporter* earlier this year, she confesses that when the show debuted and was instantly popular, she knew she was “fucked,” in terms of her dreams of movie stardom and her hopes that this would just be a quick job to pay the rent while waiting for a more prestigious movie career to take off.
counterparts is certainly not news, characterising it as a form of non-being is important in
the context of this program’s inclusion in this project.

The way ER and Grey’s Anatomy have been respectively characterized when
compared to one another is a prime example of the over-valuing of the former and the de-
valuing of the latter. This is beginning to change, however, as in November of 2017, Eric
Duggans made a case for Grey’s Anatomy on NPR, arguing that it “might be the best
show on television that TV critics rarely talk about” and leaning into its previously
derided soapy elements as one of its core strengths. According to Duggans:

It pushes all the appealing buttons of a quality soap opera, as hunky guys
and beautiful women tangle with each other — both personally and
professionally — within the high stakes world of a bustling hospital. But
it's also a story told Rhimes' way, featuring her fondness for shocking
topicality, her taste for ethnic and sexual diversity, and her skill at building
complex relationships between women. Grey's Anatomy pokes at the
culture of misogyny that runs through so much of show business by telling
stories through the female gaze. (2017: np)

It is likely that the program’s refusal to follow many of the conventional rules governing
the depiction of female relationships is part of the reason why these radical departures
have remained uncommented on for so much of the show’s broadcast time. The heart of
the show is its relationships and the one which frames the first episode and continues to
dominate the first three seasons is foundational, both literally and figuratively, if
unconventionally configured; we begin with the daughter, and end with the mother.
Relevant narrative content, combined with the program’s unapologetic foregrounding of
female voices and stories, and its ability to maintain consistent primetime viewership in
an era when network television has never been more precarious, are primary reasons for
its inclusion in this analysis.

Theorising dementia as non-being

[...] Memory speaks:
You cannot live on me alone
you cannot live without me
I’m nothing if I’m just a roll of film
stills from a vanished world
fixed lightstreaked mute
left for another generation’s
restoration and framing I can’t be restored or framed
I can’t be still I’m here
in your mirror […]


Alzheimer’s disease steals people from themselves.\(^{49}\) It doesn’t just take memories – it rearranges the linearity of recollection. It reorganises time, so that people slide backwards and get stuck in infinite loops of foundational experiences, misrecognising loved ones in the present, for those long departed. Losing a parent, particularly a mother, is difficult, as it is the first moment that we know ourselves to be completely alone in the world – our most direct attachment to another person finally completely severed. And yet this is the natural order of things – parents age, their bodies wither, their minds slow, and eventually all comes to a stop. It is known. So we have a framework for this kind of loss – we understand that the loss of the first people who ever loved us completely is a special kind of trauma, but if we are lucky enough (both to have been loved completely, and to keep our parents until we are old and they much older

---

\(^{49}\) When my grandmother first started to suffer the effects of Alzheimer’s in her 70s, it began with small moments of forgetfulness. She would repeat herself – the same stories, the same questions, she might lose track of time, or take a bit longer to call to mind a word or a name she wanted. Eventually she couldn’t be trusted to do the banking anymore, because she would try to do it multiple times and then forget where she had put the cash she had withdrawn. If anyone came by the house, she gave them money – repeatedly. She stopped recognising her husband, calling her six sons and daughters to anxiously report that a strange man was in the house and that he needed to leave soon before Dad came home. Her appetite diminished as she forgot to eat; when food was prepared for her, she would pretend to eat it, while hiding it in pockets or couch cushions. She became belligerent, afraid, confused. She couldn’t read books or watch her “stories” anymore – she couldn’t follow a linear narrative. I lived abroad for nearly 10 years while this was happening, and so the effects of her decline were particularly striking during my infrequent visits home. I first introduced her to my husband in 2007 – she didn’t die until 2010, and he spent time with her on multiple occasions in that 3-year period, but I will always feel like he never got a chance to meet her, because by then she was mostly gone – a blank absent presence. She knew me still, but she couldn’t learn anything new about me. We were both stuck – she in her jumbled memories, and me in the guilt that I stayed away for too long.
still), then we have time to make our peace with it – to comfort ourselves that they have lived good long lives and are ready to go, that we are independent, functioning individuals with families of our own to nurture and prepare for the inevitability of our own future deaths. But to lose a parent in the way that Alzheimer’s disease takes them is a whole other kind of bewildering pain. The state of non-being that this disease renders its sufferers into does not only negate their own sense of selves, but it also has profound implications for loved ones who must suddenly learn both to parent their own parents, and to parent themselves. This is complicated by the active failure of the parent to recognise the child – to insist that the child is someone else, or a stranger, essentially no one at all.  

When a parent-child relationship is affected by the parent’s dementia, both parties enter the zone of non-being – the parent loses the ability not only to recognize friends and loved ones, but also the self, while the child must contend with the precarity of their identity as “child” as they become either a stranger to the parent, or a misrecognised figure of the past, their present relationship disavowed. What happens to your sense of self when your primary caregiver – the first person to become real to you as separate from yourself – no longer recognises you? There is a blow to identity that occurs upon the death of a parent, but the loss incurred by dementia is perhaps more profound as the parent’s lack of recognition serves as a kind of negation of the self insofar as it is constituted by parented subjectivity, and this negation is all the more painful for its impermanence. Death provides a finality – clearly demarcating the line between what used to be and what is now – and finality allows for grief and mourning. Dementia produces a liminal state that the mind wanders in and out of, sometimes lucid, other times not – unpredictable, unreliable, dispassionate. It seems perverse to grieve the loss of a parent when they are still alive, particularly if their physical health is good, and so children of parents suffering this affliction must learn to navigate their present-absence.

Catherine Malabou (2012a and 2012b) combines neurological research, philosophy, and psychoanalytic inquiry to address the question of what happens when

---

50 The mother and daughter in Emma Healey’s novel, *Elizabeth is Missing*, struggle to navigate both their individual losses and the reversal of their roles as Maud becomes increasingly more confused, frightened and violent, while Helen struggles to care for her mother in the midst of her own frustration and fear.
subjectivity is irrevocably changed by damage to the brain that occurs as a result of war, trauma or disease. Her work is informed by her own experiences – “a belated reaction to the ordeal of depersonalisation to which [her] grandmother was subjected as Alzheimer’s disease operated upon her” (2012a: xi). She notes the way in which she came to see her grandmother as “the work of the disease, its opus, its own sculpture” (2012a: xi). Viewing Alzheimer’s as a psychic attack as much as a neurodegenerative disorder, she attempts to reconcile the apparently absent self that Alzheimer’s visibly produces with the less visible likelihood that Alzheimer’s symptoms must also produce profound psychic pain within their sufferers. Drawing on Malabou’s work we can imagine the experience of dementia as challenging the subject’s psyche to attempt to flee itself, but as there is no outside, no elsewhere, this flight is impossible. There is instead an ersatz form of flight, what Malabou notes as:

The formation of an identity that flees itself, that flees the impossibility of fleeing itself. Identity abandoned, dissociated again, identity that does not reflect itself, does not live its own transformation, does not subjectivise its change. (Malabou, 2012b: 11)

This form of alterity is what Malabou has termed destructive plasticity and she suggests that:

It invites us to consider the suffering caused by an absence of suffering, in the emergence of a new form of being, a stranger to the one before. Pain that manifests as indifference to pain, impassivity, forgetting, the loss of symbolic reference points. Yet the synthesis of another soul and body in that abandonment is still a form, a whole, a system, a life. (2012b: 18)

The term destructive plasticity offers an opportunity to conceive of certain forms of destruction more positively, as it “refers to the possibility of being transformed without being destroyed; it characterizes the entire strategy of modification that seeks to avoid the threat of destruction” (2012b: 44-45). We may feel fear when we think about the plasticity of the self, and perhaps even disbelief, that such a change could occur in us without our even knowing it. But if we subscribe to Freud’s concept of the death drive, then this kind of destruction of the self is not only possible but also probable. Destructive plasticity is “the power to form identity through destruction—thus making possible the emergence of a psyche that has vacated itself, its past, and its ‘precedents.’” In this sense,
such plasticity has the power of creation *ex nihilo*, since it begins with the annihilation of an initial identity” (Malabou, 2012a: 68). The question then is what remains after the annihilation of the initial identity, and what does this mean for relational subjectivities like child/parent, or even more specifically mother/daughter?

As an Alzheimer’s sufferer is experiencing a form of post-traumatic subjectivity, they become a figure of “identitarian abandonment,” eluding therapies like psychoanalysis (2012b: 14). Malabou asserts that:

> Existing in these cases ... amounts to experiencing a lack of exteriority, which is as much an absence of interiority, hence the impossible flight, the on the spot transformation. There is neither an inside nor an outside world. Consequently, the modification is all the more radical and violent; it fragments all the more readily. The worst dissensions of the subject with the self, the most serious conflicts, do not even look tragic. Paradoxically, they are signalled by indifference and coldness. (2012b: 14)

In this sense the loved ones of a dementia sufferer experience the latter’s existence in a significantly different way. While the experience of dementia involves an absent-absence, the experience of trying to *relate* to a dementia sufferer instead involves a present-absence, as carers and other loved ones still perceive the exterior world of embodiment that the sufferer lacks. To some degree we must always navigate a certain amount of internal absence in all forms of relationality, as it is impossible to completely *know* another person, but the dementia sufferer’s own lack of interiority makes it impossible for them to even attempt to fill in some of the gaps of this knowledge. Meredith’s struggles with the loss of her mother’s capacity for relationality are especially hard because of the way it puts pressure on Meredith’s own sense of identity, which is connected with Ellis both as her mother and as an object she is trying to replicate through her professional success. This is different from what Jacqueline Rose sees as the limitations of our capacity to wrestle with the past for self-knowledge: “Mothers and daughters cannot tell each other everything, because they do not know – nobody knows – everything about themselves; not about their own lives, or the secrets of their families, or that part of history weighing on their shoulders that is too hard to communicate” (2018: 198).

Meredith and Ellis never get to a point where they must confront the weight of history
together—Ellis’s secrets are only revealed sporadically, and many long after her death, leaving Meredith to struggle with their implications on her own.

The indifference and coldness which, in Malabou’s view, signal “the worst dissension of the subject with the self” (2012a: 14), are clearly present in Ellis Grey. However, it is difficult to tell if these conflicts would be experienced tragically by a more lucid Ellis, given everything we eventually learn about her priorities. Nor is it fully clear what knowledge limitations existed in her relationship with her daughter even before she became ill. We only know what we are shown: a daughter struggling to balance two forms of labour and navigate the anxieties of non-being that they induce, as she begins a new job as a surgical intern, in the shadow of her mother’s ground-breaking surgical legacy, while also keeping her mother’s current ill health a secret from everyone, at her own request. Viewers are implicated in this secret as they find out the truth of Ellis’s situation before anyone else in the narrative does. By the end of the pilot we learn that there are two significant aspects of her own life that Meredith’s mother has forgotten about, as a consequence of her early-onset Alzheimer’s: her professional career as a surgeon, and her child. Meredith explains who she is (undoubtedly not for the first time), and that while she is not her mother’s doctor (as her mother had wondered), she is a doctor. Ellis’s response is telling, in that she doesn’t react at all to the revelation that the young woman visiting her is her daughter, but instead she fixates on their shared profession. The transformation that has occurred as a result of her dementia has allowed her to salvage some memories of her professional and entirely self-contained identity as a doctor, while discarding her conditional identity (irrevocably linked with her child) as a

---

51 At the end of the 10th season, Maggie Pierce, the daughter Ellis conceived with her married lover Richard and later gave up for adoption, comes looking for her half-sister and father, neither of whom knew she existed. Meredith is forced to re-examine her childhood memories; she insists that Maggie can’t be her sister, as surely if her mother had been pregnant and given birth, she would recall these events. Her jumbled memories—a carousel, Ellis and Richard arguing, later calling 911 when Ellis is bleeding—have all been seeded much earlier in the series, providing their own examples of working through as they are repeatedly revisited. In episode 4:15 “Losing My Mind” Meredith discloses to a therapist that Ellis tried to kill herself when Meredith was a child—something she had never told anyone before. She later realises that this attempt could not have been serious, as a gifted surgeon like Ellis would have known exactly how to slit her wrists effectively instead of leaving her 5-year-old daughter to find her and get help. After meeting Maggie, Meredith eventually recovers her memory of her mother’s water breaking, having repressed it because it was a frightening reminder of Ellis’s suicide attempt.
mother and thereby tilting Meredith towards the zone of filial non-being. Ellis has survived a literal destruction, but the sense of being that depends upon her conscious participation in a collective memory of past experiences and relationships has undergone a catastrophic shift.

As a televisual representation, this narrative of illness is compelling. It provides a frame for the viewer to better understand Meredith’s personal ambivalence about her professional choices, even as she works through these anxieties herself. It also allows Ellis’s legacy to be consistently present on screen even while the character appears only infrequently. It is notable that Meredith continues to attempt to reach her mother – she doesn’t choose to lie to Ellis or to overtly practice a form of “validation therapy” when her mother expresses confusion. Even though the conventional approach to dementia care in this contemporary moment seems to be to indulge dementia sufferers in their “comforting fictions” (MacFarquhar, 2018), Malabou stresses the importance of reorienting the dementia sufferer with the familiar, arguing in the case of her grandmother that this kind of truth-telling would have been a form of tenderness:

[T]he incoherence of my grandmother’s behavior and her visible indifference were also reactions to the shock of hospitalisation. If I understood more clearly, I would have tried on occasion to take her back home for a few hours. I would have given her the chance to regain her familiar surroundings, her “things.” The point would not have been absurdly to help her to “refresh her memory,” but to allow her calmly and without any expectations to perceive “her own absence.” (2012b: xiv)

Meredith isn’t fully able to allow her mother this opportunity. The structure, pace and repetition of the central tension of Meredith’s desire to be both enclosed by and separated from a mother that can only rarely acknowledge her existence, creates a space in which

---

52 Larissa MacFarquhar (2018) discusses the history and evolution of approaches to dementia care in an article for The New Yorker, noting a shift from the “reality orientation” approach of the 60s and 70s, pioneered by nurse, Lucille Taulbee and doctor, James Folsom, to the “validation therapy” practiced by social worker Naomi Feil in the 80s, which took a less rigid approach to truth telling. In the 90s an Englishwoman named Penny Garner developed in even more truth-rejecting method which grew out of her experiences in caring for her own mother Dorothy. Garner prioritised her mother’s happiness over everything else, which she felt was achieved most effectively by going along with whatever her mother thought, said, and did, no matter how peculiar.
we can see the process and effects of destructive plasticity in the transformation of both mother and daughter.

**Grey’s Anatomy – Stages of working through (grief)**

While Ellis’s battle with non-being ultimately ends with her death, Meredith must work through the stages of this dementia-inflected loss repeatedly, navigating her mother’s non-being as deeply implicated with her own experience of this state. She can only hope to be released from her own zone of non-being when the ambivalence is resolved by the cessation of Ellis’s fractured subjectivity. The well-known “Five Stages of Grief” first outlined by Elizabeth Kubler Ross, provides a useful framework for delineating both the trajectory of Meredith’s struggle with the loss of her mother as an instance of non-being and the evolution of her mother’s inability to be reconciled with her own absence. The three key qualities of television drama – duration, immersion, and repetition – are each apparent in this representation as narrative threads are introduced, revisited and resolved in no particular order, employing a flexi-narrative approach which resists complete episodic closure. Durationally the slowness of the experience of dementia is reinforced by the time the program takes to develop and resolve this storyline.

I. Denial – “I used to be a doctor, I think…”

The framing of the first episode of Grey’s Anatomy turns a story about the first days of a new job into a persuasive account of what it means to become less of a daughter and more of a parent to one’s own mother. This framing is significant in the way that it recasts the viewer, who may be initially disconcerted to find that they are not being singularly hailed by Meredith’s voice-over, but that they are rather spectators of this secondary performance – a story within a story where the mother’s subjectivity is shared and perhaps even coopted by the audience. Ellis Grey’s subject position as an Alzheimer’s sufferer with an unreliable and uncooperative memory allows the program to take a slightly different approach to its storytelling.

The fact that no one else knows about Ellis’s diagnosis means that Meredith is afforded envy rather than sympathy by her peers, Cristina Yang, Izzie Stevens, Alex
Karev, and George O’Malley. When she has a conflict with Cristina, who resents her being chosen to scrub in on a surgery with a senior doctor, Derek Shepherd, that she had a sexual dalliance with before realising she would be working with him, this envy boils over into open hostility: “You know, screw you! I don’t get picked for surgeries because I slept with my boss, and I didn’t get into med school because I have a famous mother, you know, some of us earn what we get” (Grey’s Anatomy, Episode 1:1, “Hard Day’s Night”). Later Meredith confesses to George that when she told her mother she wanted to go to medical school, Ellis tried to talk her out of it: “[She] said I didn’t have what it takes to be a surgeon – that I’d never make it.” Meredith is clearly full of self-doubt and concern that she is living in her mother’s shadow, that she is getting special treatment from her boss because of an error in judgment made before she knew who he was, and that her colleagues don’t respect her. But the narrative subverts any expectations that unease and animosity should continue to dominate the emotional tone of the program. Cristina and Meredith resolve their conflict with minimal sentimentality by the end of the episode, and collegiality is restored, as indicated by Meredith’s final monologue, which narrates her journey from the hospital to what is revealed to be care home where she is visiting an older woman who looks at her in confusion:

EG: Are you the doctor?  
*MG: No, I’m not your doctor. But I am a doctor.*  
- What’s your name?  
- *It’s me, Mom – Meredith*  
- All right… I used to be a doctor, I think.  
- *You were a doctor Mom. You were a surgeon.* (Grey’s Anatomy, Episode 1:1, “Hard Day’s Night”)

Meredith takes her mother’s hand, but her mother looks away, doesn’t respond and the camera pulls back into a long final shot of the two women sitting in arm chairs slightly angled towards each other, mother sitting straight and staring blankly with legs crossed, daughter leaning forward holding the absent mother’s hand. Then the credits roll.
Ellis remembers that she used to be a doctor, but not that she used to be (still is?) a mother. Meredith remains unrecognized, not just for her own sake, but also denied the validation of having proven her mother wrong, to show her that she has made it, that she does have what it takes. Throughout the remainder of the season’s eight episodes, Meredith consistently identifies with patients in a way that illustrates her inability to move out of the zone of non-being that her mother’s condition (and Ellis’s stipulated legal requirement that it be kept secret) has placed her in. Even while Ellis’s condition continues to operate as a denial of her own motherhood, Meredith must maintain an emotional state of denial regarding her mother’s condition, in order to avoid breaching her confidence, but also as a means of deferring the wider potential implications of this disclosure.

II. Anger – “You have no idea what this will do to you.”

The toll of her mother’s present absence makes itself felt in a case where a patient’s brain tumour requires an aggressive surgery that is likely to cost him his
memories. The patient, Jorge, and his wife, Sona, want to go ahead with it, because it will give him more time than a more conservative option, but Meredith’s personal feelings spill over as she cautions his wife against this choice:

Meredith: You need to consider what you'll lose. What good is five years if he doesn't joke about your omelets and he can't remember seeing you in that red dress?

Sona: It's still five more years.
- You don't understand. He'll be there, but he won't be Jorge. He won't even recognize you.
- This is our business.
- You have no idea what this will do to you. Isn't five good years better than ten bad ones?
- [...] You think that I'm being selfish, that I don't want to give him up.
- I don't.
- This is Jorge's decision. And if that means ten bad years for me, fine. I'll give him those years because I will give him whatever he wants. [...] And if he doesn't remember me, if he doesn't remember what we are, he's still my Jorge. And I'll remember for us both. (Grey’s Anatomy, Episode 1:4, “No Man’s Land”)

Meredith identifies more with her patient’s wife than with the patient himself. Her concern for what his potential memory loss will do to his partner – the person who may be left caring indefinitely for a man that doesn’t remember her or their life together – illustrates the transference she is experiencing. Unable to confront her mother, she can only confront this stranger, a proxy for herself, as if somehow knowing what was going to happen might have given her a chance to make a different choice. You can’t choose your mother though, and you can’t just walk away from her; Meredith knows that she is stuck, but it doesn’t stop her from trying to prevent someone from falling into the same trap. Her angry, agonized question – what good is more time if the person you’re spending it with is no longer someone you or they recognize? – goes unanswered. Sona may think that she can remember for both her and Jorge, but Meredith knows better how nearly impossible that task is. There are so many things about her mother – and about her own life – that she doesn’t even know, and you can’t remember what you weren’t told or didn’t experience. Her wistful appeal to Sona reflects a fantasy of a shared relationship that she and Ellis never had, but that she wants to believe could still be possible, if only
her mother could recognize her. Sona’s response triggers a frustrated anger because it reflects the state of denial that Meredith has been forced to exit. Unable to continue to rely on this defense mechanism, Meredith must confront and begin to work through her loss.

Ellis expresses anger too, first projected at a colleague of Meredith’s who she misrecognises as Meredith’s father. Here Ellis is depicted as unable to experience her present reality, caught in a past memory where her husband and child were barriers to her success as a surgeon. Drawing on Malabou (2012a), we can view this as evidence of the psychic pain Ellis is experiencing but unable to fully understand or articulate. Ellis’s inability to fully experience a present psychic self substantially inhibits her capacity to fully work through her state of non-being without succumbing to it. The second angry outburst we see is directed at her daughter, in response to Meredith’s shy admission that she is happy. Suddenly lucid Ellis experiences an intense case of “reality orientation” and finds it unacceptable that her daughter might have already begun to work through her condition when she has only just become fully aware of it.

III. Bargaining – “I wish I could go back. I’d do everything so differently.”

We hold mothers to a standard of perfection that is both unreasonable and impossible. As represented in Grey’s Anatomy, this mother and daughter have competing needs – the daughter is at the beginning of her career, in a new blossoming relationship, and she requires both the mother’s recognition and approval, while the mother is nearing the end of her life much sooner than she had hoped, thrust into an unreliable reality and stuck there indefinitely, and she’s not ready to go. Suddenly (and briefly) lucid, Ellis needs her daughter to be her proxy – to carry out her will in the world. It both infuriates and pleases her to find that Meredith has a will of her own and a sense of purpose that isn’t completely bound up with her mother’s illness. But along with the frustration of thwarted desires, we also get a sense of Ellis’s regret and desperation in her last conversation with Richard Webber – the chief of surgery and her former married lover53 – before she slips back into dementia:

---

53 Meredith discovers that her mother and Richard had an affair when she was very young, cheating on
**EG:** Do you... do I know who Meredith is? Do I at least recognize Meredith?

**RW:** You know she's someone important. Someone who loves you.
- *You look out for her, because she's got so much more to learn and I won't be able to teach her.*
- I'll look out for her.
- *I wish I could go back. I'd do everything so differently. I'd fight harder for you. I think if I'd fought for you...*
- We would have had a wonderful life together Ellis.
- *You think so?*
- I do. We would have done our fellowship here. And then you would have fought me for chief and probably won and I wouldn't have minded because we'd have kids at home.
- *We have kids?*
- Meredith would have needed a brother and sister. Kids need family.
- *We would have been a family.*
- Probably bought that big house on Parker, the one with the barn. That's a good place for a family.
- *And I would have been happy just like Meredith says she's happy. And that would have changed everything. Maybe... I would be fine and we could grow old together and life would be so perfectly ordinary.*
- Yeah.
- *My life is so unfinished. It's unfinished and I'm unfinished.*
- No, Ellis. Don't think that. Just close your eyes and think of the family, of the house.
- *And you there every night to come home to.*
- And me there. I'm there. (*Grey’s Anatomy, Episode 3:14, “Wishin’ and Hopin’”*)

Harper Avery winner, Ellis Grey, an ambitious woman who never would have put a man before her professional aspirations, is now willing to imagine any kind of life that might give her more time to become “finished.” The two versions of Ellis, that Meredith can only encounter separately at each of the two extremes of her mother’s lucidity, have finally collaborated on a singular dream that allows Ellis to bear the inevitable drifting both of their respective spouses. Ellis had been prepared to leave Meredith’s father to be with Richard, but he became jealous of Ellis’s professional success and he chose to stay with his wife. Ellis then left everyone but her daughter, moving across the country from Seattle to Boston with Meredith, who grew up no longer seeing her father or understanding why.
away of reality. Ellis’s bargaining illustrates the kind of compromise that women are so often called upon to make – settling for the normative achievement of a middle-class life with a loving husband and children to care for is positioned as a way to avoid thinking about other desires. According to this representation, being is contingent on caring for others – being seen and being cared for. Personal achievement is secondary, however “unfinished” it might leave you. The non-being of Ellis’s thwarted career objectives is reframed as an opportunity for her to be happy by receding into fantasy.

While a kind of imaginary compromise forms the manifestation of Ellis’s bargaining in this context, Meredith’s version is more ambivalent. When she discovers that her mother might have terminal liver cancer, she is forced to admit to herself that she doesn’t know which outcome to root for while still waiting for the biopsy results. A colleague commiserates that at least cancer is fast, if painful, and they give you morphine, but “they don’t give you morphine for Alzheimer’s” (Grey’s Anatomy, Episode 2:3, “Make Me Lose Control”). Meredith berates herself for wishing her mother had cancer, but this desire can be read as a form of tenderness, equal to the self-interest that it also indicates. Were Ellis to die of cancer, it would be quick, but the pain would be visible and thus could be mitigated. Alzheimer’s is a much slower descent into permanent non-being, and the psychic pain that Malabou discusses can only grow as the effects of the disease become more cognitively and emotionally devastating. Meredith may well want to spare herself the emotional and physical labour of her mother’s sullen silences and angry outbursts, but surely there is also a part of her who understands that a quick (if painful) death might be preferable to Ellis as well.

IV. Depression – “What happened to you?”

Meredith is forced to bear the emotional burden of her mother’s indiscretions, as a past-locked Ellis, fully immersed in the volatility of her once passionate desire to be with Richard, is completely oblivious to Meredith’s identity as her daughter, instead treating her like confidante, eager to hear the details of a friend’s trysts. When a distraught Ellis begins to rage that “he's with her, he's with that woman - his wife,” Meredith tries to explain to her that this all happened a very long time ago, and it’s not happening now. Ellis delivers a final blow: “It's because I have a daughter, isn't it? He always said he
didn't want kids. I should never have had a kid” (*Grey’s Anatomy*, Episode 3:10, “Don’t Stand So Close To Me”).

The ambivalence of having legal responsibility for a parent who has confessed to finding you an inconvenient obstacle to the thing they really wanted, is a key tension framing the episode where Ellis suddenly comes back to herself in a “random gift.” She is lucid, and aware of everything, however temporarily. She wants to know about Meredith’s life, but the conversation takes a judgmental turn when Meredith confesses that she hasn’t yet chosen a surgical specialty:

*MG:* Yeah, well, I guess I’m just waiting to be inspired. I’m happy now. I feel like I know who I am, plus I think when you have someone in your life that you love, you really love, I think that’s...I don’t know I just...I’m really happy.

*EG:* What happened to you?

- *What do you mean?*
- You're happy? You're happy now? The Meredith I knew was a force of nature, passionate, focused, a fighter. What happened to you? You've gone soft. Stammering about a boyfriend and saying you're waiting to be inspired. You're waiting for inspiration? Are you kidding me? I have a disease for which there is no cure. I think that would be inspiration enough.

- *Mom...*

- Listen to me, Meredith. Anyone can fall in love and be blindly happy. But not everyone can pick up a scalpel and save a life. I raised you to be an extraordinary human being. So, imagine my disappointment when I wake up after five years and discover that you're no more than ordinary. What happened to you? (*Grey’s Anatomy*, Episode 3:14, “Wishin’ and Hopin’”)

Ellis’s admonishment to Meredith may be read not just as a disapproval of a frivolous love affair, but as a larger warning against what continuing down that road will inevitably cost her daughter in terms of her career and her autonomy. Ellis Grey isn’t written as the kind of woman who would ever say that her greatest achievement in life was having a child – her investment in that child would have come at a cost, which demands reciprocity. To Ellis, in this moment, nothing is more important than the work – surgery,
research, being the best. She is oscillating between anger about the news of her condition she is only now lucid enough to finally understand, and wistful realisation that her legacy, in the form of her daughter’s surgical gifts, is now all that matters. In order to be extraordinary, Ellis think that Meredith must forsake all pleasurable distractions and pursue a singular path. But Meredith has seen the other Ellis – the one who emerges when lucidity recedes. This Ellis is brought to her knees by an unreturned phone call, a late visit, a broken promise. This Ellis understands the cost of loving an unavailable man, and yet she chooses to do it anyway. Meredith is unable to reconcile her mother’s expectations of her with Ellis’s own actions, and the realisation that she will never get the validation that she craves from her mother brings her to a breaking point, in the form of a near-death experience. The happiness that she tried to affirm for herself in her mother’s lucid presence, fades away in response to Ellis’s stern chastisement, which expresses a fury that Meredith can claim happiness in the face of her mother’s lost unfinished being. If her mother can’t see her as an extraordinary person, then how can she be one? The melancholy that frames her existence in relation to her mother from the program’s first episode becomes explicit here, as it culminates in driving her into freezing water and an emotional abyss.

V. Acceptance – “You remind me of my daughter…”

Meredith makes one final attempt to connect with her mother, trying to make the most of the fraught gift of her complete presence, but Ellis’s lucidity recedes before she can respond:

MG: I just have to say this. [...] I have this hope that in a year or two years or five, they're going to have a breakthrough. They're going to find a cure for Alzheimer's and you and I will have another chance, to get to know each other. You will have a chance to get to know me, to see that I am not even remotely ordinary. [...] But it's up to you, Mom. It's your life.

EG: You remind me of my daughter… (Grey’s Anatomy, Episode 3:14, “Wishin’ and Hopin’”)

Curiously, after this loss of lucidity, Ellis still remembers that she is a mother; her inability to recognize Meredith now might be read as a tacit acknowledgement that
Meredith too has undergone a transformation – that she is no longer the daughter Ellis once knew. It’s less clear, however, if this is a transformation that Ellis approves of.

The next time Meredith sees her mother is in the dream-world – a liminal space between life and death, visualised as a long corridor. Meredith’s consciousness is inhabiting the space – a dark “upside-down” version of the hospital – encountering various people (familiar to viewers) that have died during her residency, while her body is in a hospital bed, as the doctors struggle to warm her up after she is found hypothermic and drowned: “She’s not dead until she’s warm and dead.” Meredith’s boyfriend Derek is devastated, and he lashes out at Ellis, still a patient recovering from her recent surgery: “You broke her. You called her ordinary. You taught her time and time again that nothing she does ever is good enough. Every good thing that Meredith is happened despite you. She may not survive this. That's on you. That is on you” (Grey’s Anatomy, Episode 3:17, “Some Kind of Miracle”). Ellis stares at him blankly, but her face begins to register a hint of understanding, an acceptance of what needs to happen next. As Meredith’s body temperature finally increases enough to allow an attempt to start her heart, Ellis’s heart stops beating. Two teams of doctors simultaneously work on both women – Meredith is warm, but she’s still dead, and Ellis isn’t responding to any of the measures they are taking to get her back. As the doctors are about to declare time of death for Meredith, in the dream-world her consciousness struggles to breathe, and then she sees Ellis in scrubs, striding towards her. Each woman remarks that the other shouldn’t be there, and they embrace. Ellis finally tells her daughter what she needs to hear – an imperative to choose to return to the real world: “You are... you are anything but ordinary, Meredith.” Both women are weeping – Meredith, at receiving the validation she so desperately craves, and Ellis, surely because of what it is about to cost her. “Now run. Run.” Meredith hesitates, but finally turns back towards the living at her mother’s urging; as she moves faster, her mother recedes into the distance, unable to follow. (Grey’s Anatomy, Episode 3:17, “Some Kind of Miracle”).
Figure 8: Ellis and Meredith embrace in the dream-world

Figure 9: Meredith leaves her mother behind
In the real world, Ellis dies, while Meredith’s heart finally starts beating again. In a reversal of the infant-development psychoanalytic paradigm, she survives her mother’s earlier attempt to destroy her, and she becomes real. Her mother can’t survive this most recent encounter though, as this would challenge the narrative of need fulfillment in the dream-world – something Ellis would invariably be unable to live up to were she and Meredith to meet again on the other side. Ellis and Meredith work together to help the latter dream her experience; this can be read as employing what Thomas Ogden (2010) calls “dream thinking.” In telling Meredith that she is anything but ordinary, Ellis doesn’t just validate her daughter, she “communicates to [Meredith her] formerly undreamable/unthinkable experience in a form that [s]he is now more fully able to dream on h[er] own” (Ogden, 2010: 330). Ellis’s death is framed as a relief, releasing her from the unbearableness of incompleteness, but it can also be read as a final sacrifice – Donald Winnicott’s “good enough” mother making an appearance at last.

The narrative strategy of interspersing scenes from the dream-world with the real is very effective. The high melodrama utilised to depict Meredith’s friends and colleagues gravely anticipating her death creates a significant amount of tension as we can never be certain how the story will end. The extensive character development that is undertaken over the first three seasons of the program heightens viewer investment in this televisual facilitation of working through. Ultimately both women are able to move through the zone of non-being – Ellis can be read as choosing her death, and thus exchanging her mortality for freedom from psychic pain, while Meredith chooses her life, returning from the zone of non-being without a maternal mirror, but also free of the burden of having to live up to this reflection. Her decision to leave her mother in the zone of non-being is reminiscent of Joan Didion’s suggestion that: “If we are to live ourselves there comes a point at which we must relinquish the dead, let them go, keep them dead” (2007: 225-26). Meredith conjures up a loving version of her mother in the dream-world, and relies on this figure, birthed by her unconscious mind, to guide her back to herself, only to relinquish her to death once she has served her purpose. Inverting Anne Sexton’s maternal paradigm, now it is the daughter who says to the mother: I made you to find me.

This chapter has explored the crisis of non-being in the domain of the personal, in the context of memory and kinship. Memory serves a dual purpose here, signifying both
self-knowledge and one’s capacity to know and understand others. In terms of working through, *Grey’s Anatomy* deploys the structuring narrative elements of repetition, duration and immersion particularly well through its effective balance of episodic and serial storytelling forms. The central tension of Meredith Grey’s relationship with her mother (and the implications of Ellis’s choices) has been repeatedly re-represented over the life of the series. The recurrent appearance of Ellis Grey serves as a reminder of television’s power to strategically evade closure, creating spaces where loss can be worked through and the pain of absence can be (however temporarily) mitigated.


4 Rectifying the future: Social death as non-being in the Prison Industrial Complex

When you are alone with yourself, all the time, with no one but yourself, you begin to go deeper and deeper into yourself until you lose yourself. It’s a perverse contradiction. It’s like your ego begins to disintegrate until you have no ego. Not in the sense that you become humble, or gain some kind of perspective, but that you literally lose your sense of self. And I’m not sure, anyone, unless they’ve gone through it, can truly understand how profound that loss is. It’s like the psychic glue that binds your whole notion of existence is gone, and you become unglued. I think, therefore I am. I think too much, therefore I am not. I am not, therefore I am nothing. I am nothing, therefore I am dead. And if I am dead, then why am I still so goddamn lonely?

~ Daniel Holden (Rectify 4:1 “A House Divided”)

Rectify (Sundance, 2013-2016) illustrates an institutional example of non-being as a form of “social death” (Patterson, 1985; Guenther, 2013; Jonsson, 2015; Kralova, 2015) experienced by prisoners, particularly if they are subjected to prolonged periods of solitary confinement. Central protagonist Daniel Holden’s experience of being returned to society after spending nearly two decades on death row (convicted of the crimes of rape and murder) is depicted in almost real time, but also non-linearly given its heavy reliance on flashbacks to his time in prison. This program was selected in part because it showcases fictive television’s capacity to merge form and content as an evolutionary aspect of its performance of working through. Even though this program is the shortest (30 episodes over 4 seasons) of the three examined in this dissertation, it does a significant amount of work with the time it has, precisely because of its approach to the representation of the experience of time. Unlike M*A*S*H and Grey’s Anatomy, which exemplify foundational and persistent television genre forms (the sitcom and the medical ensemble drama, respectively), Rectify occupies a different space in the television landscape, less known, less prolific, and less watched. But like the cruel experiences of
incarceration and their aftermath that it depicts, it persists, existing as an archiveable object, whether viewers find it or not. This persistence is instructive, serving as a reminder that the victims of carceral systems also remain, irrespective of our acknowledgement. The parallels between the ways systemic inequality traps African Americans within prejudicial social and economic paradigms, and the way the prison system literally traps human beings are all too apparent, but this connection (the systemic intersection of Blackness and criminality, and its implications) is often ignored in fictional representations of incarceration and its consequences. *Rectify* builds on the metaphor of entrapment, as everyone in Daniel’s family also finds themselves “stuck” in particular ways, the zone of non-being that trapped Daniel having extended its influence far beyond the prison walls.

The program’s racial politics complicate its attempt to work through the experience of incarceration. A central tension is created as the viewer is exposed to the broad social devastation caused by an extended period of solitary confinement, while at the same time the race-based implications of mass incarceration in the US are largely ignored. If we look closely, though, we can see subtle hints of this reckoning – an attempt to work through the way that slavery lives on through the Prison Industrial Complex.⁵⁴ *Rectify* uses a white protagonist’s dehumanising encounter with the carceral system to ask viewers to imagine what is an all too familiar way of being in the world for African Americans. Disproportionately represented in prisons, many black families in the US find their lives structured by a unique temporality, characterised predominantly by waiting – caught between the past and the future, the present only ever gesturing towards a potential better day that never comes. This liminal state of being is a foundational aspect of black struggle in America, dating to the time of slavery. Mass incarceration serves as the latest iteration of a system of control and punishment that has never fully recognized

---

⁵⁴ Drawing from the term “Military Industrial Complex”, the term Prison Industrial Complex, or PIC, was first used by anti-prison activists to draw attention to the complex and interconnected economic interests at play in the growth American prison populations, countering the assertions that increased levels of crime were to blame with the contention that incarceration is in fact a booming business in the US. The first use of the term is commonly attributed to social historian Mike Davis, in 1996, after which it became part of activist discourse and is notably discussed at length by Angela Davis in a multitude of works, including “Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex” (1998) and *Are Prisons Obsolete* (2003).
the personhood of a group of people whose long history in the US has been indelibly marked by subjugation, coercion, and violence (Alexander 2010). Michelle Alexander notes that:

More black men are imprisoned today than at any other moment in our nation’s history. More are disenfranchised today than in 1870, the year the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified prohibiting laws that explicitly deny the right to vote on the basis of race. Young black men today may be just as likely to suffer discrimination in employment, housing, public benefits and jury service as a black man in the Jim Crow era – discrimination that is perfectly legal, because it is based on one’s criminal record. This is the new normal, the new racial equilibrium. (2010: 180-81)

And yet when the issue is addressed at all, it is nearly always within the frame of fundamentally racist ideas about Black criminality. Little attention is paid in social discourse to the legacy of slavery and the responsibility US society still has to try and repay the debt it owes to the black community for the time, labour and lives that have been stolen from it since the birth of the nation.

Thus, while Rectify is about solitary confinement and its effects, it is also about race, precisely because of its absence from the primary narrative. This overt disavowal of the racial politics of mass incarceration can be reinterpreted if we read Rectify’s white protagonist, Daniel Holden, as a proxy for all of the incarcerated African American men and their disrupted families, hovering on the fringes of this representation. Daniel Holden, too, is caught between the past and the future – his present is an uncertain state

55 From the International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis (2005): “The term “disavowal” (Verleugnung), often translated as “denial,” denotes a mental act that consists in rejecting the reality of a perception on account of its potentially traumatic associations” (415). As Freud’s two canonical illustrations of this concept involve disavowal of a woman’s lack of a penis and disavowal of a father’s death, this concept is understood in relation to an absence, rather than a presence – symbolically representing a shortcoming in a parental figure that one is unwilling to confront. Disavowal is differentiated in this way from negation, which operates from a position of recognition, in order to choose to disregard an object. Disavowal instead “constitutes a fundamental obstacle to the very process of constructing psychic reality” (416). In terms of the application of the term to Rectify then, the absence of being which is denied relates to one of Barrack Obama’s campaign speeches (given in June 2008) about black communities and the lack of male role models. Black men haven’t simply gone “missing” from their families – they have been taken away by the state. Their disproportionate presence in the Prison Industrial Complex, directly correlates with their absence from their homes, families and communities.
as he must navigate an unfamiliar and at times hostile world after being suddenly released from prison after spending over two decades on Death Row. His release has come about because new DNA testing appears to have ruled him out as the perpetrator of one of the crimes of which he was convicted, but as he has not been officially exonerated, he must contend with the likelihood that he will be retried, while those around him quietly debate his relative guilt or innocence, viewing him in turn as a monster, a curiosity or a wounded animal. As he cannot remember what he did or didn’t do, he is unable to reconcile this question for himself, but the trauma he has experienced has conditioned him to assume the worst.

In order to cope with the mental and emotional toll of his time in prison, Daniel comes to rely on his friendship with Lee Kerwin Whitman, a young Black inmate. This relationship is revealed to viewers slowly in a series of flashbacks which fill in some of the opacity surrounding Daniel’s time in prison, while also signifying important memories that Daniel draws on once again to navigate his transition back from prison to life outside. The character of Kerwin offers a limited glimpse of the degree to which the Black prison experience is structurally different from the White one, in part, again, precisely because Kerwin himself is a limited focus of the narrative. The analysis in this chapter focuses on a collection of scenes from across Rectify’s four seasons, which depict Daniel’s time in prison as a form of “social death” (Patterson, 1985; Guenther, 2013; Králová, 2015) and concentrates specifically on this unusual friendship (constituted by conversations had through the grate between their cells) with Kerwin, whose experience of social death is significantly different from Daniel’s. While Daniel is granted the opportunity to recuperate some of what was lost as he comes to terms with the liminal state of being he was forced to inhabit while in prison and begins to forge a new life on the outside, Kerwin is executed, and his death precipitates Daniel’s mental breakdown while awaiting his own final sentence.

The final season offers an opportunity to look back on the journey Daniel has been on, as it poses the question of what it means to rectify, and to whom, or to what, such efforts ought to be applied. The repeated flashbacks depicting Daniel’s time in prison function as memory work – not always reliable, but necessary re-presentations of
what he has experienced, offered as a means of working through the trauma he has suffered. His final prison flashback in the series finale leaves us with an image of Daniel and Kerwin in a shared reverie – imagining them together on a carefree road trip. The program culminates in its journey of working through by offering a meditation on the after-life of social death, something that is instructive not just in the world of the story, but in guiding us towards more humane forms of justice in the world that remains when the story has ended.

**The carceral imaginary – prison on TV**

The images of prison which feature so consistently in so many films and television programs play a significant role in shaping public understanding of a carceral approach to crime and punishment. According to Angela Davis:

> Even those who do not consciously decide to watch a documentary or dramatic program on the topic of prisons inevitably consume prison images, whether they choose to or not, by the simple fact of watching movies or TV. It is virtually impossible to avoid consuming images of prison. (2003: 18)

The ubiquity of prison – how it looks, what it’s for, what it represents – is a fundamental backdrop of one of television’s most enduring genres – the procedural crime drama – and we imagine that we can speak knowledgeably about what prison must be like based on our engagement with these limited representations. There are also a handful of US programs which take place almost entirely in carceral settings – most notably HBO’s *Oz* (1997-2003), Fox’s *Prison Break* (2005-2009, 2017), and the Netflix Original series *Orange is the New Black* (2013–).

*Oz* was HBO’s first foray into television drama and many of the programs which followed owe it a debt for being the first to illustrate the moral complexity of the anti-hero. *Oz* depicts male inmates in a subsection of the fictional level 4 maximum-security Oswald State Correctional Facility (known colloquially as the Emerald City). This experimental unit of the prison aims to focus on rehabilitation through education and taking personal responsibility for one’s actions, but the very first episode illustrates the flaws in this approach when dealing with inmates who have been sentenced to life with no possibility of parole. The program is characterised by a stunning level of brutality,
even by today’s standards. The violence is stylised, and actual acts are often hidden from the camera rather than graphically displayed, but somehow this makes the effect all the more horrifying. Episode one, “The Routine,” ends with a death when one inmate is vengefully murdered by another – the narrative establishes a forlorn sense of futility for the victim, who seems like a central protagonist, until he isn’t anymore. Dino Ortolani epitomizes a particular kind of toxic masculinity that underpins many stereotypes of Italian-American men – macho, homophobic, and hot-tempered – and none of these characteristics are especially well-disposed to help him cope with his sentence. If one is to survive their carceral time by literally “doing time,” then Ortolani’s case is particularly challenged, because his time is indefinite. He isn’t able to do the time, but he can’t stop it either, so instead he behaves in increasingly self-destructive ways until someone else eventually ends his life for him.

**Prison Break** debuted two years after *Oz* ended, offering a slightly more escapist representation of prison, as viewers were asked to suspend their disbelief while the plot made good on the program’s title in a variety of ways and places over the course of five disparate seasons. The first season is arguably the most realistic representation of the challenges of prison life, but the program unfortunately deteriorates into something far more nonsensical in seasons following.

Currently broadcasting, *Orange is the New Black* is based on Piper Kerman’s best-selling memoir of the same name, which reflects on her brief time of incarceration in a women’s minimum-security prison (FC Danbury in real life, Litchfield Penitentiary in the fictionalized version, which also changes Piper’s surname to Chapman). The program deals more adeptly than any other television narrative of its kind in offering a nuanced depiction of both the reality of incarceration and the systemic issues which predispose poor women of color to disproportionately find themselves there (Artt and Schwan, 2016). Both seasons 4 and 6 offer storylines which illustrate the futility of the carceral reality for women who lack economic and/or racial privilege. Season 4 (released on Netflix in June 2016) culminates in an inmate protest against an economically sanctioned deterioration in conditions, which unfortunately results in an overzealous guard killing a woman he was trying to restrain by depriving her of air. The character, Poussey
Washington, didn’t need to gasp “I can’t breathe” until she couldn’t anymore, for the real-life parallels to be apparent. Season 6, released in the summer of 2018, depicts the aftermath of a three-day prison riot which occupied the entire narrative of the 5th season. The admitted “leader” of the riot, Tasha “Taystee” Jefferson, had been working to get justice for her dead friend, but is instead wrongfully convicted of 2nd degree murder of a prison guard. The image of Taystee in chains as she is transported from prison to the courthouse and back, invokes comparisons to slavery directly, as is a guard’s response to a colleague who argues that a prisoner is still a person: “No, she aint! And as soon as you start seeing these animals like that, you’re fucked!” (*Orange is the New Black* 6:12 “Double Trouble”). These attempts to produce empathy in the viewer are often in conflict, however, with flatter representations of “evil” inmates who deserve their fate. The message is primarily one of reform (that is, any problems with prison are really about a few bad apples), rather than abolition.

On the other hand, *Rectify*’s representation of prison serves primarily to illustrate the social and emotional circumstances and impact of solitary confinement and awaiting execution rather than release. Viewers are confronted with the complete absence of community and freedom that inmates in these circumstances experience. During the few moments each week that they are permitted to leave their cells, they are heavily shackled and able only to shuffle slowly to and from their destinations. The two narrative strategies used to provide information about what happened to Daniel Holden in prison are the flashback and the personal anecdote. Both frame Daniel’s experience through his own perspective, which is not always wholly reliable. The images of prison that are offered are stark and bare – they effectively communicate the boredom and the lack of stimulation that so many former inmates have reported experiencing, signifying a

---

56 Eric Garner was killed on July 17th, 2014, by an NYPD officer who placed and held him in a chokehold while trying to arrest him on the street, under suspicion of selling single cigarettes illegally. While the chokehold purportedly lasted less than 20 seconds, Garner continued to lie face-down on the sidewalk after the officer, Daniel Pantaleo, removed his arm. Garner repeated the phrase “I can’t breathe” eleven times until he lost consciousness and died an hour later in hospital. The phrase has been taken up in chants, and on signs by activists protesting police brutality; it is also associated with the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement. In 2017 journalist Matt Taibbi published a book titled with Garner’s last words, which examines those events closely in the context of modern-day policing.
departure in US television’s tendency to use carceral narratives to reinforce rather than challenge the status quo. By resisting the urge to make compassion synonymous with injustice, the program can be read as making a compelling case for prison abolition – and more particularly for the abolition of two of its more egregious producers of states of non-being – solitary confinement and death row.

**Prison societies and mass incarceration – from slavery to New Jim Crow**

The history of the prison system in major western countries like France, the UK and the US is perhaps unsurprisingly similar (Foucault, 1977; Sullivan, 1998; McLennon, 2006; Arrigo and Bullock, 2008; Matthews, 2009). While each account may acknowledge the degree to which incarceration has been used as a means of disciplinary control in their respective societies, most scholarship addressing the history of the prison in broad terms fails to contend fully with the specific and different ways that this control is exerted with regards to intersecting and overlapping subjectivities like race, gender and economic class. Take Foucault’s assertion that: “By operating at every level of the social body and by mingling ceaselessly the art of rectifying and the right to punish, the universality of the carceral lowers the level from which it becomes natural and acceptable to be punished” (303). Foucault might find it important to ask how people were made to both accept the power to punish, and to tolerate finding themselves on the receiving end of this power, but in the case of Black people in the Americas, this acceptance (or at least resignation) came long before mass incarceration.

Christina Sharpe’s (2016) work addresses what it means to be Black in the US, in the context of the “the precarities of the afterlives of slavery” (5). Sharpe asserts that:

Transatlantic slavery was and is the disaster. The disaster of Black subjection was and is planned; terror is disaster …and it is deeply atemporal. The history of capital is inextricable from the history of Atlantic chattel slavery. The disaster and the writing of disaster are never present, are always present. (2016: 5)

The 13th amendment to the constitution of the United States of America provided a tidy loophole post-slavery that reinstated the designation of that particular category of non-being, upon criminal conviction. Essentially both slavery and incarceration enact upon their subjects as forms of non-being but 13th amendment discursively joined Black
criminality to Black slavery, in that the Black experience of incarceration became a form of re-enslavement. The historical acceptance of slavery as something white people were once entitled to subject black people to has paved the way for the current acceptance of carceral forms of punishment. Both were/are a matter of law, but it is equally important to understand that they were/are not just tolerated, but accepted, for far too long. Just as white supremacists believed that Black people could be owned and enslaved, now the American Prison Industrial Complex allows the disproportionate incarceration of African Americans to be rationalized in the same way.

For African Americans the materiality of the literal existence of carceral institutions is not insignificant. Even in terms of the “mechanisms of normalization,” which Foucault identifies as a key underlying political issue of the prison, the more pressing problem for people of colour is that these mechanisms are not applied equally across the board. Black individuals and communities are regularly viewed as criminal and scrutinized for the smallest deviations or perceived threats of deviation. The spate of white people in the summer of 2018, calling the police on Black people for barbequing,  swimming, lawn-mowing, and water-selling, illustrates how immediate and ongoing a concern this is. It is impossible to talk about the current plight of Black people in American prisons without also examining the larger historical contexts in which mass incarceration has grown and continues to operate.

There is no shortage of scholarship addressing the links between the struggle for civil rights and Black criminality in American culture, and a consistently compelling

57 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fh9D_PuE7Oj
61 While very much a trend in the summer of 2018, white people calling the police on black people is not new, according to an NPR report from June 2018, which discusses the long American history of “white supervision of the black presence” https://www.npr.org/2018/07/13/628694725/white-people-calling-the-police-on-black-people-is-not-new
argument being made is that mass incarceration operates as a new form of slavery (Douglass, 1893; Kasirika and Muntu, 1971; Sellin, 1976; Patrick-Stamp, 1995; Ochinsky, 1997; Gilmore, 2000; Wacquant, 2002; Bosworth, 2004; Davis, 2005; Alexander, 2010; Muhammad, 2010; Childs, 2015; Coates, 2015). These New Jim Crow writers attribute the birth of mass incarceration to the backlash against 60s civil rights movements, just as Old Jim Crow was a response to reconstruction after the Civil War. Their argument is compelling as it charts a trajectory from the gains of anti-segregation advocacy to stronger punitive crime policies disproportionately targeting Black neighborhoods, the rise of private for-profit prisons, and the terrorizing policies of the War on Drugs. While some critics argue that the prison boom of the 1960s was preceded by a rapid rise in violent crime that ought to preclude assumption of race-based motives, Michelle Alexander (2012) and others have suggested there is cause for disputing the accuracy of these race-baiting crime statistics, which were successfully employed to get Nixon elected. Critics of the New Jim Crow scholars, like James Forman Jr. (2012), overlook a multitude of first-hand accounts of, and ruminations on, carceral experiences which were published while Old Jim Crow laws were still in effect, and their arguments are often further limited by assertions that African Americans who have acquired social and economic status are not subjected to the racist disposition of the state in the same ways that their poorer fellows are. The Black Lives Matter movement, and the myriad events which catalysed it, would seem to suggest otherwise.

Loïc Wacquant (2002), building on the work of classical historian Moses Finley, who distinguished between “societies with slaves” and “genuine slave societies,” asserts that “lower-class African-Americans now dwell, not in a society with prisons as their white compatriots do, but in the first genuine prison society in history” (60). African Americans comprise less than 15% of the US population, but they are disproportionately incarcerated as they make up 33% of total adult prisoners.62 Within carceral institutions, more extreme forms of punishment also reflect a strong racial bias against Black inmates:

---

62 This is according to a 2016 Pew Research Center report. [http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/12/shrinking-gap-between-number-of-blacks-and-whites-in-prison/]
34.5% of people executed on Death Row since 1976 have been Black.63 Black male prisoners are also disproportionately placed in solitary confinement, representing 45% of the total prison population.64 In numerous cases there is evidence that solitary confinement is also used politically, to punish activist leaders attempting to organize for better conditions, suggesting that even the desire to experience incarceration more humanely is a punishable offence. The implications of further isolating an individual already trapped and segregated from society are addressed more fully in the next section.

**Solitary confinement, social death and prison temporality**

Prisoners spend too much time in solitary confinement in the United States. This is the conclusion of several studies conducted in the last decade which assert that extended bouts of solitary confinement are tantamount to severe psychological abuse, verging on torture (Halvorsen, 2018; Kaba et al, 2014; Morris, 2015; Ravindran, 2014; Shalev, 2008). There are two elements to the nature of this abuse and they are apparent in the terminology – solitary and confinement. The individual is both alone and physically restricted. If only one of these two things were to apply – to be restricted but in a group, or to be alone but free to wander – the psyche might find ways to cope and compensate for the lack, but this combination of deprivations – of both freedom and community – is what can ultimately cause a person to become completely undone.

The question of just where one loses oneself under these circumstances – at just what point this begins to happen – is a complex one. Television drama seldom has to negotiate these boundaries of personhood, as good TV storytelling requires both physical presence and emotional conflict. Narratives of solitude generally don’t play well on screen. The rigid parameters of institutional systems which deal with things like justice, crime and health in US society provide plenty of fodder for conflict-driven story-telling, and melodramatic representations of these systems are television genre staples. This is what makes *Rectify* particularly compelling, as it’s a story about a journey back from non-being (if such a journey is possible), when the worst things have already happened –


when another story has already been told, but off screen.

It’s important to be familiar with the material conditions of solitary confinement, in order to better understand how easily it facilitates a state of non-being. Early in 2016, The Guardian featured an investigative news report about solitary confinement in US prisons, which included “6x9” – an online interactive component where readers could choose to subject themselves to a small fragment of what the experience might be like through a virtual reality immersion experience. Many readers found this experience too difficult to submit to for the entirety of the time required, making it a particularly useful tool for understanding the threat to the self that even the smallest loss of control can activate. The press kit information about the project highlights the mental harm that solitary confinement inflicts, referring to both physiological and psychological stress – the former induced by a lack of stimuli and the latter by a lack of human interaction. It can be easy to forget that the brain needs exercise just like the rest of the body, but it suffers greatly when thrust into disuse. Jean Casella and James Ridgeway (2016) describe the conditions of solitary confinement in more detail, adding that it is seldom referred to institutionally using this term, as “segregation” is preferred:

Solitary confinement is the practice of isolating people in closed cells for twenty-two to twenty-four hours a day, virtually free of human contact, for periods of time ranging from days to decades. Solitary confinement cells generally measure from six by nine to eight by ten feet. Some have bars, but more often they have solid metal doors. Many do not have windows. Meals generally come through slots in these doors, as do any

65 The piece asserts that an estimated 80,000 American prison inmates are currently in solitary confinement. One of the FAQs states that: “You should be aware before watching that 6x9 contains disturbing material that may provoke an emotional reaction. You should take this and your comfort level into consideration before you choose to continue.”

https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2016/apr/27/6x9-a-virtual-experience-of-solitary-confinement

66 As I attempted to submit to this experiment myself (best done using a cellphone, ear phones and Google Cardboard, an inexpensive VR viewing simulator), I became immediately anxious at my inability to determine how long the experience was meant to last. This anxiety quickly became a mild form of panic, and I had to focus my mental efforts to overcome it and persist, but even then, it was the awareness that I could quantify the reasonably likely length of my stay that aided in calming me. I can only imagine what it must be like to be subjected to confinement of an indefinite length – where for the foreseeable future, all one has to look forward to is the empty void of uninterrupted solitude.
communications with prison staff. There may be showers within the cells, or inhabitants may be taken, in shackles, to shower two or three times a week. They may also be escorted to a fenced or walled yard for an hour of exercise, usually only on weekdays, or they may be released into an area adjoining their cells through a remote-controlled door. Most, although not all, will be permitted to have books as well as legal papers, and to send and receive letters. Some may be allowed visits, usually through a Plexiglas barrier. A few may have radio or television. (7)

It’s vital to note here that solitary confinement is not a black box of sensory deprivation and it doesn’t need to be; the devastating effects of confinement are not mitigated by the small comforts of reading material and limited physical exercise. The history and impacts of solitary confinement within the carceral system have been well-documented (Grassian, 1983; Smith, 2006; Arrigo and Bullock, 2008; Ridgeway, 2009). The effects of solitary confinement are, as you might expect, correlated in severity with the length of time an individual is subjected to it. The use of confinement in prisons was understood to be punitive when it was first introduced and for a time the practice was discontinued. Its resurgence corresponded with the opening of maximum security carceral institutions in the 1960s, and many of the inmates subjected to it at this time were targeted as dissidents with a powerful charisma to rally their fellow inmates in protest against inhumane treatment, which thus threatened the institution’s ability to completely control and terrorise its subjects.

Casella and Ridgway’s description of solitary confinement (above) is reinforced by the representation of extended carceral confinement depicted on Rectify, offering legitimacy to this fictional account which deepens its capacity to be psychosocially impactful. In Rectify, Daniel Holden spends nearly twenty years on death row before we meet him, and his address to the press in the opening minutes of the first episode, after his release, expresses the tremendous difficulty one would have in trying to adjust to no longer being condemned to death:

I had convinced myself that kind of optimism served no useful purpose in the world where I existed. Obviously, this radical belief system was flawed and was, ironically, a kind of fantasy itself. I will seriously need to reconsider my world view. (Rectify 1:1 “Always There”)
It is sobering to imagine an existence where optimism serves no useful purpose. It is more sobering still to acknowledge that there is much about the representation that is not imaginary at all. This treatment of prisoners is socially, politically and legally sanctioned in the US; myriad accounts indicate that it is happening right now. Daniel’s experience highlights the degree to which hope is painful and even cruel when one is subject to the isolation and monotony of solitary confinement, which could only be made worse by contemplating one’s fate. This experience constitutes both a literal and symbolic zone of non-being, that, once internalised, is hard to come back from, even if incarceration ends.

Incarceration facilitates a form of non-being best characterised as “social death”. This term has a long history of application (Králová, 2015), from health sciences, where it has been used to characterise an individual so physically incapacitated as to be “as good as dead”, to genocide studies, where it describes the process of dehumanisation – a strategic form of psychological warfare that an oppressor engages in, to make the ultimate removal of his objects of derision morally inconsequential to him. Orlando Patterson (1985) uses the term to characterise slavery, in a comparative study of enslaved peoples across cultures. Annika Jonsson (2015) writes about post-mortem social death, having conducted interviews of bereaved people of various ages to determine their relationality to their deceased loved ones – something she refers to as “continuing bonds,” drawing on the 1996 work of Klass et al. She differentiates between stages of social life/death that the deceased may end up in (ranging from full social existence, to a liminal absent-presence, to marginal partial post-mortem social death, and finally to total social death). In each case, however, the characterization of post-mortem social life or death is entirely embedded in the relationality that the living person maintains with the deceased in terms of their ability to both grieve and commemorate their loved one. Institutional barriers to relationships, like incarceration, would have a significant impact on these continuing bonds, even before death. Lisa Guenther (2013) contends that social

---

67 Patterson differentiates between intrusive and extrusive conceptions of social death, which apply in accordance with the manner in which a slave was recruited (1985: 39). Slaves who were incorporated externally represented hostile alien cultures and their social death was marked by both their separation from their ancestors and their new positions as internalised outsiders (39-41). Locally recruited slaves were insiders who had been expelled from their communities for a failure to meet certain minimal forms of behavior and their social death was predicated on a loss of status (41-42).
death necessarily inhibits social relationships, since:

To be socially dead is to be deprived of the network of social relations, particularly kinship relations, that would otherwise support, protect, and give meaning to one’s precarious life as an individual. It is to be violently and permanently separated from one’s kin, blocked from forming a meaningful relationship, not only to others in the present but also to the heritage of the past and the legacy of the future beyond one’s own finite, individuated being. (xxi)

In *Rectify’s* second season, we see Daniel Holden enter a state of melancholy after his friend Kerwin’s death, where he refuses to see his family members when they come to visit. Since he is meant to die in prison, he sees no point in continuing to nurture relationships that will only be more painful to end. In this respect the social death that he experiences in solitary confinement spreads to his loved ones, who are forced to behave as though he is already dead, until he is ready to have it otherwise.

As it applies to solitary confinement (and incarceration more generally), the idea of social death is perhaps most richly informed by the long tradition of writing about African American struggle. Slavery, Jim Crow legislation, the War on Drugs, and now mass incarceration are all systemic practices which have deliberately targeted and/or disproportionately impacted black individuals, families and communities. Martin Luther King Jr., in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963) notes that the ability to endure the ordeals of imprisonment was a deliberate strategic consideration of civil rights activists as they determined their best course of action in undertaking nonviolent protest. Imprisonment was anticipated and conceded as both necessary and inevitable, as this more literal reprisal of slavery would hopefully serve to make the injustice of Jim Crow laws more visible. The willingness to endure jail is further explained by the sense of futility and frustration that otherwise characterised Black existence in the 60s, when the only other option available in pursuit of a more equitable lived reality was to wait:

For years now, I have heard the word “wait.” It rings in the ears of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never." It has been a tranquillizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday
that "justice too long delayed is justice denied." (King Jr., 1963)

Unfortunately, for too many African Americans, both in and out of prison, this waiting continues, more than fifty years after Dr. King’s rousing speeches. Current carceral rates and times may exceed a broader social capacity to fully comprehend the effects of long term incarceration on the psyche, but the Black community has always known these effects all too well. Thomas Meisenhelder (1985), writing about time in prison, notes that “all human activity, as seen phenomenologically, is then temporally structured through and as a casting of oneself toward the future” (42). An inability to actively perceive a future, then, has a serious deleterious effect on the psyche, both individually and collectively. The Black community lives with an ever-present sense of bated breath; even its members who aren’t actively experiencing forms of PTSD are nonetheless at risk of falling victim (whether by law enforcement agent or fellow citizen) to an aggressive first strike against the pervasive myth of black criminality. Waiting itself becomes a form of prison, as control is ceded to state actors and black families perform damage control. Even economically advantaged parents cannot afford not to have “the talk”68 with their young black sons, as these “facts of life” can become a matter of life and death in an encounter with police.

Life in prison is characterised by waiting, and this state of inaction is invariably predisposed to create a zone of non-being. One does not use time in prison, so much as bear it. As George Jackson (1971) put it: “just to exist at all in a cage calls for some heavy psychic readjustment” (18). The waiting comes with an awareness that while time might seem to stand still inside the prison, it is very much moving forward on the outside. Relationships become fraught, as ironically having someone on the outside to care about may only make a lengthy sentence harder to cope with. As prison life is structured by rigid routines, it lacks spontaneity, and the ubiquity of both physical and social constraint

68 There has been a move in recent years to acknowledge more widely that while White parents contend (however uncomfortably) with the need for their adolescent children to have basic information about their changing bodies and developing sexual subjectivities, Black families must have a different kind of “talk” with their children, which involves how to keep oneself safe in an inevitable encounter with law enforcement. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/02/learning/teaching-with-a-conversation-with-my-black-son.html
often results in a passive or fatalistic outlook: “Prisoners are effects rather than causes; that is, they perceive themselves as being nearly wholly determined by the institution, its staff and other, perhaps more powerful, inmates” (Meisenhelder, 1985: 43). Waiting is also tremendously boring, as Victor Serge (1970) notes: “the problem of time is everything. Nothing distinguishes one hour from the next: the minutes and hours fall slowly, tortuously” (30). Thus, according to Meisenhelder, time is generally experienced as a burden rather than a resource (1985: 45).

Meisenhelder’s interviews with prisoners do however reveal a consistently useful and important future-creating thought process, in the form of the reverie. In order to manage the futurelessness of prison reality, inmates compensate by retreating into fantasy and daydreams, building symbolic temporary solutions to objectively unfulfilled needs; “reveries [also] substitute the attractions and speed of the dream for the boredom of prison” (52). Prisoners use reveries to imagine other possibilities, to cultivate and maintain a sense of hope when life might otherwise be unbearable. Daniel Holden’s use of the reverie is an ongoing feature through Rectify. As he is preparing to be released from prison in the opening moments of the program, we are only able to experience his time there through his memories of it, and he shifts back and forth between the past and the present, with no clear sense of linearity. Until we meet Kerwin’s family in the 2nd season of the program, a compelling argument might be made that Kerwin isn’t real – that he’s simply a creative figment of Daniel’s imagination, dreamt into existence from a desire to find moments of intimate community, even within such a terrible place. Shana Redmond (2014) comments on this power of creativity as it relates to prison music:

> Alternative conceptions and demonstrations of kinship, art, and happiness are fundamental elements within the political repertoires of incarcerated peoples and through these revisions and reversions they develop their prison time against the enclosures of the state. This temporality is their citizenship, one grounded by the alchemy of survival and creation. (234)

The restriction and paucity of the prison environment make these kinds of rebellions against an infrastructure of scarcity very difficult, however, as the temporality of the prison suggests “an institution that … grew from the earth fully formed and is now installed as a permanent landscape and marker of a depraved minority” (Redmond, 2014: ...
Daniel’s memories of the day of Kerwin’s execution could then be read as the symbolic death of Daniel’s hope – of his ability to sustain a belief in future possibility beyond despair. The sense of hopelessness that individual prisoners may feel as they struggle with/against prison temporality is magnified to families and entire communities in the age of mass incarceration, again disproportionately affecting poor people of colour, who are also subject to the strictures that limit their access to their loved ones.

This description of prison temporality has a familiar resonance, recalling MLK’s discussion of the imperative to “wait” as a broken promise consistently denying Black people their rightful place in society. In addition to the way poor people of colour are disproportionately imprisoned for non-violent offences, prison has also become an overt means of coercing dissident Black activists to “wait” for justice, in some cases for more than forty years in solitary confinement. Meisenhelder reminds us that “as a formal organisation, the prison is built on representations of the inmates’ pasts,” thus prisoners remain frozen in time as “the past is a world of facticity where one exists as an object completely determined by what has been, rather than as a subject open to the future” (47). Meisenhelder ultimately describes the social practice of imprisonment as “institutionalised bad faith”:

Prison is a material symbol of the more permanent existential imprisonment of the convicted person within the stigmatised category of being a criminal. Perhaps this second form of containment can help to explain our high rates of recidivism. Successfully to remain outside prison requires that the ex-convict somehow achieve a sense of belonging within the temporal world of everyday life with its open future. Beyond simply learning to live practically in this new world, he must be able to deal successfully with the ambiguity of the in-and-for-itself ambivalence that is inherent in being an ex-convict. (1985: 54)

Given that many Black people already live with an ambivalence inherent in being the descendants of ancestors brought to America in chains, it’s fair to suggest that mass incarceration represents a kind of doubling down on the relationality of first contact between White and Black America. The temporality that characterises prison life circulates in and around poor Black communities until its point of origin becomes illegible. *Rectify* offers an opportunity for viewers to encounter and be moved by the
deeply damaging psychosocial impacts of incarceration, but it stops short of fully engaging with the defining implications of the carceral experience for Black personhood in the US.

“Is there anyone left to hate?” – Navigating hope and forgiveness on Rectify

*Rectify* is about the effects of imprisonment, among other things, but most of the explicitly institutional aspects of incarceration are avoided in order to prioritize the representation of solitary confinement. Daniel’s experiences in prison are only represented as flashback sequences, stylistically signifying memories of trauma and their implications. In these sequences the whiteness of the walls, and of the prisoners’ clothes, almost make this experience appear like a dream – a fantasy of both solitary meditation and faceless intimacy with voices through the grates between the cells, removed momentarily from the deadly intentions of a punitive state. According to Emily Nussbaum, reviewing the program for *The New Yorker*, “it’s a show about the way that time gets distorted; it’s one that distorts time, too. As with many structurally daring series, it’s joyful, because its insides match its outsides” (2016). This distortion of time produced by solitary confinement is central to the way non-being is worked through in this program. The representation of temporality facilitates character development and complexity in a way that would not typically be possible for a more generic television series of this length (30 episodes).

The narrative events of the program are laid out slowly. The six episodes of the first season take place over seven days, but the emotional depth of what is conveyed enables the viewer to forget how little time has actually passed in the world of the story. The day after he returns home Daniel notes that he “can’t quite get a handle on the concept of time yet. There’ve been moments here today, where I feel like I’ve only been gone a few weeks… and I’m still in high school. But mostly it seems like I was always there” (*Rectify* 1:1 “Always There”). His prison experience pulled him out of the real world when he was particularly young and impressionable, and one of the effects of prolonged solitary confinement is the inability to sense and mark time. Upon release Daniel can only oscillate between these two narratives – the first being that prison has
somehow happened in a temporal zone outside of his normal life, in which case he ought to be able to resume his life from where he left off, and the second being that there was never a time when he wasn’t in prison, in which case he has no frame of reference from which to navigate his new social/culture/technological reality, having completely missed the significant changes of the last twenty years.

While race and gender obviously influence one’s ability to avoid prison (these factors are so interwoven into the process as to impact even who is first deemed suspect in police investigations), *Rectify* sidesteps this key focus of anti-prison activism by giving us a protagonist who is male, white, handsome, intelligent and from a family of relative means. This is not to say that he is not othered. Emily Nussbaum explains that:

In isolated Paulie, Georgia, he’s a distinctly odd figure, a socially awkward autodidact who meditated and read obsessively in his cell. He speaks in an off-kilter, whispery style, making even sympathetic neighbors uncomfortable. His mannered intellectualism marks him as an outsider, queer in several senses, as much as any suspicions of criminal guilt do. (2016)

Yet, his subjectivity makes him the kind of person who is most likely to be economically and socially predisposed to avoid this level of punishment, or even the legal assignation of culpability, for any crimes he might commit. And the crimes for which he has been convicted and sentenced to death – rape and murder – are far from insignificant. DNA evidence appears to absolve him of the rape, but the murder is an unsettled question, and the truth of his guilt or innocence remains out of his reach because of the gaps in his memory from the night in question. What is particularly striking about the program is the way it manages to transform a privileged white man, convicted of a horrible crime, into a victim. The subjectivity of the central protagonist highlights the program’s subversive potential, but conversely this can also be read as an insidious representation in the era of Trump. The focus on the effects of long-term incarceration, particularly in circumstances of extended solitary confinement is offered as compelling here precisely because the waters aren’t muddied with arguments that tend to look to race, gender, and poverty as mitigating factors against culpability. This is not a story about whether or not Daniel has done what he has been accused of, although we do eventually get something of a
resolution to that question. This is a story about what happens to a human being when almost everything that makes them human in any meaningful sense is taken away. That we can be offered an individual, who on paper would seem to be the least deserving of our sympathy, and yet still be moved by his plight, is a telling indication of both how terrible prison can be and how well the program is able to communicate this to viewers.

That we are not offered the kind of individual who is disproportionately most likely to be subjected to the ongoing horrors of mass incarceration in America is also telling though, in a different way. We might consider that Rectify is trying to work through the experience of mass incarceration as a fundamentally Black one, but it is unable to do so with a Black central protagonist. The ambivalence at play in its choice of a white protagonist leaves it open to an interpretation that suggests one’s experience of the criminal justice system is racially neutral, dangerously threatening to erase the reality of systemic inequality and relegating it to a problem of the past that ended with the civil rights movement. Yet the disproportionate mass incarceration of Black people in the US and their consistent association with criminality in so many US television crime dramas cannot be ignored.

In the context of the greater television landscape and its representation of the US criminal justice system and those caught up in it, Rectify doesn’t get to take a hard pass on race. It can thus be read as gesturing towards a thing it cannot say outright; Daniel Holden can be both protagonist and placeholder, when maybe the more significant character is Lee Kerwin Whitman. Kerwin is introduced as a framing device – the person who keeps Daniel sane for a good portion of his time in prison, and whose eventual execution catalyzes a psychological breakdown. The fact that Kerwin is ultimately executed, while Daniel is released, cannot be separated from their respective racial identities. Black criminality inheres in the US justice system. Kerwin’s death makes Daniel’s suffering legible to white viewers. His death is not experienced on screen by his family – his mother and brother who we later meet – but only by a fellow inmate. His death breaks Daniel, but it also strangely becomes a kind of negation of his life. His existence is shown to matter primarily because of what it offers Daniel in terms of comfort and stability. A central tension in the program is its capacity to expose the viewer
in stark terms to the broad social devastation an encounter with the carceral system engenders, while at the same time largely ignoring the racial implications of mass incarceration in the United States of America. If we look closely though, we can see subtle hints of this reckoning – an attempt to work through the way that slavery lives on through the Prison Industrial Complex.

The approach to working through here involves the seeding of Kerwin’s appearances throughout the series – we never meet Kerwin in the present, only through flashbacks, because by the time we meet Daniel, Kerwin is already dead. So, this is a kind of memory work, employing repetition, duration, and immersion. We also see a change in the kinds of flashbacks over the seasons: Season 1 introduces Kerwin and ends with Daniel’s memory of the day he was executed; Season 2 melds dreams of Kerwin with memories of Daniel’s emotional breakdown in response to his loss; Season 3 combines memories of almost being executed with a dream-like commentary on them and this is also where we see Daniel’s memory of learning that he will be released. As Daniel finally begins to talk about his experiences in season 4, they become internalised and the flashbacks disappear until one last reverie with Kerwin occurs in the series finale.

I. “I didn’t think it would end this way.”

The emotional work that is required to reconcile oneself to a death sentence – the half-life that this would entail – is clearly a form of social death on two fronts, first as decreed by the state, and second as internalised by the inmate. Kerwin’s arrival on death row, and the friendship he and Daniel develop as they converse through the grates in the wall between their cells, prevents Daniel from having to fully experience his fear and his loneliness, and thus the full extent of his social death is delayed, which only makes it worse when the inevitable happens. Kerwin admits his guilt for the crime that he has been convicted of – he was responsible for a drive-by shooting where a 3-year-old girl was killed (although he didn’t see her in the back of the car). He is ambivalent about appealing his conviction (and his death row sentence) because he “can’t do time, the way that [Daniel does] time, by not doing time” (Rectify 1:1 “Always Here”). And yet he still wants to live. He and Daniel make jokes about this desire, even in the face of the horrors of confinement: “I still wanna live. E’ry day. What’s that about?” “Vitamin A
The flashbacks of prison that Daniel experiences in the first 6-episode season of the program all involve Kerwin – the first is of the day he arrives on the row, and the final one depicts the last time Daniel sees him before he is taken away to be executed. Fifteen minutes into the program’s first episode, we see Kerwin as he is brought on the row for the first time – he is young, and he looks very scared, on the verge of an emotional outburst, goaded by the guards and a more aggressive cellmate. But then he hears the calming repetition of Daniel’s meditative “ohm” through the grate and you see his breathing begin to slow, and his anxiety begin to lessen. Daniel offers something valuable to Kerwin in this first interaction, which immediately makes the latter’s sentence bearable. But this is also Daniel’s memory, and perhaps it reflects something about the way he wants to see himself in this relationship – he advises Kerwin on what books to read and through his meditation practice he provides an example of how to do time “by not doing time.” As the relationship grows, it becomes increasingly clear that Kerwin exists, both literally and symbolically, as a place for Daniel to retreat to when he is struggling to cope with reality. Arguably, this could be viewed as a re-presentation of a kind of master/slave relationality. Even within the flatter power structures of mutual incarceration on death row, the black character serves the social and emotional needs of the white one. But this relationality is subverted by the revelation of the degree of dependency that Daniel has on Kerwin. As the first season eases into the second, there is no gap in the presented aerial image of Daniel in his cell, curled into a fetal pose, Kerwin’s empty cell beside his. The first season concludes with the emptying out of Kerwin’s effects and mopping of the floor, in preparation for a new inmate. The second season begins here, but then the narrative shifts into a kind of fantasy/reverie, signaling that even in death, Kerwin is still useful to Daniel (see III. “Because I know you”).
While it is clear in the first three seasons that Daniel is experiencing feelings of loneliness and alienation, which he struggles to navigate, it’s not until the 4th season that...
he is able to articulate his own understanding of the zone of non-being he finds himself in, when he tells his counsellor Avery that he didn’t think it would end this way, that he didn’t expect to get out. The ending he had anticipated was execution. There is a sense that the ending he references here is not the just the end of his incarceration; it is the end of a way of being in the world, that however dysfunctional, was all he knew for more years than he had been alive when he was first subjected to it. The social death he has experienced through having to accept the torturously prolonged inevitability of his material death has had a profound impact on his ability to live in the present, or indulge in hopeful dreams of the future.

II. “He didn’t do nothin’.”

The social death engendered by mass incarceration doesn’t just impact the imprisoned; it also affects their family, friends and community. Daniel’s family has struggled in his absence, especially as they continued to live in the small Georgia town where the crime was committed, enduring the shame and anger of a community set against their loved one. While Daniel is incarcerated his father dies and his mother remarries; he has both a half-brother, Jared, and step-brother, Teddy, to meet for the first time when he is released. While Daniel’s younger sister Amantha is a fierce advocate who never gives up in her quest to keep him alive and eventually be freed, his mother Janet is unable to sustain this same degree of certainty and passion. She does not travel to the prison to see him the 2nd time he is about to be executed (or any of the three additional times after that). When the call comes that he is again saved by a last-minute legal intervention, she seems conflicted in her relief. After Kerwin’s execution Daniel begins refusing to see his visitors, thinking of himself as a “ghost” that they are better off without, but he relents eventually upon receiving a letter from his sister, writing to him as just her brother, not her brother on death row, and letting him know that she loves him, always and forever, even if he never speaks to her again (Rectify 2:9 “Until You’re Blue”). When he learns that his conviction is going to be vacated and he will be released, he remarks to his lawyer that it will be very hard for his mother, as she had to let him go in order to survive and now she will have to “conjure [him] back up again” (Rectify 3:3 “Sown With Salt”).
Kerwin’s case doesn’t just involve his own experience of the social death that mass incarceration subjects all inmates to some degree of, particularly when it is compounded by solitary confinement and a death sentence. His family also experiences a posthumous form of this social death on his behalf, as they must bear the emotional toll of his crime and its consequences. His execution sanctions both a literal and symbolic erasure of his life, including even his time before prison. Daniel promises Kerwin that he will visit the latter’s family if he ever gets out, and in the 2nd season, he makes good on that promise, culminating in an uncomfortable moment that forms one of the program’s few overt acknowledgements of the racialized structure of the justice system. And yet even in this rare moment of acknowledgement, the door is suddenly shut on this line of working through. Kerwin’s brother Stefan closes the door, both literally and symbolically: the family is left alone with their grief, while Daniel stands alone on the porch, unsure how to apologize for being alive when his presence can only intensify their loss.

Kerwin’s mother is limited in her ability to openly grieve for her son because he was killed by the state. She has had to internalise her son’s criminality, not having any recourse but to accept that he was necessarily punished for his crimes. When Daniel arrives at the Whitman home, Kerwin’s brother Stefan calls out to his mother that it’s “Kerwin’s friend Daniel. The white man – the one who got out.” They exchange pleasantries and Mrs. Whitman notes that “Kerwin grew up so much in there – in that awful place. Became a man – a decent man too.” Daniel agrees, and then she becomes wistful, tearfully expressing her envy of Daniel’s mama, who can hug her son whenever she wants. Stefan has to interject, sensing that she is making Daniel uncomfortable: “Mama, Daniel’s not like Kerwin, okay? He didn’t do nothin’.” She nods slowly, and repeats her reply twice: “no, I guess he didn’t…” (Rectify 2:4 “Donald the Normal”). She is unable to argue – her son’s death itself becomes proof of its justification, as the loss would be too devastating to contemplate otherwise.

The lingering question of what Daniel may or may not have done is of course complicated by his whiteness. Stefan had said earlier that he never knew anyone who ever got off death row – “you know – alive.” Everyone looks sad and Daniel apologises,
making to leave to catch his bus. Mrs. Whitman urges him not to rush off – as painful as this encounter must be for her, this man is one of the last people to have seen her son alive and to have shared last moments with him. He thanks her for her son: “He was a good person. And he was my friend. I miss him every day.” It’s hard to tell if this makes her feel better or worse – she remains on the sofa, and the camera lingers on her for a moment, as Stefan sees Daniel out and thanks him for coming by. Daniel admits that he wasn’t sure he should, and Stefan tellingly doesn’t correct him, but he does shake his hand and wish him good luck. Daniel’s intentions were to fulfil Kerwin’s vicarious desire to visit his family one more time, but the painful reality of his freedom in the face of Kerwin’s death turns this visit into yet another reminder of what the Whitmans have lost.

III. “Because I know you.”

Kerwin’s faith in Daniel as the impetus for him to keep going – first in prison, then when in a coma after being attacked, and again as he comes to terms with “leaning the other way for awhile” (Rectify 4:1 “A House Divided) with regards to choosing to believe in his own innocence rather than guilt – is a consistent theme throughout the series. The relationship between these two men is deeply intimate – they “know” each other in a way that transcends the things each has been accused and convicted of. Each is able to exit and/or delay entry into the zone of non-being because of the emotional support and social presence of the other (Kerwin articulates his support for Daniel more than his dependency on him).

Belief in goodness is presented as a powerful catalyst for material change, illustrated as Daniel struggles with adjusting to being back in the world after his release. This becomes particularly significant at the start of the 2nd season when Daniel’s family waits anxiously for him to awaken from his medically induced coma (he was viciously attacked by a gang of men at the end of the 1st season, led by the brother of the teenage girl he was convicted of raping and killing). He encounters Kerwin again here in the dream world, providing an opportunity for him to explore the limitations of his freedom and his emotional fragility. Returning to the aerial image of two cells, side-by-side, one in which Daniel has curled up in bed facing the wall, to mourn the death of his friend and
try to resist the unbearable loneliness he can no longer withstand – this is how season one ended. At the start of season two (Rectify 2:1 “Running With the Bull”), there is a beat of silence and then Kerwin himself re-enters the cell, but not in chains – this is our cue that this is a dream rather than a memory. Kerwin comments on how they must have changed their minds, and how they didn’t wait long to get rid of his stuff. They didn’t even lock his door. When Daniel asks how he got back there, he replies that he just came back: “Where else was I supposed to go?” He implores Daniel that he had better wake up: “You look at life like it’s a burden. Life is a gift man.” We then see Daniel in hospital, his face bearing the impact of a violent beating, struggling to move and extricate himself from lines and tubes as he has somehow woken from his induced coma. The doctors quickly work to sedate him, and the narrative continues to shift between Daniel’s dreams/memories and his family keeping vigil at his bedside.

In another longer reverie, he and Kerwin are in their prison uniforms, wandering around a field near his home, somewhere that he wanted Kerwin to see, and so here they are. Kerwin realises that it isn’t real, and Daniel confirms it – filling his friend in on what has happened. Kerwin is overjoyed that he got out and commiserates about his medical situation. Daniel tells Kerwin that he is his best friend – his only friend – and that he doesn’t want to let him down, but he has a confession: “I don’t think I can do this. Everything out here. It’s just so… complicated. There’s just so much pain and hate. And I think I may just be – just too broken you know? Just too broken.” Kerwin’s reply is comforting balm for Daniel’s shame-filled sorrow:

One of the things that kept me going on the row, maybe the thing – was the hope that you’d get out some day Dan. But, not just me, you know. Me living through you. And I never felt envious of you, not one time – I was just grateful to have – something hopeful. Even if it was for the life of another person – you know, maybe, especially because of that. And when I realized that – when I became conscious of that hope inside that seven by nine hellhole – I just thanked God for it. Every day Daniel. Every day. Because it gave me something to live for, you feel me?

But now that’s over with. That time has passed. And I’m not of this world now. So, this is your world. And, uh, you lying in a coma, and you can’t deal with it anymore, and you just too tired, and you – you ready to see what’s on the other side? Well, it’s just not my place to tell you what to do

This version of Kerwin, conjured by Daniel’s comatose mind, offers him an unconditional love that he is not yet able to accept. But Kerwin also reminds Daniel that there might be something in the beauty of the place they are sharing together, and the fact that Daniel can come there whenever he wants. “All I’m sayin’…” he repeats as he walks off into the woods – signaling the end of the dreamtime and disappearing from narrative of the program until we see him again in one final flashback in the series finale. This suggestion that there is/can be beauty amidst suffering is tied to the notion that as long as you have some form of choice, then you’re still free. The conflation of free will (however limited in practice) and freedom can be a powerful inspiration offered to help someone navigate their way through a zone of non-being characterised by some form of enslavement. But it can also operate more insidiously as a way of palliating our anxieties about injustice and suffering, suggesting that if the enslaved are already free in their minds, there is no reason to trouble ourselves with freeing them in body.

On the day that Kerwin is taken away to be executed (Rectify 1:6 “Jacob’s Ladder”), he asks the guards to stop outside of Daniel’s cell as he calls out to him. At first Daniel won’t come to the window, and the guards become impatient, but Kerwin quietly implores them that he needs to say something to his friend. When an anguished Daniel finally appears, Kerwin’s only words are an offering of vindication, on this darkest day of his own life. He tells Daniel that he knows he didn’t do it. When Daniel asks how he knows, he replies “because I know you,” three times, voice breaking on the last. And then he is led away to his death. It is difficult to decide if Kerwin is a tragic figure or a hopeful one, as so much of his life, at least as it is presented to us, seems to be about what he offers to Daniel. In the world of the story, there were obviously conversations which we never see/hear, and it isn’t surprising that in his grief and confusion, Daniel is only able to focus on the memories and dreams of his friend that best help him.
Figure 12: "How do you know that this is real, and what you dream ain't?"

Figure 13: "Because who would dream up something like this?"

The final flashback of the series offers a moment of shared equanimity between friends, imagining themselves driving around New York City, unencumbered by the boundaries of time and space. This playful reverie has a wistful quality, as a memory Daniel is treasuring, from the worst period of his life, but also in some ways, the best. He had a friend, who for a time meant everything to him. He survived the ordeal that they both shared because of the strength of their relationship and the ongoing power of his friend’s belief in him, while his friend became yet another victim of an inhumane and morally
corrupt system, structured in racial injustice since its inception. His survival is difficult for him to bear, partially, because in a sense it comes at the cost of Kerwin’s.

**Life after (social) death**

If Daniel has experienced social death in prison, then he is navigating a kind of social after-life once he has been released. Unlike a more typical conception of an after-life though, where we would expect to share social space with others who had also experienced death, Daniel must contend with others who can’t fully understand his subjective unshareable experience of their common world. Even the former prison inmates he meets in the 4th season can’t function as kindred spirits in this regard. They were housed in the general population, where they could interact with others on a regular basis, unlike Daniel whose human contact was limited to the guards responsible for him and the voices of other inmates along the row who he could never see or touch. He describes this experience to his counsellor Avery, in an exchange that allows him to work through some of his frustration at being compelled to participate in group therapy sessions where not-talking isn’t an option. He explains how his only interactions were with the voices he could hear through the grates between cells:

> DH - Sometimes, with friends, sometimes with not friends at all. No matter who it was, I would never get to see them, or feel them there – their presence. And that’s not the same.
> 
> A - No, no it’s not.
> 
> - And I did that. I lived like that for twenty years.
> 
> - That’s a long time.
> 
> - It’s a strange way to exist.
> 
> - It’s inhuman. (*Rectify* 4:1 “A House Divided”)

Avery identifies the state Daniel found himself in while he was in prison – something other than fully intact personhood. Daniel knows what he has been deprived of, yet he defensively resists community, claiming that the extended time in which he was forced to live without it makes it too difficult for him to do otherwise now. He is at war with himself – as difficult as it might be to find common ground with the other guys in the house, he is also desperate to escape from his imposed solitude, even while he
acknowledges that he isn’t certain he can “be out there either, in the world.”

What would it take to come back to life, to make the transition from symbolic non-being to actualized being-in-the-world? The first step, as with so many of these kinds of transitions, is to acknowledge and grieve for what has been lost. Daniel and Avery discuss this too, focusing particularly on what it might mean for Daniel to “lean the other way for a while” and imagine instead that he didn’t commit the crime for which he was convicted, but can’t remember doing. Daniel is struggling with the fact that he can’t remember committing the alleged crime, which means that he can’t be accountable for it in the way that he feels he should be in order to move on. He doesn’t know what he did, and he doesn’t know what to do with that “unknowing” (Rectify 1:1 “A House Divided”). Avery suggests that he doesn’t really have a choice – that he has to accept it and figure out how to move on with his life anyway. Daniel is struggling on two fronts – with guilt compounded by frustration over a crime he doesn’t remember committing, and with another kind of guilt compounded by bewilderment that he is still alive when he worked so hard to prepare himself for death. He is confused by the suggestion that he try imagining that he didn’t do it for a change – “but then I’d just be making a decision.” Avery reminds him that he has already made one – the alternative is to decide based on hope instead of guilt and fear.

The idea that one makes a decision to leave the zone of non-being is a powerful one, and illustrative of Paul Tillich’s (1952) assertion that being is an act of courage, in the face of the anxiety of its negation. Avery’s framing of this decision as an act of loving self-care reinforces Tillich’s perspective. The work Daniel must do in order to make the journey back from non-being involves engaging with both his present and past realities. Acknowledging and grieving what he thinks he has lost only gets him so far, as there was no shortage of time to dwell on the past while he was in prison, but it hasn’t made him any more capable of existing outside of his cell. He can’t fully understand what parts of his past are still holding him back until he begins to live more fully in the present.

In a larger structural sense, coming back to life is a multi-faceted project that necessarily abandons the individual in favour of the collective. Guenther (2013) finds that the legacy of slavery has ensured that carceral institutions function as afterlives for the
social death that slavery produced, while at the same time reproducing another instance of social death which excludes based on criminality rather than just race. She argues, thus, that even though mass incarceration disproportionately impacts people of colour, the experience of social death that inmates then encounter once in the system is seldom racially discriminant; this idea would justify the lack of explicit attention to the Black carceral experience in Rectify. Guenther posits that it is resistance to these institutions in the form of collective solidarity which will ultimately produce the most meaningful afterlife, noting that “solidarity is an afterlife in common, an affiliation of political solidarity, a kinship of purpose, rather than the false kinship promised by nostalgic attachment to identity” (Guenther, 2013: 254). While I agree with Guenther regarding the distracting and divisive potential of a “nostalgic attachment to identity,” we must also be wary of so casually disregarding identity politics in favour of collective action if the goals of that action are not explicitly focused on reducing suffering for all people, regardless of their relative economic and sociocultural privilege. Rectify’s inability to account for a crime embodied in its main (white) character has resonance with some of the more widespread instances of systematic discrimination experienced by African Americans in US society. In this way the program can be read as a parable regarding the implications of this denial and uncertainty for racialized others, particularly insofar as it can result in their indefinite relegation to various zones of non-being.

Ensuring that no one is left behind in these zones requires a renewal of compassion and a gestural attitude of empathy in public discourse regarding criminality. It requires, as Guenther notes, “a collective rebirth of creaturely life and the refusal to profit from the social death of others, no matter who they are or what they have done” (2013: 255). For television storytelling to complete its working through of the collective anxiety of non-being as social death, in relation to the way slavery lives on in the American prison system, it must provide a clear alternative path which transcends individual circumstances to be widely applicable. Viewers must come to understand that:

We are you: our subjective, unshareable experience of the world supports your own subjective, unshareable experience of a world that we have in common, whether we feel like sharing or not. The social death of prisoners sticks to the social life of those who have never set foot in a prison and
could not possibly know what it is like. (Guenther, 2013: 255)
This calls for an acknowledgement of our interdependence – a practice of radical
kindness, in which we must accept our debt to each other, not just in relation to the social
death of prisoners for which the rest of us bear some moral responsibility, but at all times.
We must decide anew each day that we will live in a world where we prioritise the
reduction of suffering over the accumulation of capital. There is hope for all of us when
we choose to help one another, but perhaps there will be joy once we realise that we
couldn’t imagine it being otherwise.
Epilogue

I realise as I write this that I do not want to finish this account.

~ Joan Didion (2007: 224)

If an ending ever does occur, then it will have been brought about by words, words spoken, among others, about what it means to end.

~ Dan Gunn (2002: 2)

Beginnings are difficult, but somehow endings seem impossible. The challenges that I have encountered throughout the writing of this dissertation mirror the challenges posed by the objects of my analysis themselves. The question of being is held in constant tension with the threat/promise of ending. My cancer treatment involved surgery and six cycles of chemotherapy. The whole process took nearly six months to complete and when it was over, I thought that would be the end of my visits to the cancer centre. But then I was asked if I wanted to participate in a double-blind study of a drug with the potential to target cancer cells at the level of DNA repair. It’s strange being part of a study like this, hoping the drug will work, but ironically uncertain if you’re even getting a real dose, as the placebo is a viable option. If you’re on the placebo, it’s actually a desirable research outcome for your cancer to return, and quickly, as it will validate the efficacy of the drug for others who remain recurrence-free. It’s best not to think about that too hard. I agreed to do it anyway because even if it didn’t end up helping me, it would benefit someone if the trial was successful and the drug made it to market. Even now that the study is closed, the team continues to gather data, as the recurrence of my disease remains statistically relevant, ironically, the longer I manage to evade it. During a recent visit to the cancer centre where this monitoring occurs, I encountered the gynaecological oncologist who performed my surgery and oversaw my eighteen weeks of chemotherapy in 2013. He isn’t involved with the research team conducting the study, so I haven’t seen him since
the end my initial treatment. He was with the social worker that I had also met with periodically, and they were both extremely pleased to see me, in a way that was unsettling, until I realised why. Too many of their patients don’t make it six years. My continued disease-free existence is statistically extraordinary. I should have died, but I didn’t – my life should have ended, but I must instead continue to be.

Narrative television must also contend with this ambivalence, releasing characters and scenarios into worlds of meaning where their representational significance exceeds the capacity of a broadcast schedule or streaming release to contain them. The programs I have discussed obviously do not constitute an exhaustive list of representations of working through on television, but they do each, respectively, offer something unique and significant in terms of our understanding of the range of issues, events and affects television fictions might be capable of representing and engaging with. Distracted as I have been throughout this process by the ongoing threat of recurrence of my own illness, I have been particularly attracted to scholarship and personal accounts which attempt to deal with the implications of sickness, whether it is banal, chronic or life-threatening. Remarkng on how common illness is, Virginia Wolff expressed surprise in 1926, that it had yet to take its place as a primary subject of literature, alongside love and battle. Clearly the significance of illness in storytelling has increased a great deal over the last century; these three categories – love, battle and illness – can perhaps provide a final opportunity to revisit my case study narratives, encountering them as collectively representing timeless essential themes in the context of working through various crises of non-being.

*Grey’s Anatomy* is about illness, in an obvious way, as it is a medical drama. But unlike a more typical medical procedural which focuses on treating and curing a variety of ailments every week, the foundational story begins in the pilot with the spectre of dementia and this narrative thread continues to unravel throughout the program’s many seasons. There is something larger at work here in the way that the memory loss Ellis Grey experiences is refracted by the medium of television itself – the working through that is performed is specific to the medium’s capacity to hold all stories at once – to replay them simultaneously, or backwards, or out of order with chaotic abandon.
Television’s role as a “container” allows it to be viewed as both analyst and analysand in terms of its narrative imperative to repeat, recreate and revisit themes, events and conflicts. After her death, *Grey’s Anatomy* continues to revisit the intersection of Ellis Grey’s motherhood and her illness, and its implications for her daughter’s physical and emotional wellbeing, but the events surrounding Ellis’s death must still be read as an ending of sorts – illness having catalysed an opportunity for reconciliation and letting go. Ellis lets go of her life, allowing Meredith to let go of her mother. Each woman can be read as simultaneously selfish and selfless. This is what it means for daughters and mothers to love each other – messy, complicated, inconsistent relationality.

Daniel Holden’s journey is also about letting go, but his attachment is less tangible, involving deep-rooted shame and self-loathing. Among other things, *Rectify* is about love, and coming to terms with both shared emotionally intimacy and self-care. The program depicts the power of human connection and the devastation of loneliness when deprived of it – it speaks to how love in the abstract isn’t enough, as contact is necessary to make it real and meaningful. The program’s ideological ambivalence in terms of its use of Daniel as a white protagonist to make the Black carceral experience more legible to white US viewers can be somewhat neutralised if we view the relationship between Kerwin and Daniel as the program’s primary love story. Daniel survives death row because of Kerwin’s friendship, while his memories of Kerwin’s unwavering belief in his inherent goodness sustain him through what is arguably an even more challenging space to navigate – the zone of non-being he finds himself stuck in as he transitions from prison to civilian life. His counsellor Avery opens his eyes to the possibility that instead of repeating and revisiting unreliable memories and imaginings of his guilt, he might consider that he didn’t commit the crimes of which he was accused and convicted: “This may sound hokey as shit, but you’ve gotta figure out some way to love yourself.” This is incredibly difficult for Daniel because in doing so, he has to acknowledge how deeply and perversely invested he has become in this broken, depraved idea of himself that he believes deserves whatever punishment the world inflicts on him. He is at war with himself, but he is able to eventually move through the zone of non-being once he is able to accept that only he can save himself – that it isn’t enough just to want pain and loneliness to end – you have to hope for it and believe that it’s possible. He is then
symbolically “welcomed” into the company of the fellow housemates he had felt so estranged from via his newfound ability to experience disappointment in the face of thwarted expectations.

* M*A*S*H is a war story to be sure, but it’s also about resiliency in the face of horror, shame and despair. The producers initially implored CBS to bring this (sometimes darkly) comic depiction of the Korean War to the small screen but spare it the homogeneity of a laugh track. They were unsuccessful in breaking away from this powerful genre convention, but they did reach a compromise – the network agreed that surgical scenes would not be “sweetened” with artificial laughter, allowing the pathos implicit in the life or death work of the operating theatre to speak for itself. Small fractures like these, in the standardised aesthetic conventions of the 1970’s US situation comedy, are now noted as an exceptional attempt to utilise an under-regarded television form to subvert an ongoing war effort being driven by government forces that had clearly learned no lessons from the earlier war the program depicted. The evolution of Hawkeye Pierce, from irreverent trickster to a man overwhelmed by anguish and shame, remains an extraordinary feat of character development for this genre. *M*A*S*H’s* early depiction of the crucial role of the psychotherapist in facilitating a resolution to psychic conflict and its implications is another example of the program’s narrative power, however limited it was at the time. Sydney Freedman appears regularly but infrequently, the network era sitcom apparently unable or unwilling to sustain a character of such gravity within its weekly narratives. Arguably it is depictions like this that have paved the way for a program like HBO’s *In Treatment*, which confines its narrative focus almost exclusively to the therapeutic setting of an analyst’s office, where episodic meetings with patients mirror actual therapy sessions (in terms of their repetition and immersion, if not duration).

The stories television tells, the various themes programs engage with, and the anxieties they work through, are proxies. They are messages we can send each other when we can’t find the words or risk the vulnerability to say the things we mean – the urgent dreams we have for one another, or the unmet needs we pretend not to care about. I suspect that the feeling of emotional estrangement that is so carefully conveyed by the
fragility of Meredith’s relationship with her mother – a fragility that certainly would have preceded Ellis’s Alzheimer’s diagnosis – is a more familiar one for many mothers and daughters then it’s socially permissible to admit in this new era where everyone’s mom is their best friend. In some regards taking on the role of caretaker to one’s emotionally absent mother (which dementia has rendered cognitively absent as well) becomes an opportunity to reimagine a relationship where communication isn’t fraught, because it isn’t necessary or perhaps even possible. But care can still be offered, love can still be accepted. Somehow, we can do even if we can’t fully be.

Other programs offer other calls to action: Rectify reinforces the significance of paying attention to the people in one’s community who may seem odd, but are just caught in an internal struggle between a desperate craving for communion with others, and an awkward helplessness to imagine how it could even be possible. It also makes one of the most compelling cases for prison abolition that I’ve ever seen, depicting a carceral experience so damaging that we are forced to question our own humanity in the face of ongoing support for the broken US justice system as it now stands. *M*A*S*H* effectively integrates an anxious nostalgia with a universally applicable critique of the impacts and implications of war on soldiers, non-combatants and civilians alike. The futility of this kind of conflict continues to be palpable on screen, serving as a powerful imperative to future generations of viewers encountering the text for the first time. Stories are proxies, but as representations of the real, they must necessarily, eventually, end. What they have to say about what it means to end is instructive as we continue to search for ways to make sense of our lives and to navigate the various ontological threats we encounter on this quest.
References


http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/fss_papers/3599


Nussbaum, Emily (2016). “Rectify is a Quiet Marvel.” *The New Yorker* June 15th. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/05/rectify-is-a-quiet-marvel


Ryan, Kathleen M. and Macey, Deborah A. (2013). *Television and the Self: Knowledge,*


brief history and review of the literature.” Crime and Justice 34(1): 441-528.


Curriculum Vitae

Tiara Sukhan

Education

1995        B.A. University of Manitoba (Philosophy/English Literature)
1999        B.Ed. University of Manitoba (English Literature/Music)
2007        M.A. Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand (Media Studies) with merit
2019        Ph.D. University of Western Ontario (Media Studies)

Academic Appointments

2013-       Lecturer, Faculty of Information & Media Studies, University of Western Ontario
2005-2009   Tutor, School of English, Film, Theatre, and Media Studies, Victoria University of Wellington

Awards

2017        Dean’s Award for Excellence in Teaching (part-time faculty), University of Western Ontario

Publications

Articles


Book Chapters

**Scholarly & Public Presentations**

Prime-Time Minister: Politics, Entertainment & Justin Trudeau. Invited presentation, Mediations workshop, Faculty of Information & Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, November 9th, 2017

Smart Women in Popular Culture. Invited presentation at the ‘Women in Science’ STEMposium, University of Western Ontario, March 19th, 2017

TV’s Funny Ladies: Sitcoms, Sketch Shows & Samantha Bee. Mini-lecture at Fall Preview Day, Faculty of Information & Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, November 13th, 2016

‘Does this make me look maternal?’ How Media Constructions of Motherhood Discipline Women. Mini-lecture at March Break Open House, Faculty of Information & Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, March 14th, 2015

Watching and Hoping: Exploring the ‘Possibility of the Impossible’. Invited presentation, Mediations workshop, Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, April 26th, 2013.

Bootcamp, Brides & BMI: Constructions of Feminine Selfhood in Canadian Size-Transformation Television. Gender Politics & Reality TV Conference, University College Dublin, Ireland, August. 25-27th, 2011

Narrating Humour. Invited guest lecture, Victoria University of Wellington, April 6th, 2009


Television Comedy. Invited guest lecture, Victoria University of Wellington, September, 2008.

**University Service**

Faculty of Information & Media Studies, University of Western Ontario

Media Studies Doctoral Association, Member: 2009-10, 2013-17; Treasurer: 2010-11; Chair: 2011-12; Vice-Chair, Secretary: 2017-18

Mediations Speaker & Seminar Series Organising Committee, member: 2011-12

Limited Duties Affairs Committee, Member: 2017-19

Faculty Council, Limited Duties representative: 2017-19
Academic Teaching Experience

Radio & Television as Entertainment Media 2013-19
Adapted syllabus, taught all classes, administered all grades
Enrollment: 40
This is an elective third-year undergraduate course about the history and development of radio and television as cultural industries. As the department does not have introduction to television studies course, this class operates as a general survey of key ideas, events and issues. Topics focus on history, genre, representation, audiences and power.

Women’s Television: History, Gender, Feminism 2013, 2015-18
Adapted syllabus, taught all classes, administered all grades
Enrollment: 40
This is an elective third-year undergraduate course which looks at the television industry’s address to women, both historically and in the present day. This course considers roles played by genre, character and narrative in creating “women’s television,” paying particular attention to the medium’s ongoing dialogue with feminism.

International Media & Social Change 2014, 2017-18
Adapted syllabus, taught all classes, administered all grades
Enrollment: 40
This is an elective third-year undergraduate course. As media transcend traditional political and geographic barriers, they present new opportunities for expression, knowledge, identity formation, collaboration, and mobilization. But international media can also be tools of subjugation, cultural erosion, fragmentation, and manipulation. This course examines the nature of these developments and their social significance, using case studies from Canada, China, Cuba, Egypt, Israel, the Middle East, New Zealand, Palestine, Rwanda, South Africa, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Uganda and the United States.

Deviant Divas 2015
Adapted syllabus, taught all classes, administered all grades
Enrollment: 30
This is an elective third-year undergraduate course. In examining fictional and real-life monstrous women—including witches, sex workers, body modifiers, cyborgs, and serial killers—this course considers what monstrous femininity means, how technology and the media contribute to (re)defining female deviance, and what happens
when the monstrous figure of the deviant diva becomes the Western cultural norm.

*Media, Representation, Identity*  
Adapted syllabus, taught all classes, administered all grades  
Enrollment: 50

This is a second-year undergraduate course which explores the role of media and visual culture in shaping our environment, worldviews, and senses of self and identity. Topics are framed by examples from Raymond Williams’ *Keywords* and include issues related to gender, sexuality, class, race and ethnicity, and ability and disability.

**Other Teaching Employment**

2010- Music Teacher, piano and music theory, self-employed

2012-14 Summer Academic Orientation Advisor, Faculty of Information & Media Studies, University of Western Ontario

2009-2013 Teaching Assistant, Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario  
Courses: Media and Society, Mapping Media Theory, The Meaning of Technology

2005-2009 Tutor (T.A.), Department of Media Studies, SEFTMS Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand  
Courses: *Popular Media Culture, Television Studies, Television Narrative*

2004-2009 Day School Teacher, Gifted Kids Programme, Wellington, New Zealand

2002-2003 HOD Mathematics, Tongariro High School, Turangi, NZ

2000-2001 Teacher (English, Music), Tongariro High School, Turangi, NZ

1999-2000 Teacher – English Department, Fort Richmond Collegiate, Winnipeg, MB, Canada