

“Utterly Unknowable”:  
Challenges to Overcoming Madness in  
Sarah Kane’s *Blasted*, *Crave*, and *4.48 Psychosis*

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Thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the M.A. degree in English  
with a specialization in Women’s Studies

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### **Abstract**

Sarah Kane has often been categorized as an “In-Yer-Face” playwright, part of a group of contemporary British playwrights interested in making audiences feel the outcome of violence. However, Kane’s plays have also arguably challenged many existing theatrical forms, including the late twentieth century resurgence of “Angry Young Men” plays. While critics have been quick to identify madness as a main theme of her work, few have connected each play’s complex construction of madness with a struggle to complicate existing theatrical form. Through an intersectionally feminist reading of three of her plays—*Blasted*, *Crave*, and *4.48 Psychosis*—this thesis examines the connection between the rejection of normative disability tropes (or madness, more specifically) and the challenging construction of theatrical form that takes place within each of these Kane plays.

## **Acknowledgements**

The last year and a half has been full of frustration, laughter, tears, and sweat, none of which I have experienced alone. Throughout the process of researching and writing this project, I have had the loving support of many holding me up and reminding me that while all may not be well, it is okay to feel this way. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor Lauren Gillingham, who knew exactly when to shake my elevated levels of self-confidence and when to hand me a tissue. It has been an honour to work with such an empathetic and considerate scholar.

A huge thanks to all those who frequently inhabit 440, especially Anna, Tina, Marko, and Sammy, who make me laugh, listen while I cry, and proofread even when I am adamant that my first draft is good enough. I also extend a thanks to the various coffeeshops that have carried my tired bones, including TAN (RIP), Arlington Five, Red Door, Bluebird, and Origin, among others. A huge thank you to my mother, who supported me financially and emotionally. To my cat, Maverick, who purrs when I have panic attacks, and demands snuggles when I feel I can't get out of bed: you will never read this, but I still must thank you. Finally, to the man I once called "Kane guy": thank you for understanding when I can't see you, for holding me tightly when I need it, and for all the garlic you know how to cook. As I go forward with my PhD, I am reminded constantly that grad school is a team sport.

## Introduction

### “The Sickness of Becoming Great”: Sarah Kane and Madness

In a 1998 interview, British playwright Sarah Kane discussed a new play she was then in the process of writing, saying the following:

I’m writing a play called *Four Forty-Eight Psychosis*. It’s about a psychotic breakdown. And what happens to a person’s mind when barriers that distinguish between reality and different forms of imagination completely disappear [...] Various boundaries would collapse. Formally, I’m trying to collapse a few boundaries as well, to carry on making the form and content one [...] And for me there’s a very clear line from *Blasted* through *Phaedra’s Love* to *Cleansed* and *Crave* and this one. (Kane 1998, 19)

In many ways, *4.48 Psychosis*<sup>1</sup> does represent an extension of her four earlier plays, *Blasted* (1995), *Phaedra’s Love* (1996), *Cleansed* (1998), and *Crave* (1998), as Kane attempted to “carry on making form and content one” (19). My Master’s thesis traces this interaction between form and content in three of Kane’s plays, arguing that the “psychotic breakdown” in *4.48 Psychosis* appears equally in *Blasted* and *Crave*, to the extent that they challenge formal conventions of traditional drama, and ideals of mental fitness that pervade representations of madness, both in contemporary literature and mainstream cultural conceptions of disability more generally.

This project stages an intersection between two strains of argument: the formal connection between Kane’s experimental drama and her exploration of madness; and the concept of “overcoming”<sup>2</sup> that has emerged from critical disability

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<sup>1</sup> *4.48 Psychosis* was first staged in 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Mitchell and Snyder (2000) give a good overview of overcoming narratives.

studies to characterize the narrative forms to which people with disabilities are often subjected, as they are expected to conceptualize and control their disabilities in specific ways. Through her formal experimentation, Kane challenges conventional representations of disability, and more specifically, madness, by challenging the conventional narratives that often surround mad characters. Crucial to my argument will be a close analysis of Kane's theatrical form, as it follows from European theatrical tradition and simultaneously challenges it: her formal experimentation can be easily compared to the epic theatre of German dramatist Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), the absurdist theatre of Irish playwright Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), the realist theatre of Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen (1828- 1906), and the theatre of cruelty of French dramatist Antonin Artaud (1896-1948)<sup>3</sup>. Beginning with *Blasted*, Kane aims to disrupt conventional notions of setting, characterization, and dialogue that distinguish the playtext<sup>4</sup> form, pushing the limits of what can and cannot be staged. This formal disruption becomes more explicit in *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* as she begins omitting any qualifiers of characterization or setting outside of dialogue. Her final play, *4.48 Psychosis*, was staged shortly after her own suicide, an event that connects the play's overt discussion of madness with her own experiences with mental health facilities. Kane's experimental form and violent content often evoke these personal experiences, as well as bringing feminist themes to the fore, asking her audiences to question toxic masculinity, gender binaries, and structures of power. Through an examination of her formal experimentation, I argue for an explicitly intersectional feminist outlook on Kane's plays, focussing on the

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<sup>3</sup> Carney (2013) compares Kane to Brecht and Beckett, Solga (2007) compares her to Ibsen, and De Vos (2010) compares her to Artaud.

<sup>4</sup> Rather than using "script", I use the term "playtext" to represent Kane's theatrical text, including all stage directions, character signifiers, and dialogue, because *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* do not necessarily include any/all of these elements.

intersection between disability, gender, and race. To this end, I investigate the concept of “overcoming” that has emerged from critical disability studies: critics in the field have shown that these narratives of overcoming, regulating, or eradicating disability<sup>5</sup>, often uphold normative and hierarchical standards of fitness, failing to challenge ableist assumptions around disability and individual development. By playing with the playtext form and rejecting the possibility of her characters overcoming their mad condition, Kane simultaneously challenges ableist standards of mental fitness and defines a new radical form of selfhood that is not necessarily mentally fit.

I argue that Kane uses form throughout her work in order to challenge hierarchies of mental ability; question the validity of subjecthood as necessarily distinct, whole, independent, and mentally fit (or sane); and disrupt normative narrative models that frame individual development as a progression of increasingly greater degrees of mental coherency. By creating gaps and spaces in dialogue, Kane disrupts the linear narrative flow of naturalism, displacing its end goal of a complete subject. She takes theatrical characters that are deemed mentally unfit by other characters, themselves, or contemporary audiences and reframes them as possible subjects in themselves, as models for an alternative form of subjecthood that lies apart from ideals of sanity; in other words, she allows her mad characters to remain mad without cure, regulation, or death. At the same time, however, she refuses to romanticize or glorify madness, using the distress of her characters to offer complex representations of mental instability.

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<sup>5</sup> I will discuss three examples of conventional overcoming narratives below, on pages 7, 10, and 12 of this introduction.

While madness is now recognized as one of Kane's most prominent themes, her career did not begin with an explicit representation of madness. Kane is primarily known for *Blasted*, her first play that was originally staged by the Royal Court Theatre in 1995. The play initially sets itself up as a piece of "kitchen sink realism" taking place in "a very expensive hotel in Leeds"<sup>6</sup>, and follows a dialogue between two former lovers, Cate and Ian. However, the second scene introduces a new character, a soldier back from war, and the stage is literally blasted into a new and strange onstage world. Carney (2013) discusses the play as a two-sided plot, the first part as formally realist and the second as more formally experimental; he connects these two parts to two European theatrical histories, that of the social realism of Brecht and the formalism of Beckett. Sarah Ablett (2014) looks instead to the abject in *Blasted*, pointing to the moment of blasting in the second scene as "a postulated movement from a symbolic to semiotic state," in a move she calls "approaching abjection" (63). Laurens De Vos (2010) points to the formal fragmentation of the second part of the play as a turn towards cruelty, mirroring Artaud's method of revealing violence as truth. As Kim Solga (2007) notes, however, while critics focus on which part of the play is more real or reveals more truth, few have been willing to look at *Blasted* as a complete and complex whole (348). Conversely, the formal experimentation in Kane's final two plays is not discussed as an extension of *Blasted*'s break with realism, but rather is often referred to as a completely new style for Kane.

It was arguably the success of her experimentation with form in *Blasted*, and her subsequent two plays, *Phaedra's Love* and *Cleansed*, that allowed Kane to experiment more explicitly with form in her final two plays. Her fourth play *Crave*

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<sup>6</sup> See (Kane 2001) for all citations taken directly from her plays.



has four characters that remain unnamed throughout the performance, given only letters to distinguish between them: C, M, B, and A. It is difficult to trace a definitive plot in *Crave*: while A admits they<sup>7</sup> are “a paedophile” (156) and C describes their own childhood rape (176), it is unclear whether A is C’s rapist. Similarly, while M desires a child, and B most often responds to M’s lines, it is unclear whether M wants B’s child, or just a child more generally. M may arguably also take the position of the psychiatrist in the play, listing psychiatric symptoms that C admits they are “suffering from *now*” (187). In many ways, *4.48 Psychosis* follows both the form and content of *Crave*, explicitly extending *Crave*’s break from traditional playtext forms and its discussion of madness. *4.48 Psychosis* is separated into twenty-four sections<sup>8</sup> in which a speaker, or perhaps multiple speakers, discuss their life and love(s) with a psychiatrist. While there is, once again, no distinguishable plot, the speaker(s) do seem to be focused on the theme of suicide, leaving the audience with the impression that the speaker(s) will soon commit suicide.

While there has been little scholarly work that focuses on *Crave*, that which has been written often takes the play as a transition between Kane’s concentration on staged violence (*Blasted*) and her more explicit experimentation with form (*4.48 Psychosis*)<sup>9</sup>. One of the exceptions<sup>10</sup> to this is Ahmet Gökhan Biçer (2011) who writes about Kane’s work as postdramatic theatre, pointing to *Blasted*, *Cleansed*, and *Crave*

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<sup>7</sup> None of the characters in *Crave* are gendered, except for C who is given one stage direction that is gendered: “*under her breath*” (170, emphasis mine). To respect the ambiguous gendering in the play, I will use “they/their” as a gender-neutral pronoun for all four characters rather than “he/she”, to acknowledge that these characters may be neither male nor female.

<sup>8</sup> Antje Diedrich (2013) calls them “scenes” (377), although many of them are too short to be traditional theatrical scenes.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Carney (2013) writes a very short section of a chapter about *Crave*, focussing instead on *Blasted* and *4.48 Psychosis*.

<sup>10</sup> The only scholar that exclusively examines *Crave* is Phillips (2015), who uses the play to examine Lacan’s theory of the Real.

as pieces of performance art that break down traditional plot structure, theatrical form, and characterization. Similarly, Matthew Roberts (2015) argues that *4.48 Psychosis* is a form of postdramatic theatre, as it too ruptures theatrical conventions, forcing each performance to create new meaning rather than ground that meaning in the playtext. Biçer (2011) and Roberts (2015) argue that the lack of contextualization in these playtexts allows the director and actors to recreate each performance, creating their own context and meaning through the performance on-stage. The work of these two scholars in excavating and examining the formal innovation in these plays has allowed me to dig even deeper to show what these disruptions do to conventional understandings of selfhood and humanity through the playtexts' fragmentary work on narrative.

Given the shared project of *Blasted*, *Crave*, and *4.48 Psychosis* in challenging theatrical realism, I examine the impact this formal disruption has on conceptions of madness. I thus invert the causal relationship that Solga (2007) traces as she uses Elin Diamond (1990)'s reading of hysteria in Ibsen's drama to point to the disjointed form of *Blasted*; Solga shows how hysteria forces a break from the Ibsenian realist narrative (or literally blasts it away), leading to the audience's realization that realism is always "ripe to be blasted" (354). I look instead to how Kane plays with form, not just to "blast" realism, but to challenge conceptions of madness as something in need of cure or rehabilitation. This work largely follows from Christina Wald (2007) who focuses on three forms of madness (hysteria, trauma-induced neurosis, and melancholia) as they are represented in English language drama; Wald (2007) also looks to Diamond's discussion of Ibsen's drama, explaining that Ibsen often places hysterical women at the centre of his plays "as a riddle whose solution depends on a male analyst" (40) who must know them (38) and, for all intents and

purposes, cure them (40). I suggest here that Wald (2007) is describing a theatrical overcoming narrative, showing how Ibsen's characters overcome their madness through (linear) masculine understanding. By breaking with realist theatrical forms like Ibsen's, I argue, Kane turns her back on this need to "know," "solve," or cure her hysterical (or mad) figures, showing the audience a more complex understanding of madness. By looking to the contemporary terms "mad" or "madness," I bridge the gap between literary theory and the more recent field of Mad Studies and on that basis develop a critical lens adequate to the formal and thematic complexity of Kane's work.

The break with realist form that Solga (2007) and Wald (2007) trace is directly related to the scholarship around "humanity" in Kane's work. For instance, De Vos (2010) argues that Kane formally uses cruelty in *4.48 Psychosis* in order to posit a complete and united version of the human self, a selfhood that paradoxically must lead to suicide. Louise LePage (2014) constructs a similar argument about *Blasted*, pointing to Cate and Ian as representatives for a humanity that is necessarily complex, broken but still distinct, making for a kind of "conglomerate human" (253) that is humanist but nonetheless challenges a Cartesian, linear, or liberal-humanist model of self. In contrast to these arguments that claim there is a certain kind of universal humanity represented in Kane's plays, Christina Delgado-García (2012) takes up Butlerian performativity theory to argue that Kane's works deconstruct and reject the liberal-humanist subject position, subverting and refusing a distinct, whole, or normalizing version of selfhood. Distinct from both positions, Julie Waddington (2010) points to a different kind of subjectivity in *4.48 Psychosis*, arguing that Kane's version of selfhood is decidedly post-human, as it "challeng[es] the reader and audience to think beyond received paradigms and look beyond

categories such as gender, race, class, and sexuality” (142). What all of these scholars agree upon, and what I too suggest, is that Kane challenges the audience’s normalizing perceptions of how self and humanity are represented; this challenge, I argue, emerges out of both the individual characters and the form in which they are presented.

The arguments around humanist values in Kane’s work are connected to whether she can be classified as an intersectional feminist writer and should be examined through a feminist lens; if there is a unifying human position, or if we are “beyond” thinking of gender, race, class, and sexuality, then feminism does not seem necessary. Many scholars argue that Kane should not be viewed as a feminist author because she vehemently denied the title of “woman writer,” saying, “I have no responsibility as a woman writer because I don’t believe there’s such a thing” (qtd. in Stephenson and Langridge 1997, 134). Elaine Aston (2010) argues, by contrast, that Kane’s work is decidedly feminist: taking *Blasted* as her example, she contends that the play challenges the revival of the “Angry Young Men” movement by representing Cate as a raped, yet somehow sexually empowered woman. Stefka Mihaylova (2015) equally argues for a feminist analysis of Kane’s work, contending that *Blasted*’s focus on masculinity, whiteness, and violence challenges conventional narratives that presuppose the untouchable normality of the (able-bodied) white man. My work extends the framework of Mihaylova’s argument to apply it to *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* as well as *Blasted*; I will take an explicitly intersectional feminist stance on Kane’s work to closely examine how she challenges the “normal” position of whiteness, masculinity, able-bodiedness, and able-mindedness through a focus on madness, in form and in content.

I focus on the contemporary terms “mad” or “madness” to bridge the gap between literary theory, intersectional feminist theory, and the emergent field of Mad Studies. I use the term “mad” or “madness” in the place of “mental illness” both based on the arguments in the field of Mad Studies<sup>11</sup>, and because Kane herself was impacted by Mad activism, calling one play put on by a cast of all mad performers “the only piece of theatre to have changed [her] life” (qtd. in Saunders 2009, 46). Mad Studies often takes a critical stance on contemporary psychiatry, calling attention to the vulnerable position of mad people who must interact with psychiatric institutions on a daily basis, and revealing the ways that the medical model (the pathologization of mental difference) individualizes experiences that are part of a broader social structure. At the same time, Mad Studies attempts to recognize the ways that anti-psychiatry movements can also make mad individuals vulnerable, to the extent that they disavow the real distress that mad people experience by calling madness a social construction rather than a reality<sup>12</sup>. More recently, mad scholars have critiqued the stark difference between psychiatry (which uses the medical model, often individualizing and medicalizing mad distress, calling madness a disease or illness to be cured) and anti-psychiatry (which disavows the “truth” of “mental illness,” calling it complete myth<sup>13</sup>), instead attempting to find a middle ground that both recognizes the violence of the psychiatric system, while also respecting the real lived experience of mad people (Lewis 2010, 166). Mad Studies is

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<sup>11</sup> Burstow (2013) highlights the importance of using radical language when discussing psychiatric survivors, arguing that psychiatry will not be questioned unless pathologizing terms, like “mental illness,” are challenged.

<sup>12</sup> In the attempt to challenge psychiatry, anti-psychiatry movements risk romanticizing mental difference, further distressing those who feel individual crisis through this difference.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Thomas Szasz (1961) was one of the first to call “mental illness” a myth, challenging the foundations of psychiatry.

an important frame of analysis for Kane's work, as Ariel Watson (2008) shows, arguing that *4.48 Psychosis* represents both psychiatry and anti-psychiatry as "tools for the manipulation and objectification... of the patient" (189). While much work has been done on psychiatry in *4.48 Psychosis*, disability criticism has been curiously silent on Kane's other works; I thus position my analysis as one explicitly interested in a Mad Studies, intersectional feminist outlook on Kane's works.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's criticism (1997; 2002) bridges the gap between intersectional feminism and disability studies, looking to problematic narratives surrounding "normal" bodies, and pointing to the connection between disabled, feminine, and racialized bodies that emerges when they are all shown to be abnormal. Garland-Thomson (2002) writes that disabled bodies tend to fall into three normative narratives: the person with a disability overcomes their disability, and thus is "cured" and no longer disabled; the person is marginalized, silenced, ignored, or otherwise regulated within the narrative; or the person with a disability is eradicated, either by dying or being killed (14). While Garland-Thomson is primarily interested in physical disabilities and thus corporeality, her argument can easily be extended to talk about mad people and their minds: sanity is the most desirable and "normal" position; mad people can be "cured" through pills, therapy, or some combination of the two; they can be regulated through institutional intervention; or they can otherwise be made to die<sup>14</sup>. Similarly, what Garland-Thomson (1997) terms the "normate" may help to conceptualize the difference between sanity and madness; she positions the normate as "the corporeal incarnation of culture's collective, unmarked, normative characteristics" (8). If we extend this definition beyond

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<sup>14</sup> This narrative thread is especially applicable to theatre, as characters that are representative of madness are often part of a broader tragic narrative.

corporeality, the “normate” might be an apt description of sanity. In my second chapter especially, I begin to connect the “normate” with Lisa Duggan (2004)’s concept of neoliberalism<sup>15</sup>. I therefore use the term the “neoliberal normate” to indicate the intersection between Garland-Thomson’s normate, and the neoliberal subject that Duggan argues also cannot exist; if the normate is unmarked and normative, so too is the neoliberal subject, who functions completely independently from any potential systematic oppression.

Madness is therefore a transgression of sanity and perhaps neoliberalism, a challenge to normative characteristics of selfhood as necessarily mentally fit. Seeing madness as a transgression of sanity could potentially also position madness as a rebellious movement against the normal or normative expectations of the subject. To apply this argument to literature, though, we must be careful not to romanticize madness. Elizabeth Donaldson (2011) revisits Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979)’s *Madwoman in the Attic*, for example, to critique the notion that the madwoman is a rebellious figure, arguing instead that madness is often used to highlight normality, pointing to the sane woman as much more desirable (96). By refusing the trajectory of overcoming, regulating, or killing mad subjectivity, Kane’s work challenges the desirability of sanity, while also refusing to romanticize madness as Gilbert and Gubar’s analysis has been shown to do.

My aim is to show the ways that Kane’s plays challenge the human as whole, distinct, and “normate,” often through an evocation of differing positions of power,

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<sup>15</sup> Duggan argues that neoliberalism, an economic and political ideology based on free market economics, depends largely on racial and gender inequalities that are systematically and intentionally ignored under the assumption that all are “created” equal and therefore have equal opportunities to succeed. While she argues that this model was largely encouraged in American politics during the 1990s, it is equally applicable in a British context, as the Thatcher government pushed for similar economic success.

especially as sanity relates to gender and race. I argue that through a disruption of theatrical and narrative form as well as characterization, Kane takes up the position of what feminist theorist Sara Ahmed (2011) calls “being for being against” (162), critiquing the hierarchical positioning of mental fitness, while also criticizing an inversion of this hierarchy. Kane’s critique dismantles the narrativization of mental fitness that Wald (2007) attributes to a playwright such as Ibsen and also disrupts what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2010) call “narrative prosthesis” (274), a narrative structure that revolves around curing a disability. Mitchell and Snyder (2010) outline four steps to any general narrative structure: “first, a deviance or marked difference is revealed” in one of the characters; second, a need to know the source of this difference is solidified in narrative form; third, the deviance is brought to the centre of the narrative; and fourth, the deviance is somehow resolved (279). This “narrative prosthesis” is very close to what previous scholars have called the construction of the liberal-humanist subject: “becoming” through the linear progression of fitness, curing or disposing of disability. I demonstrate that while Kane reveals marked differences from normative states in all of her characters (Mitchell and Snyder’s first point), she does not allow the audience to know the source of these differences (the second point), nor require all the characters to be cured (their final point), thereby challenging narrative prosthetic structures and conventional narratives of self-development more broadly.

Finally, I argue that Kane challenges the subject of the “neoliberal normate” largely through enacting interdependence. The term “interdependence” or “interdependency” has been a term used both in a feminist and disability studies context, but not necessarily used for similar ends. Nick Watson et al. (2004) argue that the term has the potential to bridge the gap between the two fields if we can re-



evaluate the relationship between carer and cared-for. While the feminist movement has largely been concerned with the position of women as unrecognized carers, whether it be for their children or within a paid labour position, the disability movement has been more concerned with the cared-for, arguing that the need for care also allows for the possibility to be exploited. In order to recognize both the work done by the carer (who is also much more likely to be a woman) and the cared-for (or in this case, those with disabilities), Watson et al. argue that Nancy Fraser (1989)'s concept of "needscapes" is useful. By blurring the lines between "Victim. Perpetrator. Bystander." (231), Kane also brings up the concept of need, in the sense that she refuses to easily distinguish between various levels of vulnerability. I argue that at many points in her plays, Kane invites the audience to closely examine the relationship between care and need. In this sense, interdependence is an important term for my project.

My project is separated into three main chapters, examining *Blasted*, *Crave*, and *4.48 Psychosis* respectively. My first chapter looks to *Blasted* and the various descriptions and depictions of disability within the play. The play begins with Cate and Ian in a hotel room. After a night that is not staged during which Ian rapes Cate, a third character arrives on the scene, a soldier back from war. Cate disappears out a window and there is an explosion: the stage is literally blasted. In the next scene, the soldier rapes Ian, eats Ian's eyes, and then kills himself. Ian is left alone and blind in the hotel room, until Cate returns with a baby who dies in her arms. She buries the body under the floorboards, and Ian eventually eats it. At the end of the play, Ian dies.

In the initial stage direction, Cate is referred to as a young woman "with a South London accent and a stutter when under stress" (3). From the outset, Kane

thus stages Cate's stutter as an embodiment of what Mitchell and Snyder (2010) would call "deviance", a performed demonstration of some kind of internal disability. The play begins with Ian talking to Cate about her family, calling her brother a "Retard", "Spaz", and "Joey" (5), all slurs that refer to those with mental disabilities, extending this description to also include her. Although these words are clearly derogatory and are hardly endorsed by the play as a whole, Kane intends for the audience to connect Ian's words with Cate's actions and reactions: she sucks her thumb, stutters, and has "fits" that leave her unconscious or make her laugh "hysterically" (9). In line with conventional narrative form, the audience may expect to uncover the reasons behind Cate's "fits"; in fact, Solga (2007) argues that we are given the source of Cate's disability through the repeated sexual violence to which she is subjected prior to and during the play (357). However, in the second part of the play, the "blasting" represents a break with this narrative structure and the expectations it feeds, as Cate is not removed from the centre of the narrative, and does not overcome her disability, or "grow out of it [like] the doctor says" (10). She is also not regulated by others; in fact, she is the only character apparently still "living" as the play finishes, sucking her thumb in the final scene.

Ian's character similarly challenges conventional narratives around disability, as his body and mind degenerate, but resist eradication. An analysis of Ian's character will allow me to challenge the widely held argument that the moment of "blasting" is necessarily the formal disruption that interrupts the narrative; the on-stage blast is not the catalyst for his disability on stage, as Ian's initial sickness (he coughs throughout the first scene, admitting his lungs are diseased) is established from the very beginning of the play, before the soldier appears. As the play continues, Ian soon becomes the one who laughs "hysterically" (59), eventually "dying with

relief” (60). In this moment of “relief,” Ian’s decaying body seems to align with a conventional disability narrative by dying. However, the play is not over, and Ian speaks again: what follows is Ian, not Cate, “having a fit,” fainting as Cate cares for him. Therefore, Ian now takes on the initial representations of Cate’s madness, her hysterical laughter and her fits, as his physical trauma also makes him mad. He does not and will not recover; instead Cate and Ian represent a kind of Butlerian community of vulnerability, existing on stage with their respective forms of disability, Cate with her mad stutter, and Ian with his mad blindness. I explore where the form and trauma merge, alongside the difference between toxic masculinity and feminine hysteria, showing how it is Cate’s hope for a feminist future in the face of a warzone that gives *Blasted* a hopeful ending.

My second chapter examines *Crave*’s break with theatrical form, focussing on the impossibility of a collective overcoming. As I have suggested, *Crave*’s four characters are given only letters to distinguish between them: C, M, B, and A. While Kane has suggested that she had characters in mind when allocating these signifiers, saying that C stands for child, M for mother, B for boy, and A for “the author or abuser [...] Aleister Crowley, [...] the Anti-Christ [and] arsehole” (qtd. in Saunders 2002, 79), she intentionally omits these descriptors from the stage directions, allowing for each new staging to reinterpret the characterization of each letter. The play consists entirely of dialogue between characters, though with no indication of the relationship between their respective utterances, and with little linear progression identifiable in their comments across the length of the play. At the same time, as the play continues, the number of silences increases and the already initially ambiguous connections among characters become even more fragmented. *Crave*’s form therefore mirrors that of *Blasted*, as Kane begins challenging the traditional

boundaries of the playtext form, “blasting” the theatrical space through the silences that increase near the end of the play.

My own analysis of *Crave* builds on Delgado-García (2012)’s argument that *Crave*’s characters subvert the conventional premises of a liberal-humanist subjectivity, as I will focus on the fact that the characters refuse to make the source of their distress known. While *Crave* turns away from *Blasted*’s bodily representation of disability, the style of the playtext nonetheless points to mental deviance, echoing *Blasted*’s trauma-induced madness. In what Carney (2013) calls “an autistic loop of trauma” (280), *Crave* positions trauma as the reason behind its characters’ madness, yet at the same time refuses to resolve this trauma, instead simply reiterating it. During this process of reiterated trauma, *Crave* demonstrates the hierarchies of abuse that exist between different mental abilities and configurations of gender and race. A’s abusive love monologue, for example, takes place at the same time as C says “under *her* breath until A stops speaking,” “this has to stop this has to stop this has to stop...” (170, emphasis mine). The simultaneity of these utterances points towards a relationship between A and C that arguably extends beyond this theatrical moment. C is the only figure whose gender seems fixed as female through the stage direction pronoun “her”, and is also the most definitively mad in the play, revealing that they were hospitalized for “Anorexia. Bulimia” (173), and suffer from a long list of mental symptoms (187). C is therefore gendered female, and is shown to have mental disabilities that are emphasized beyond those of the other characters. Similarly, A refers to the lover that they admit abusing as “oriental” and C refers to their rapist as “a handsome blonde” with “blue blue eyes” (176). Kane thus asks us to examine closely the positionality of gender and race in relation to trauma within the play. Katerina Deliovsky’s work (2010) on white femininity is relevant here, as Manichean

binaries of black/white and darkness/light are repeated throughout the play, alongside narratives that position abuser as white and abused as a person of colour. Deliovsky (2010) argues that hierarchies that privilege whiteness over blackness do so through the paradoxical position of whiteness as invisible, yet also vocal, as whiteness occupies the normative position. In contrast, blackness, darkness, or colour is hyper-visible yet also silenced. An audience is conditioned to want to know and understand racial difference, while at the same time fearing it: the racial Other, usually represented by blackness or darkness, is often forced to make itself known (8). As the silences increase near the end of *Crave*, so too do discussions of lightness and whiteness; *Crave* thus positions the audience away from the knowledge or cure of the trauma-induced madness, focussing instead on the normative position of whiteness.

My third chapter will examine the thread of suicide in *4.48 Psychosis* and the way in which suicide ultimately functions as a challenge to narratives around madness. While Antje Diedrich (2013) has done a very thorough job outlining the intertextuality in *4.48 Psychosis*, looking to the different psychiatric modes that Kane critiques within the play, she has overlooked what I will argue is a very important literary intertextual moment: the last line in *4.48 Psychosis*, “please open the curtains” (245), invokes Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* (1890), where Hedda commits suicide behind a drawn curtain. As Diamond (1990) notes, Hedda escapes the control of her “knower” through suicide, yet by dying still follows the trajectory that is expected of the hysteric (89). I will argue that Kane subverts this trajectory through invoking suicide, yet not necessarily having the act committed, and not allowing the audience to “know” the mad speaker at all.

Ariel Watson (2008) argues that the silences allow the speaker to subvert and challenge the narrative mode that the psychiatrist expects. I extend Watson's argument by pointing to the ways in which the speaker asks the psychiatrist, their lover(s), and the audience to "please. Don't switch off my mind by attempting to straighten me out" (220). I will argue that *4.48 Psychosis* thus represents a challenge to what disability scholar Robert McRuer (2006) calls "straight composition" (156), as the speaker tries to navigate the complicated and paradoxical position that madness puts them in: on the one hand, they want attention, love, and help; on the other, they deny their own illness and admit that they are at fault for their own condition. As the play continues, the spaces between lines become more frequent, emphasizing the fragmentary selfhood of the speaker. Again, the Manichean binary between darkness and light is a continuing motif here, as are the ambiguities surrounding gender and sexuality. Two allusions to trans identities are made in *4.48 Psychosis*<sup>16</sup>, pointing to the ways that the "fragments" of subjectivity that the speaker clings to are connected to gender, sexuality, and race. By examining the final line and connecting the discussion to Hedda's suicide, I trace out the complex selfhood of Kane's speaker, one that complicates our perceptions of what madness is by not allowing us to know the reason behind the speaker's distress, and also by challenging the innocence of the physician as the normate. I ask how the theme of suicide, although often acting as the normative force that eradicates madness, here becomes something powerful for the speaker, allowing them to escape the cycle of trauma that the normate induces through assuming the speaker can become and wants to become normal as well. The final lines of the play, "please open the curtains," both implies

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<sup>16</sup> "The broken hermaphrodite who trusted herself" (205) and "Behold the Eunuch/of castrated thought" (242).

suicide and denies it, as the speaker cannot hide behind the curtain to commit the act as Hedda does, yet the audience has been told throughout the play that suicide is the speaker's intention. Suicide becomes both evoked and yet never committed, as the main speaker uses imperative requests to involve the audience in their own recovery or lack thereof. The audience participation becomes an enactment of Artaud's true theatre, as the audience decides whether the main speaker commits suicide or does not.

This interdisciplinary project contributes to Kane scholarship in two ways: following from previous scholarship that focuses on Kane's experimental form, I trace how this form works in Kane's plays to disrupt particular narrative structures; and I use intersectional feminism and disability studies to explore the representation of madness within her plays. The themes of Kane's plays merit further intersectional scholarship, as madness, race, gender, and sexuality interact in this moment of dramatic history. As the first scholarly work to explicitly focus on disability and race in Kane's plays, this project intentionally uses an intersectional analysis to do justice to her complex and challenging plays.

## Chapter One

### “You’re a Nightmare”: Blasting Realism in *Blasted*

Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (1995) initially shocked audiences with its overt and graphic violent content. Most of early Kane scholarship focussed on this initial audience response, framing Kane as part of a movement of young British playwrights interested in making audiences feel the outcome of graphic onstage violence.

Although this onstage violence often positioned disability as a large part of this era of theatre, critical disability studies has yet to examine the radical stance that many of these plays take on disability. In this chapter, I will begin to fill this scholarly gap, arguing both that *Blasted* itself challenges narratives around disability, and that Kane scholarship thus far has, in large part, depended on these very narratives to examine the play. Of *Blasted*’s three central characters, the play’s narrative seemingly centers on Ian, the white, middle-class male character. The play soon questions and critiques itself, however, disrupting what first appears to be a narrative about the effects of male violence on hysterical women. In other words, through Cate, the hysterical character of the play, and her relationship to Ian, *Blasted* does not allow for a straight line between violence and disability, emphasizing the possibility of an unconventional kind of narrative trajectory for the mad woman.

This alternative narrative trajectory for Cate is also a challenge to many previous theatrical forms. *Blasted*’s form has been compared to a large number of theatrical forms, including “kitchen sink” realism, Ibsenite drama, social realist theatre, tragic drama, masculinity-in-crisis plays of the 1990s, and postdramatic theatre. As Kane herself said in a 1999 letter, “the play collapses into one of Cate’s fits, putting the audience through the experience they have previously only



witnessed” (qtd. in Aston 2010). The final scene, in which Ian dies and yet still remains talking on stage, thus represents the playtext’s own madness, a hystericization<sup>17</sup> that comes from rejecting linear progression, and the theatrical forms that assume linearity as truth. It is the play’s refusal to follow linearity, or what I argue to be the play’s postdramatic structure, that connects *Blasted* to the radical form of Kane’s final two plays. Although *Blasted* includes stage directions, character descriptions, and many of the other formatting aspects of a traditional playtext, its formal and contextual madness make *Blasted* a more postdramatic play than one might initially expect.

While the initial readings of the play centred on its violence, subsequent criticism has been substantial both in breadth and in focus. *Blasted*’s minimalist dialogue lends itself to many different interpretations, and its open-ended second half invites the audience to reflect on the play’s engagement with previous theatrical forms that do not quite fit. An important aspect of many of these theatrical forms is disability: because experimental theatre often explores the connection between trauma, violence, and disability, disability stands at the heart of many of the theatrical traditions from which Kane draws. Because disability is often turned into a trope or motif in theatre, however, its inclusion in many of these theatrical forms tends to reinforce normative expectations about the connection between violence and disability. Before focussing on *Blasted*’s relationship to these forms in detail, I want to first outline what these normative expectations are, in order to explain how *Blasted* challenges them. When discussing conventional medical objectives about disability, disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002) outlines three different trajectories for people with disabilities: disability is cured (and is therefore

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<sup>17</sup> I take “hystericization” from Diamond 1997.

no longer disability), disability is regulated (and able-bodied people are not inconvenienced by it), or disability is eradicated (and the person with the disability dies) (14). Garland-Thomson argues “this ideology of cure is not isolated in medical texts or charity campaigns, but in fact permeates the entire cultural conversation about disability and illness” (14). Similarly, disability scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue that all literature follows a particular expectation around disability, beginning with identifying a “deviance” and ending with resolving that deviance, usually by curing, regulating, or eradicating disability (279). These narratives assume a simple chain of causality between some kind of violence that creates a deviance and the ostensibly undesirable disability that results from it. This causality suggests that any future disability should be resolvable through a knowledge and containment of its source. It is particularly significant that although *Blasted* self-consciously engages with disability issues, its plot does not conform to either of the models of disability’s conventional narrative structure outlined by Garland-Thomson or Mitchell and Snyder. I will contend, specifically, that the relationship between Cate and Ian shows multiple forms of disability that refuse to be cured, regulated, or eradicated. Further, *Blasted*’s ending constructs an alternative future for disability, a feminist future that refuses to continue the cycle of linear masculine violence.

The beginning of *Blasted* seemingly follows Mitchell and Snyder’s narrative prosthesis, revealing “a deviance” both in Cate’s and Ian’s characters. The first scene begins as the two former lovers enter; the setting is described as “a very expensive hotel room in Leeds” (3), and the dialogue begins with blatant racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism. The two characters initially on-stage are Ian, a 45-year-old Welsh journalist, and Cate, a 21-year-old south Londoner with “a stutter when

under stress” (3); Ian dominates the conversation, while Cate reacts to his discriminatory comments. Ian removes all of his clothes and Cate laughs when he says “put your mouth on me” (7); Ian becomes embarrassed and redresses in silence. He orders sandwiches to the hotel room but Cate refuses to eat the meat, instead devouring the cheese sandwiches. He attempts to initiate sex with her a number of times during this first exchange, but Cate insists that she “do[es]n’t ... want to do [it]” (14). In this first scene, Cate sucks her thumb, stutters, and goes into a number of fits, or shocked states of unconsciousness. In line with what Mitchell and Snyder would call “revealing a deviance” (279), Cate’s behaviour is connected to Ian’s derogatory slurs about her mentally disabled brother whom he calls “Retard,” “Spaz,” and “Joey” (5). It is important to note, however, that Cate does not represent the only “deviance” revealed this early in the play; Ian coughs uncontrollably in this first scene, eventually admitting that his lung is diseased, presumably with lung cancer.

In the second scene, the two awake in the same hotel room and it becomes clear that Ian raped Cate the evening before. When they fight over Ian’s loaded gun, Cate stutters and faints. He “simulates sex” (27) with her unconscious body; Cate awakes as he reaches orgasm. She voices her desire to leave and go home. Ian locks the door, refusing to let her leave. When a car backfires and he reacts with panic, Cate begins caressing and massaging him all over, eventually performing oral sex on him; just as Ian comes, exclaiming “I/Am/A/Killer” (30), however, she bites down on his penis. Cate is still bleeding between her legs from what is presumably Ian’s forced sex from the night before, saying that she cannot pee and her anus hurts<sup>18</sup>. He orders two English breakfasts; she says, “looks like there’s a war on” (33) as she looks out the window. The breakfasts arrive and Cate refuses to eat them because of the meat;

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<sup>18</sup> The play is ambiguous as to the exact kind of sexual assault that has taken place.

she then declares that she is going to have a bath and then go home, locking herself in the bathroom. A knock on the hotel room door brings a third character on the scene, an unnamed soldier back from war. Ian and the soldier begin talking about the hunger that the soldier has for sex and food, and Ian feels threatened by the soldier's advances. When the soldier finds Cate's underwear in one of the drawers, he demands to see her. They check the bathroom and find that Cate has escaped out a window. The soldier pees over the sheets on the bed; there is a blinding light and an explosion and the scene ends.

In the third scene, a large hole in one of the walls reveals that a war is on outside and the hotel has been bombed. Ian and the soldier, both unharmed from the blast, continue talking about the soldier's desire for food and sex. The conversation soon turns to war and killing, as the soldier demands to know what damage Ian has done. After he has described killing and raping a family at war, the soldier forces Ian to admit his rape of Cate. The soldier then talks about his own lover, Col, a woman he says was also raped and killed by soldiers. The soldier asks Ian what he does and Ian describes his journalist job, saying that he cannot write about the soldier because he does not "cover foreign affairs" (48). The soldier turns Ian around and rapes him, afterwards pushing a revolver into Ian's anus. The soldier is still hungry, demanding whether Ian has any food. When he cannot find food, the soldier sucks out and eats both of Ian's eyes, saying that this is what the soldiers did to Col. The scene ends. Suddenly in this scene, we have a new disability and a new form of violence that occurs in order to establish the deviance: Ian's sexual assault and blindness.

In the fourth scene, the soldier is holding a gun and lying on the ground. He has killed himself sometime between scenes; according to the stage directions, "he has blown his own brain out" (50). Cate enters, holding another woman's baby;

seeing Ian, she calls him “a nightmare” (51). When Ian responds, she tells him about the war outside the hotel room. He demands that she help him commit suicide, saying “[if I] don’t shoot myself I’ll starve to death” (54). Cate initially refuses, eventually giving him an empty rifle. Ian pulls the trigger and begins crying when he realizes there are no bullets. The baby dies in Cate’s arms and she begins laughing “hysterically” (57). This hysterical laughter is important in this context because Cate’s disability has not yet been resolved; similarly, Ian’s frantic desire for death is unsurprising, given his new disability, but Cate’s refusal to give him the means for suicide is in direct contradiction to the conventional structure of disability narratives. Cate even compares Ian to her brother, saying that the latter “[has] blind friends” (55). Somehow, even though Ian is her rapist, Cate seems to believe in the possibility of a different kind of future for him with his disability.

In the fifth and final scene, Cate buries the baby’s body under the floorboards, and leaves the hotel room to exchange sex for food. Ian tells her not to go, but she goes anyway, leaving him alone on stage. In a series of short episodes, he masturbates, tries to strangle himself, “shits” (59) on stage and tries to clean it up, laughs “hysterically” (59), has a nightmare, clings to the soldier’s body for warmth, eats the baby’s body, and eventually, according to the stage directions, “dies with relief” (60). It starts to rain on Ian, and he says “shit” (60), seemingly beyond death. Cate returns with bread, sausage, and gin, eating her fill and feeding Ian. She sits apart from him and sucks her thumb as Ian says the final line: “thank you” (61).

Although we have identified Cate’s and Ian’s respective “deviance” early in the play, neither disability follows the conventional trajectory. Cate’s disability is not cured by the end of the play; despite her new willingness to eat meat and drink gin, Cate laughs “hysterically” at the end of scene four and sucks her thumb in the final

scene. Meanwhile, Ian acquires some of Cate's symptoms after his traumatic episode with the soldier in the third scene. In scene four, Ian and Cate talk about the possibility of an afterlife, with Cate arguing that there is something beyond death, and Ian saying "Can't die and come back. That's not dying, that's fainting. When you die, it's the end" (56). The final moment after Ian's "death" is therefore not death at all; in fact, according to Ian's own reasoning, he has fainted. This "fainting" is close to what happens to Cate in scene two, as the stage directions indicate that Ian has "a fit". It is especially interesting to note that this moment would not necessarily be apparent to an audience viewing the play's performance. While the stage directions say "dies with relief" (60), Ian's subsequent talking means that an audience would not see this dying. Only a reader or director would be able to connect the irony of scene four and five, as Ian dies but does not die, instead only fainting according to his own reasoning. Ian's hysterical laughter in the final scene is similar to Cate's own hysterical laughter throughout the play. The play ends, therefore, with two characters with disability alive and on stage. Not only are they living with disability, they are also not subject to regulations that would seek to contain them or their disability. Instead, Cate moves around on stage and off stage at her own will, choosing to come back to feed a debilitated Ian.

It is not only the plot itself that challenges conventional disability narratives: the form of the play diverges from many different theatrical forms that assume mental or physical wellness as most desirable, thus casting disability as a deviance to be resolved. In many theatrical traditions, and in tragic theatre especially, a narrative resolution to disability typically depends on some kind of revenge. By diverging from tragedy especially, *Blasted* disrupts the cycle of violence on which many of these theatrical forms so often depend. Although *Blasted* is a very violent play, disability is

not exclusively dependent on this violence, and does not encourage more violence. In its refusal of violence as resolution, *Blasted* constructs a specific critique of toxic masculinity. Cate's refusal to kill or abandon Ian, and Ian's inability to "die of relief" in the final scene demonstrate a challenge to toxic masculinity and masculine violence as truth, in direct contradiction to a number of theatrical forms. I wish to show that linear narrative often depends on this cycle of masculine violence, such that violence creates disability and disability encourages more violence. By closely examining a number of theatrical forms, I will emphasize how *Blasted* departs from the expectation of violence begetting violence.

Beginning by examining *Blasted's* form especially as it relates to Shakespearean and Beckettian tragedy, I will show that Kane's play takes issue with the aspects of tragedy that depend on disavowing and despairing over disability. Sean Carney (2013) argues that *Blasted* is a tragedy, pointing to the themes within the play that centre on death and dying. While I agree that *Blasted* takes on many of the aspects of a traditional tragedy, it also ends on a note of hopefulness, as two people depend on one another for comfort in a world that might seem comfortless. Graham Saunders (2003; 2005) also connects *Blasted* to a legacy of tragic writing, comparing the play to Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Edward Bond's adaptation *Lear*, and Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. Kane herself compared the fourth scene of *Blasted* to Gloucester's desire to commit suicide in *King Lear*, also pointing to the title of her play as "the blasted heath" of *Lear* (Saunders 2002, 58). The final few scenes and the narrative discontinuities of *Blasted* are also reminiscent of Beckett's apocalyptic imagery, dark humour, and sparse dialogue.

The specifics of *Blasted's* break with the disability tropes of tragedy can be seen through a brief analysis of *King Lear* and *Endgame*. *King Lear's* tragedy is the

deadliness of disability itself, as Lear's madness becomes his eventual downfall and Gloucester's metaphorical blindness becomes embodied and deadly. The end of the play depicts a long list of deaths from both sides of Lear's allegiance, a moment in which the patriarchal head's individual disability spreads to the rest of society. In contrast to Shakespeare's physical-made-metaphorical approach to disability, Beckett's *Endgame* begins with all of its characters disabled in some way. The play is set in some unnamed future time, when bodily decay represents the end of the world. The tragedy of *Endgame* is disability without cure, as there are no more painkillers and eventually, no more characters to watch. *Endgame* represents the adage that "everyone will eventually become disabled," a statement made by disability scholars<sup>19</sup>, not as a call-to-arms for disability scholarship, but as a tragic reality of humanity; *Endgame* shows disability as a precursor to death.

In contrast, *Blasted* sets two characters with disabilities (Ian with his blindness and Cate with her hysteria) in a warzone but they do not die. Cate is not vilified but neither is she sanctified, coming back to Ian to feed him, but also "sit[ting] apart from him" in the final scene (61). There is no cure for Ian's blindness nor Cate's hysteria, but the play does not represent this as necessarily tragic. Rather than repeating the cycle of violence that she experiences, Cate changes things by refusing to abuse her abuser at his most vulnerable. Cate and Ian's shared vulnerability is therefore not tragic, but hopeful; as the war rages around them, they care for one another. Unlike *Endgame*, where Hamm and Clov are bound together because "there's no one else/there's nowhere else" (6), *Blasted* represents the potential for elsewhere and for something else. While both *King Lear* and *Endgame* participate in a tradition of using disability to represent a flawed humanity, *Blasted*

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<sup>19</sup> (Pfeiffer 2002, 18).



rejects this aspect of tragedy. The play equally rejects this dependence on physical and mental disability as allegory, instead portraying flawed humanity in relation to the inevitable self-destructiveness of toxic masculinity, and giving hope by showing that an alternative to this destructiveness exists.

The alternative that I point to in *Blasted* is decidedly not realist; instead, the play is interested in exploring something beyond the conventional real. *Blasted* challenges a long lineage of European realist drama, including Ibsenite drama, Brechtian social realist theatre, and more recent “kitchen sink” realism. Sean Carney argues that *Blasted* can be separated into two halves, the first more comparable to Brechtian social realist theatre, and the second more in tune with the Beckettian avant-garde (267). However, Kane refused such a separation between the first and second halves of *Blasted*. While the setting of *Blasted* and the dialogue between the two lovers might compare to Brechtian social realist theatre, Ian’s use of slang challenges such a comparison; Brecht is known for the detachment of his characters from the audience, especially using language that alienates, rather than encourages audience understanding. The second half of the play is often connected with more avant-garde forms of theatre, especially that of Beckett, yet in a 1998 interview with Aleks Sierz, Kane said that she intended the second half of *Blasted* to be the more “real” half of the play:

Directors frequently think the second half of *Blasted* is a metaphor, dream, nightmare (that’s the word Cate uses), and that it’s somehow more abstract than the first half. In a production that works well, I think the first half should seem incredibly real and the second half even more real. Probably, by the end, we should be wondering if the first half was a dream. (qtd. in Sierz 2000, 106)

This challenge to realism is therefore a challenge to a particular kind of realism, a realism that imagines that there is only one kind of real. Instead, Kane is most often interested in exploring the multivalent aspects of theatrical reality, pushing the boundaries of what is possible on stage. *Blasted* especially questions a linear reality, where the beginning is assumed to have direct consequences on the ending.

Another form of realism that is relevant to Kane's work in *Blasted* is that of the masculinity-in-crisis plays of the 1990s. In British theatre throughout this period, new avant-garde playwrights almost exclusively used explicit and graphic violence in their plays. These new playwrights, called "the New Brutalists" (Saunders 2002, 4) or "The New Angry Young Men" (Aston 2002, 575) were neither entirely brutal nor entirely male, as Kane was frequently included in these lists. I call these plays masculinity-in-crisis plays because they largely embody Susan Faludi (1991)'s conception of the "crisis of masculinity". Faludi describes the concept of the "crisis of masculinity" or the "masculinity crisis" as a reaction to or backlash against the gains of feminism leading into the 1990s: as women gained more reproductive autonomy, took steps towards economic equality, and attempted to rewrite male-dominated narratives, the patriarchal position was challenged and masculine control was questioned. Part of the anti-feminist backlash was therefore a creation of a new hyper-masculine narrative of violence; increasing violence against women was often justified by implying that feminism had gone too far. "Masculinity in crisis" becomes an excuse for promoting or reifying masculine-centred narratives, especially those that revolve around white masculinity, as it is argued that women are encroaching too much on more universal stories. Narratives that revolve around white masculinity are encouraged or celebrated within the masculinity-in-crisis model, as other kinds of stories are imagined to be less universal. Faludi argues that this kind

of feminist backlash is not new, but “has erupted in every period of backlash in the last century, a faithful quiet companion to the loudly voiced call for a ‘return to femininity’” (62). Although Faludi does not mention drama, I read this same kind of masculinity crisis in British theatre of the 1990s. Given the history of socialist struggle within European theatre, the masculinity-in-crisis plays often also explore class issues, as the poor white man must somehow reclaim the power he has lost through feminism and capitalism<sup>20</sup>. In large part, these plays were both reiterating the “Angry Young Men” plays of the 1950s and 60s, while also reacting against contemporary feminist work that portrayed toxic masculinity and rape culture as inherent structures of a flawed, patriarchal society<sup>21</sup>.

These masculinity-in-crisis plays, alongside the literature and film that also followed a masculinity-in-crisis model, were often lauded by (mostly male) critics who denied that these narratives had anything to do with Faludi’s conception of the crisis in masculinity, instead arguing that their violence was amoral and therefore universal. Aleks Sierz (2000), for example, argued that Kane was one of the first to write what he called “in-yer-face theatre” (3); he pointed to the moments of graphic violence in *Blasted*, *Phaedra’s Love*, and *Cleansed* and adamantly argued against the possibility of the “crisis in masculinity” pertaining to Kane’s work (104). He also repeated in two separate articles (2001; 2010) that “not all men are rapists” (104; 54). Kane is not a feminist author, Sierz maintains, because she spreads violence

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<sup>20</sup> Often categorized as the beginning of the “In-Yer-Face” theatre movement, Mark Ravenhill’s *Shopping and Fucking* is a very good example of the crisis in masculinity, as three white male protagonists are thrust into a world where all things, including sex, are part of a consumer capital that the characters must struggle against.

<sup>21</sup> Faludi is a good example of this feminist work, as her 1991 book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* outlines structures of American society that affect women often because of persistent gender roles that allow and perhaps even encourage men to engage in violence.

equally between genders, and because she refused to call herself a “woman writer” (2001, 103-105). He intentionally separates Kane’s work from other feminist theatre in order to make her seem more legitimate, pointing to the graphic violence in her plays as not masculine-focused, but amoral. Similarly, Robert Lublin (2010) argues that *Blasted* is about love, not rape, contending that “the feminist possibilities... are lost” when Cate does not take revenge on a blind and dying Ian (117). Both Sierz and Lublin assume that *Blasted* does not actively critique toxic masculinity, but is nonetheless an important play for its universal violence. They almost explicitly ignore the ways that *Blasted* intentionally challenges masculine violence through a disruption of linear narrative.

However, these critics were right in making a connection between *Blasted*’s plot and the theatrical conventions associated with “Angry Young Men” drama. Following in the footsteps of work like Edward Bond’s *Saved* (1965)<sup>22</sup> and *Lear* (1971)<sup>23</sup>, *Blasted* is an intentionally violent play, yet, as I have suggested, it also attempts to break from the assumption that there is no relationship between toxic masculinity and violence. In the introduction to *Lear*, Bond describes the emphasis he places on violence within his plays, writing that “it should be amoral not to write about violence” (v).<sup>24</sup> This description of violence in Bond’s playwriting is especially poignant when compared to Kane’s discussion of violence in *Blasted*: “you’d think people would be able to tell the difference between a play about violence and a

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<sup>22</sup> *Saved* includes a scene where a group of men, including the baby’s father, stone a baby to death.

<sup>23</sup> *Lear* is a retelling of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, where *Lear* is both blinded and becomes mad.

<sup>24</sup> Kane has commented on Bond’s forewords and afterwards, saying she thinks they are “brilliant” but beyond her capacity for commentary. Instead, she wants the audience to engage with her work and tell her what they think it is about (qtd. in Saunders 2002, 27).

violent play. I don't think it's violent at all. It is quite a peaceful play" (qtd. in Benedict 1995, n.p.). While Kane was being facetious in this interview with journalists who saw *Blasted* as an exclusively and controversially violent play, her comment highlights *Blasted*'s use of violence in a different way. Through Cate's character, we can see what Kane meant here about the difference between a play being about violence and being violent: Cate refuses to act in the way that might be expected of her, for instance, by taking revenge on her rapist, instead describing and engaging with her surroundings. *Blasted* is meant to function similarly, to show how violence permeates a society that is unwilling to grapple with its structures of power.

Elaine Aston, widely considered to be the leading feminist Kane scholar, has challenged the perception that *Blasted* is amoral, examining it as a potentially feminist-inspired piece. Aston (2010) refers to *Blasted* as representing "the feeling of a loss of feminism" (585); she connects *Blasted* with the perceived failure of feminism to properly address toxic masculinity. Placing *Blasted* in a very important context, Aston emphasizes the feeling and affective response that *Blasted* sparked and continues to spark, especially around masculinity and violence. She argues that while parts of *Blasted* might be a disavowal of feminism, its violence is not actually as amoral as some critics wish to believe, but instead is explicitly rooted in a toxic masculinity that may not be resolved or resolvable. However, by focussing on the reaction of *Blasted*'s viewers, or their collective affective response, Aston removes our focus from the play itself, instead emphasizing the meaning that is made outside, in its performance and reception history. Aston's analysis of *Blasted* is important to the extent that it demonstrates how we might connect this meaning-making process to Kane's later postdramatic theatre (a point to which I will return), but it also seems to give too much credit to the centrality of masculinity in the play, a focus that I see

as highly challenged by *Blasted*'s form. I argue, by contrast, that although *Blasted* uses many aspects of a masculinity-in-crisis play, it also challenges toxic masculinity through Cate's refusal to reiterate masculine violence. In other words, the critique of masculine violence that Aston attributes to the response of the play's audience is something that I see as also taking place within the play itself. Cate's position as both a woman and a person with a disability makes her refusal of a conventional revenge narrative that much more important, as she breaks the cycle of violence that is usually a key structure of a masculinity-in-crisis narrative.

In order to elaborate the particular ways that *Blasted* challenges the masculinity-in-crisis theatrical form, I must first outline another form of theatrical realism from which *Blasted* deviates: Ibsenite drama. As Ibsenite drama focuses on the hysterical woman through the eyes of the masculine authority figure, it not only upholds disability narratives, it works to strengthen their legitimacy. Unlike masculinity-in-crisis plays that work to legitimize a focus on masculinity in order to justify further violence against women, Ibsenite drama focuses on the hysterical woman, broken by her own sexual culpability, in order to justify male perpetrated sexual violence. Feminist scholars, including Aston (2003) and Kim Solga (2007), have argued that Cate functions as an hysteric within *Blasted*. This analysis depends not only on a particular understanding of "hysteric" but also on recognizing the theatrical form, namely Ibsenite realism, that structures itself around uncovering, diagnosing, and curing a hysterical woman, usually through forcing her to admit her own (sexual) culpability. Christina Wald (2007) gives a very thorough overview of the connections between hysteria and European theatre between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, separating hysteria into two categories, *Grande Hystérie* (1870s-1900s), associated with melodrama and Jean-Martin Charcot, and *Petite*

*Hystérie* (1900s-1930s), associated with Ibsenite realist drama and Sigmund Freud. She argues that medical discourse and theatre are inextricably linked to the extent that theatrical performances were based on Charcot's and Freud's lectures, while both researchers also attended and used these performances for their research. Popular actors were used in lectures as part of hysterical demonstrations, just as much as they performed in theatrical plays (30-38). Most relevant to Kane's plays is the concept of *Petite Hystérie*, as each of Kane's plays arguably struggles to challenge Freudian psychoanalysis/psychotherapy and his notion of the talking-cure. Elin Diamond (1997) argues that Freud's talking-cure was especially relevant to Ibsen's drama of the 1880s-1910s, as his plays often centred on an hysterical woman and the objective male authority figure who must "solve her riddle"; this convention was very similar to Freud's talking-cure, in which the hysterical woman admits her moral failings and is thus cured (qtd in Wald 2007, 37). Ibsenite drama focuses on the hysterical woman as the character with a deviance, resolving her deviance through an utterance that reveals her guilt. The narrative trope of the hysterical woman being understood and made understandable by the male authority figure is arguably a requirement of Ibsenite drama, as she becomes the arbiter of the unreal, the part of the narrative that is eventually clarified for the audience. The audience is thus expected also to be objective, real, and arguably male, an outside representative of the male physician who eventually cures the hysterical woman.

By setting these features of Ibsenite drama in relation to Kane's plays, it becomes clear that *Blasted* equally disrupts the position of the hysteric as well as that of the objective male authority figure. According to the origins of hysteria in melodrama, the hysteric is represented by her mysterious fainting spells, unintelligible utterances, and (sometimes hallucinatory) fits and convulsions (Wald

30). These symptoms, alongside mental simplicity and a nervous stutter, neatly describe Cate's position within *Blasted*. Solga argues that although other Kane scholars call Cate's mental illness "mysterious," *Blasted* explicitly connects Cate's trauma with her nervousness (361). According to Solga, there is a direct causal relationship between Ian's sexual violence against Cate and her fits, hysterical laughter, and thumb-sucking. Her rape is not mysterious, as Cate continually reveals that she does not have desire, repeating "I don't want to do this" (13). By not staging Cate's initial rape, *Blasted* emphasizes the way that heterosexual rape of women is often silenced and disavowed. Solga argues that *Blasted* works to emphasize how violence against women is ignored in a masculine-centered society, and points to Cate as a hysterical woman, traumatized by a long history of sexual violence (363). Finally, she contends that *Blasted* initially uses and then discards a realist form in order to represent realism's fragility, in the same way that the depictions of masculinity in *Blasted* emphasize masculinity's fragility (367). While I find her analysis convincing, her emphasis on Ian's part in Cate's disability is troubling. Solga's main argument hinges on the simple connection between rape and disability: she argues that unlike in Ibsenite drama, in which the main objective is to discover the cause of the hysteric's disability, the cause of Cate's disability is known from the beginning of the play.

I would argue, however, that such an argument might be giving Ian too much credit. The beginning of the play reveals Cate's disability through Ian's words, as he calls her brother derogatory slurs and heavily implies that Cate is similarly simple. In a milder description of the same, Ian repeatedly calls Cate "stupid" and "thick," often in the form of a command: "don't be stupid" (32). Cate's own mental disability is therefore connected with Ian's understanding of her and her family, a view that the



audience is initially made to believe as part of the theatrical reality that is unfolding on stage. If Solga is correct, Cate's disability is dependent on the sexual violence she repeatedly experiences prior to and during the play: Cate says the fits have only started again "since [her] Dad came back" (10), and she frequently stutters, laughs hysterically, and faints when Ian tries to sexually assault her. Therefore, not only does Ian's masculine gaze reveal Cate's disability, but it is Ian's violence, on Solga's argument, that also causes the disability to begin with. Cate, at first glance, seems only to be the way she is because of Ian's action<sup>25</sup> and her own inability to react. Ian is the powerful, male knower and describer of (Cate's) reality. Cate's character is therefore expected to be inactive, unknowing, simple, and unable to describe the real; in fact, much of Kane criticism still sees Cate in this light, as a passive, mostly silent victim of unfortunate circumstances.

Interestingly, both groups of Kane critics, feminist and otherwise, see Cate as a victim, calling her "naïve," "young," and "innocent". This might even have been purposeful on Kane's part, as Cate is 21 years old, around the same age as Kane herself when she was writing the play<sup>26</sup>. As Amelia Howe Kritzer (2008) notes, though, Cate "seems younger than her age" (31), arguably leading the audience to make a connection between her and her brother. Laurens De Vos (2011) exemplifies this connection, as he does not name Cate in his initial description of *Blasted*, merely referring to her as "[Ian's] somewhat retarded, much younger ex-girlfriend" (15). The critical argument that places the cause of Cate's disability in Ian's hands, though,

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<sup>25</sup> The comment that Cate utters during one of her fits does not contradict this statement; if her father has also been committing violence against her (as the statement would imply) she is still only the way she is because of the male authority figures on stage and off stage.

<sup>26</sup> Kane wrote *Blasted* when she was 22 years old and it was first performed when she was 23.

risks making Cate nameless and unimportant within a narrative whose “real” violence is in the second half of the play: the rape of the male protagonist, Ian. Placing too much emphasis on Cate’s victimization, as Solga (2007) and Kritzer (2008) do, contributes to the infantilization of Cate that Ian starts in the very first scene, potentially giving him even more influence over her.

Even in the first scene, however, Cate shows that she is not passive and that she can react to masculine power in her own way. When Ian takes off his clothes and says “put your mouth on me” (7), she laughs in front of his naked body, making him embarrassed. In scene two, before the onstage blast, Cate is the first to point out the war that is taking place outside, saying: “looks like there’s a war on” (33). She is thus the character that tells and shows the truth, anticipating the soldier’s advice to Ian (“Tell them you saw me” (48)); her intervention is surprising, though, in that she refuses to be explicitly in the spotlight or to violently impose herself on others. Instead of revealing the truth of her own disability through talk therapy, as would be expected of the hysteric in Ibsenite drama, Cate articulates the truth of her surroundings. Similarly, rather than revealing her secret sexual desire, Cate continually asserts that she does not have desire, at least not in this context. Further, the play leaves open the possibility that Cate’s disability may not be exclusively caused by the sexual trauma to which she’s been subjected; her attempt to save the baby in scene four, for example, signifies a kind of deep empathy towards all those who experience the violence of war, and ends in hysterical laughter when the baby dies.

Another limitation of the critical focus on Ian’s responsibility for Cate’s disability is that it overlooks the play’s take on other forms of madness. One could argue that while Cate represents the hysteric of the play, Ian and the soldier

represent a different kind of madness. Scholars have certainly argued that Ian's rape in the second half of the play is the more "real" rape<sup>27</sup>, imagining the cruelty that Ian experiences as the real tragedy of the play. French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray is useful in illuminating the difference between Cate's hysteria and the madness of Ian and the soldier, and in showing the ways that the male characters' actions take place within a particular cycle of violence that is undoubtedly masculine in force. Irigaray (1977) describes the masculine, or the phallogentric, as a oneness, or a straight line. Instead of introducing women into a masculine society, she strives to create an alternative feminine space. She says:

I am trying, as I have already indicated to go through the masculine imaginary, to interpret the way it has reduced us to silence, to muteness or mimicry, and I am attempting, from that starting-point and at the same time, to (re)discover a possible space for the feminine imaginary. (164)

While she has been criticized for being essentialist or too focussed on specific forms of feminine and masculine bodies that cannot and do not represent all of femininity or masculinity, her focus on the feminine is arguably meant to open up the possibility for other forms of living, of thought, and of bodily experience. A masculine, phallogentric narrative, according to Irigaray, is one that assumes a linear experience or a trajectory that disavows the elsewhere or the other. One way that this narrative works is to assume the other into the oneness of the linear narrative; for instance, the conventional disability narrative that cures, regulates, or eradicates disability is one that places an emphasis on the untouched able-bodied, the full or wholeness of the one. Irigaray herself discusses the inability of psychoanalysis to "cure" the hysteric,

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<sup>27</sup> See Lublin (2010).

saying: “does psychoanalysis offer any ‘cure’ to hysterics beyond a surfeit of suggestions intended to adapt them, if only a little better, to masculine society?” (137). I bring up Irigaray here to rethink the ways that *Blasted* challenges the realist form, both in relation to masculinity-in-crisis plays and Ibsenite drama. The complex relationship between Ian, Cate, and the soldier demonstrates how *Blasted* turns away from masculine oneness in order to imagine a new kind of response to violence, one beyond adaptation to a masculine society.

Kane wrote the second half of the play based on the Bosnia crisis, after watching a television program about the violent rapes that took place in the former Yugoslavia. When asked about the connection, she said:

I asked myself: ‘What could possibly be the connection between a common rape in a Leeds hotel room and what’s happening in Bosnia?’ And then suddenly this penny dropped and I thought: ‘Of course, it’s obvious. One is the seed and the other is the tree.’ And I do think that seeds of full-scale war can always be found in peacetime civilization and I think the wall between so-called civilization and what happened in central Europe is very, very thin and it can get torn down at any time. (qtd. in Sierz 2000, 101)

According to Kane, the soldier is meant to exemplify the connection between the rape that Ian had just committed and the war that was going on outside. Even the soldier’s lack of a name in the play demonstrates that his actions are not individual; on the contrary, the nameless soldier, who never reveals which side he is fighting for, figures as part of a larger system of masculine dominance and violence. The soldier’s occupation, the only real identifier we are given, places him as a perpetrator of violence, but also one who has experienced violence—he has undoubtedly seen the

violence of war. In the male space of the hotel room, a place where Ian had earlier raped his partner, the soldier can unleash and admit the full force of the violence that he has experienced, not only through telling Ian of these experiences, but forcing Ian to experience them himself through rape. The soldier's literal orgasm is here made parallel to his exclamation of the violence that he has experienced. After committing the sexual violence against Ian, however, the soldier commits suicide, ending his part of the narrative by ending his own life. The soldier therefore represents the end of a mad character within the conventional disability narrative, as well as representing the masculinity-in-crisis model of violence begetting violence. His experience of masculinity and violence leads him to want an end, just as Ian wants an end in the fourth scene when he longs for suicide. There is not room for the soldier to imagine multiple futures for himself, as his experience of violence leads to only one possible narrative outcome.

The soldier's position as representative of toxic masculine violence and also toxic masculine narrative structure is emphasized by his ambiguous characterization. Previous readings of the line in the third scene, "Our town now" (39), have imagined this line as indicative of the anti-Muslim sentiment in Britain in the 1990s and early 2000s (specifically Saunders 2002, 51-54; and Sierz 2010, 49-50). Such a reading assumes that the "our" refers to the (presumably black or darker skinned) soldier and does not include the white Ian, now victimized by the soldier and his gun. However, if we read Ian's rape as an extension of Cate's earlier in the play, including Ian within this "our" is not an illogical step. Not only is the soldier's skin colour left

unspecified<sup>28</sup>, the soldier seems to believe that Ian is not so different from himself. The soldier implies their collective ownership of the girl they initially assume is in the next room, also asking Ian if he knows about the horrors of war. The soldier thus expects Ian to have a similar relationship to violence as he does. The “our” therefore connects both Ian and soldier to a narrative structure that implies their enforced reiteration of violence as a mode of survival. It is only Cate who can imagine a different kind of future, embodying a multiplicity of potential trajectories for survivors of violence.

Cate’s actions therefore refuse a phallogentric masculine narrative, as she refuses to continue the cycle of violence to which both the soldier and Ian adhere. This refusal challenges both the masculinity-in-crisis play and the Ibsenite dramatic form, as the soldier’s cycle of violence is not permitted to continue. Further, Cate’s actions refuse the masculine narrative by challenging Ian’s own control over the narrative. Returning once again to Ibsenite drama, I argue that Cate shakes the male authority figure’s position once more, emphasizing his literal orgasm as an inefficient arbiter of truth. The moment in the second scene when Cate performs fellatio on Ian is a demonstration of *Blasted*’s radical reversal of power, as Cate begins rewriting the story from the inside. Sean Carney (2010) questions this scene, arguing that this moment is seemingly out of character for Cate, as she had, up to this point, refused any sexual activity with Ian. Her sudden change of heart either represents Kane’s inconsistent writing, Cate’s desire to comfort Ian, or Cate’s attempt to coax information out of Ian (Carney 270). I want to take issue with Carney’s reading of this particular scene. While it is a very important formal moment of the play, I see it

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<sup>28</sup> In early versions of the play, Kane did specify the soldier as “Vladek,” a Serbian name. She also had the line “our town now” as originally “Serbian town now,” but subsequently changed both contextual markers (Saunders 2002, 53).

as neither inconsistent writing, nor a demonstration of Cate's empathy or revenge; instead, the scene shows the beginnings of *Blasted's* step away from realism alongside Ian's step towards madness. Through positioning Ian's orgasm as irrelevant to *Blasted's* narrative resolution, the moment doubly critiques a linear realism.

Important to this analysis is the role of the female orgasm in the theory of hysteria. One of the original theories about hysteria posited that female hysteria was caused by a lack of sexual activity or climax. In order to cure her, the male authority would have to massage the woman's genital region in order to bring her to climax (Maines 1999). According to Diamond (1991), in theatre, this climax is translated into an utterance that reveals the guilt of the female hysteric: the narrative can only maintain its realism through her own truth in this utterance. In the same way that the male authority figure (or physician) would induce sexual pleasure in his hysterical patients to force them to declare their internalized sexual desire, Ibsenite drama concludes with the male authority figure understanding and therefore curing the hysterical woman's condition (60). The second scene of *Blasted* inverts this trope about hysteria twice over, as Cate, the hysteric, forces Ian, the male authority, to admit his own perceived (toxic masculine) culpability, inducing an utterance that does not fit within the narrative of the play. Just as Ian comes and simultaneously admits that he is a "Killer" (31), Cate bites down on his penis, returning to the position of the undesiring woman that she proclaimed herself in scene one. Pointing to Ian's lines during this part of scene two, Carney says, "it is as if we have walked into another play" (270); rather than admitting the truth of his own condition, Ian declares this apparent lie, that he was a secret agent and a killer. There are two possible readings of Ian's declaration: either Ian is lying, or his declaration is

completely irrelevant to the rest of the play. Ian never again mentions his secret agent status, and his claim is never substantiated with a history. The scene therefore forces the ostensibly sane male authority figure either to utter untruth through sexual pleasure, or to utter a truth that is irrelevant to the onstage reality. Whether or not Ian really is a secret agent in the play is irrelevant to the scene, as the utterance signifies both Cate's control over Ian, and her control over the narrative itself. While her disability is connected to the trauma Ian creates, it extends beyond this trauma, and is never explained through her own words. In this one very important moment in scene two, Ian begins to show how he lacks control and how his masculinity is unable to completely describe the reality that the audience is shown.

The question remains then, as to the kind of reality that *Blasted* shows, and the form to which *Blasted* does adhere. Throughout this chapter, I have outlined the various theatrical forms that *Blasted* challenges, but I have not attempted to show the kind of theatre that *Blasted* adheres to. Recent scholarship has put an emphasis on the connections between Kane's work and another theatrical form, namely postdramatic theatre. According to Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006), postdramatic theatre is defined as drama that no longer focuses on the playtext for meaning. Although Lehmann mentions Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* in his preface to the English-language edition of his ground-breaking book entitled *Postdramatic Theatre*, and his translator Karen Jürs-Munby mentions *Crave*, Lehmann does not mention Kane's previous works. However, if we trace the definition of postdramatic, it becomes clear that this form above all others fits well in *Blasted's* context.

The term "postdramatic" depends on the prefix "post," a description that follows the same meaning as the "post" in "postmodern". "Post" here does not denote



an era or epoch, or a rejection of theatrical conventions; rather it signifies a place beyond theatrical conventions, where conventions are known and understood, but potentially discarded or challenged. Lehmann especially examines theatre that discards or disregards the text, arguing that European theatre beginning in the 1960s and 1970s began to imagine a theatrical space that did not depend on only one specific theatrical reality. Realism was being played with on stage such that multiple kinds of real were being explored through audience participation and affective response. Performance becomes the most important part of the theatrical experience, as a play's meaning or understanding especially depends on the audience's interaction. The audience, of course, cannot be anticipated in advance of any specific performance, making a postdramatic piece different each time it is performed.

Focussing especially on her two final plays, scholars, including Ahmet Gökhan Biçer (2011) and Matthew Roberts (2015), have convincingly argued that Kane's playtexts are written exclusively for performance, as they depend more heavily on bodily interpretation rather than just textual interpretation. While the description of a postdramatic piece fits well with the other two plays in this study, *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*, *Blasted* still includes stage directions, character descriptions, and setting descriptions, seemingly also referencing a specific historical event, that of the Bosnian crisis<sup>29</sup>. These aspects of *Blasted*'s form might disqualify it from being categorized as a postdramatic piece. However, as Stefka Mihaylova (2015) notes, many of the specific stage directions are vague and intentionally difficult to stage. *Blasted* leaves many of the specifics out of the play, instead allowing the performance

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<sup>29</sup> Kane has said in a number of initial interviews that the Bosnian war crisis was one of the main pieces of inspiration, especially for the second half of the play.

and audience to dictate meaning. As well, while the play challenges conventions of theatrical tragedy and realism, as I have shown, it also simultaneously recognizes these forms as relevant. *Blasted* constructs a new kind of narrative form, one that allows madness to open up possibilities for the future, rather than dictating how this future might look. The result, as represented by the 1996 Brussels performance that focussed the play on the baby's death, burial, and consumption in scenes three to five because of the "Dutroux-affair"<sup>30</sup>, is the ability for each performance of *Blasted* to represent toxic masculinity in its current and relevant light. By removing context-specific identifiers from the representation of the soldier in particular, *Blasted* intentionally disrupts conventional narratives that place masculine violence as an outlier; the soldier represents all men, in a radical refusal to localize masculine violence. When it becomes clear that Ian is incapable of telling the soldier's story, the audience is encouraged to tell that story, or at least to remember and interpret it, to be moved by the performance. Aston looks to the affective response that *Blasted* initially elicited, arguing that this audience reaction represented the feeling of the loss of feminism. Perhaps it also represents a future for disability and feminism that enforces a kind of shared vulnerability through performance and audience participation.

In 1999, Kane said that the final scene transports the audience into one of Cate's fits. More recently, Mihaylova (2015) calls this final scene a "feminist... no-place" where interdependence and mutual support allow two disabled characters to survive, despite an on-going war (226). While *Blasted* is full of graphic violence, destruction, and war, it also ends with hope, as Ian, a previously entitled white male

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<sup>30</sup> Kane discusses how she was interested by this interpretation of the play, which translated the real-world events of Marc Dutroux, a Belgium serial killer and child molester, into the performance (Saunders 2002, 67).

rapist, concludes the play thanking his disabled female survivor for turning him into a survivor as well. This rejection of disability tropes is equally a rejection of a linear realism that depends on a masculine understanding of “the real” at the expense of a more complex future. By using a postdramatic form, *Blasted* allows multiple kinds of realities to interact, encouraging a future that is not necessarily linear, masculine-centred, nor completely able-bodied. In *Blasted*'s final scene, this final “feminist no-place,” we find a Butlerian shared vulnerability<sup>31</sup> that disavows a linear chain of causality.

This chapter has laid the groundwork for looking at Kane's final two plays, *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*, and the more explicitly postdramatic structure that they use. Like *Blasted*, the later plays bring in a large breadth of literary inspiration, refusing to pigeonhole or encapsulate identity. Unlike *Blasted*, however, these plays do not follow any kind of discernible plot, instead using fragments to guide the audience and reader through the possibilities for an alternative kind of future, through a different kind of narrative. Just as I have done here, my subsequent chapters will trace out the complex interactions between characters, arguing that C, M, A, and B of *Crave*, and the speakers of *4.48 Psychosis* are mad and require the audience to imagine a mad future. Both plays once again challenge masculine narratives, while also refusing to adhere to conventional disability tropes. *Blasted* represented Kane's step into theatre, while *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* arguably represent her step out of dramatic convention, as she attempts to allow performance to take precedence over playtext.

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<sup>31</sup> In Judith Butler (2004)'s *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, Butler describes the radical potential of a precarious shared vulnerability that encourages solidarity between those who share oppression.

## Chapter Two

### “White on White and Black”: Race and Gender in *Crave*

The controversy surrounding *Blasted* gave Sarah Kane a reputation for writing explicitly violent material. Her subsequent two plays, *Phaedra's Love* and *Cleansed*, followed in *Blasted*'s footsteps by including onstage rape, graphic murder, and death. In 1998, when it came time to put on her newest play, *Crave*, Kane decided to use a pseudonym because she did not want her reputation to follow it. *Crave* was meant to be a different kind of performance piece, turning away from explicit graphic violence in order to experiment with the reiteration of trauma. The play extends *Blasted*'s postdramatic strategies through the removal of linear plotting, character descriptions, or stage directions, but retaining *dramatis personae*, with four characters differentiated by letters: A, C, M, and B. The four characters engage in conversation with one another, or perhaps with themselves, in an almost lyrical mixture of sentiments. The result is a play that is difficult to interpret, as the play gives glimpses into the four characters' lives, yet also unravels those glimpses in a number of different ways. While an argument can be made for a single subjectivity distributed between four voices in *Crave*, I assume the opposite throughout this chapter; it is clear that while these voices are connected, they are meant to be played by separate performers. The four separate voices in the playtext represent the impossibility of communicating psychological distress when no one is willing to listen. The possibility of collective overcoming—or the characters working together to diminish their own psychological distress—is lost in the play because of their inability to connect with one another. I will show that in *Crave*, like in *Blasted* before it, Kane is here highlighting the importance of connection; however, unlike *Blasted*,

*Crave* does not allow interdependence to take place, repeating the psychological distress that may have been diminished through understanding.

In my first chapter, I examined disability in *Blasted*, arguing that the play's form challenges various types of theatrical realism in order to establish an alternative to narrative conventions around disability. This chapter builds on the first, focussing instead on how *Crave* refuses to let the audience contextualize its characters in order to highlight the impossibility of collective overcoming when context is erased.

Collective overcoming becomes impossible when the normate<sup>32</sup> (or that which we imagine to be normal) is still given centre stage, even when identifiers, plot lines, and contexts are removed. Madness in the play functions as a disability that is not easily cured as the play brings up many models of rehabilitation for the various forms of madness the characters invoke, but often discards these models in the same breath.

It becomes important when discussing a play as disjointed as *Crave* to parse through what kinds of connections *are* made throughout the play, and how different methods of diagnosing and treating madness are rejected. As well, because *Crave* is a play that rejects so many playtext conventions, its few stage directions are of the utmost importance. Looking especially to the silences within the play, I will outline how silence becomes both a different kind of support for mad people and a method of upholding the power of the normate.

Unlike *Blasted*, *Crave* does not include any apparently linear plot. Any succinct summary of the play therefore risks flattening the complexity of the interactions between characters. This complex interaction is exemplified in the opening “exchange” between the four characters:

C: You're dead to me.

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<sup>32</sup> For a more specific definition of “the normate,” see page 22-23.

B: My will reads, Fuck this up and I'll haunt you for the rest of your fucking life.

C: He's following me.

A: What do you want?

B: To die.

C: Somewhere outside of the city, I told my mother, You're dead to me.

(155)

At first, the audience or reader might assume that C is talking to B or that A is talking to B. There is an assumption, perhaps simply based on the form itself, that drama includes dialogue that will take place between the characters on stage at the same time. Furthermore, there is potentially a connection made between C's initial comment about death, and B's response including a "will" and "haunting."

Immediately afterwards, however, C reveals that they<sup>33</sup> were speaking about their mother all along. Finally, there is no connection between C's initial line, "You're dead to me" and C's second line "He's following me," making even particular characters' lines potentially disjunctive. The audience's understanding of an individual character therefore may not increase as the lines unfold. This first exchange, or lack thereof, among the characters reveals that further conversations within the play are suspect. It is now unclear whether B is answering A when they say "to die," or whether B is simply saying something to themselves, or to the audience generally.

*Crave* attempts to complicate the audience's desire to follow the characters linearly through any kind of plot. In many ways, the play takes up what I described in the first chapter as a feminine narrative: anti-linear and multiple. Lines are shared

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<sup>33</sup> Because of the ambiguous gendering of the characters, I use the gender-neutral pronoun "they/them/their" to refer to A, B, C, and M. This is to represent the potential that these characters are neither male nor female.

between characters, repeated later in the play by a different character, and often do not seem to follow from previous lines. The audience is thus forced to construct character in an unconventional way, almost literally reading between lines. Because of this intentionally ambiguous non-characterisation, it becomes difficult to make any kind of definitive argument around how the characters might be interacting with each other in *Crave*. In fact, M says at one point: “and if this makes no sense, then you understand perfectly” (159). Even this statement begins with a coordinating conjunction, implying a connection to the rest of the “narrative” while at the same time explicitly telling the audience that the narrative is not meant to make logical or linear sense. Just like the first “exchange” where characters do not necessarily talk *with* one another, yet still talk, *Crave* challenges its audience to consider the possibility for a kind of connection that is beyond convention. Conventional character construction may be discarded here, but there remain four characters that are saying separate, yet also related, words.

Already, before examining particular lines or their combinations, it is clear that *Crave* aims to challenge the narrative styles that underpin conventional constructions of theatrical reality. A refusal of linear causal relationships between the characters shows that it is a difficult play to read. This has led many critics to diagnose the play, calling it a representation of a variety of psychiatric conditions. Jolene Armstrong (2015), for example, argues that the play “practically begs the audience to play the role of the psychoanalyst” (162), calling the play itself “a word salad communication of a psychotic episode” (159); she fails, however, to recognize the ways that the play disavows psychoanalysis, refusing to let the audience function as the authority of its complex interactions between sanity and madness. Sean Carney (2013) points to the play’s disruptive form, calling it “an autistic loop of

trauma” (280). Thomas Phillips also uses a psychiatric diagnosis to describe the play, calling it “schizophrenia of voices that obscures the consistent narrative flow of traditional (i.e., premodern) drama” (129). These critics seem quick to diagnose a play based on its refusal to let itself be understandable. By challenging the concepts of subjecthood as individual, knowable, and linear, *Crave* brings a mad diagnosis upon it. It also refuses to be cured through critical analysis. If, as Armstrong suggests, the audience functions as psychoanalyst, the audience never successfully addresses the needs of the characters<sup>34</sup>. If we can see the hysteric in any of the characters, the figure of the male psychoanalyst is decidedly absent, as the four characters never seem to understand each other, never attempting to know the cause of the other characters’ distress. At the same time, the cycle of trauma that Carney describes as “autistic” functions as a barrier to the relief of distress for the characters. The formal refusal to resolve distress in the play, however, is not necessarily as radical as it seems, as the play makes itself vulnerable to misrepresentation and misinterpretation. It is very simple to conclude that *Crave* struggles to remain unknowable or unknown, but it is much more difficult to speak critically about *Crave* without generalizing about or diagnosing it, ironically performing the very action that *Crave* struggles against.

At the same time, while the play aims to challenge formal conventions of what a playtext should include, it remains a text with four figures assigned different lines. Tracing the ways that *Crave* challenges overcoming narratives begins with recognizing that *Crave* is a complex text that refuses diagnoses but is nonetheless a cohesive playtext. A more careful examination of the play shows that although the

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<sup>34</sup> Phillips argues the opposite, saying that C’s screams are “a tremendously effective prescription for neurosis” (143).



character development is not conventional, it is not nonexistent; the characters do have things to say to themselves, to the audience, and to each other. For instance, C, the character that begins and ends the play, shows the audience that they are in psychological distress by answering M's questions throughout the play. In many instances, C thus represents a psychiatric patient, while M takes on the role of the therapist. For example, when M gives a list of symptoms, including "Impaired judgement, sexual dysfunction, anxiety, headaches," C replies immediately "that's what I'm suffering from *now*" (187, emphasis in original). Another example is the following exchange between characters:

M: Have you ever been hospitalized?

A: Pain by association.

C: I need a miracle to save me.

M: What for?

C: Anorexia. Bulimia.

B: Whatever.

C: No.

M: Never.

C: Sorry.

A: The truth is simple.

C: I'm evil, I'm damaged, and no one can save me.

A: Death is an option.

B: I disgust myself.

C: Depression's inadequate. A full scale emotional collapse is the minimum required to justify letting everyone down.

A: The coward's way out.

C: I don't have the courage. (172-173)

This excerpt demonstrates the playtext's thematic concern for madness as a collective and individual form of psychological distress. The characters seem to be answering and interacting with each other in response to the initial question: "have you been hospitalized," and their distress throughout these lines demonstrates different forms of madness. Multiple psychiatric diagnoses are mentioned here, alongside the implied desire for suicide and inability to commit the act: "death is an option" as "the coward's way out" that C does not "have the courage" to commit.<sup>35</sup> Later, C describes what it is like to be committed to a psychiatric hospital, beginning by saying "ES3"<sup>36</sup> (187) and continuing, "If I die here I was murdered by daytime television" (188), "They switch on my light every hour to check I'm still breathing" and finally "I tell them sleep deprivation is a form of torture" (188). C here describes a process that is often used in psychiatric wards to check to verify that suicidal patients have not committed suicide during the night (Jayaram, Sporney and Perticone 2010). The tedium of the psychiatric hospital, invoked by the reference to daylight television, is highlighted alongside the "torture" of sleep deprivation. C thus represents the main mad character of the play, a character that remains distressed until the very final pages, saying "cured my body can't cure my soul" (199). There is also a definitive critique of the methods of curing, especially those that represent psychiatric treatment as torturous and boring.

The play highlights madness as a main concern, while remaining very critical of psychiatry and psychoanalysis. For example, C rejects the idea that the presence of

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<sup>35</sup> C may also be referring to their lack of courage to have "a full-scale emotional collapse" in this instance, rather than referencing suicide.

<sup>36</sup> ES3 is the psychiatric ward in Maudsley Hospital that Kane voluntarily admitted herself to twice in her life ("Suicide art? She's Better than that").

suffering from psychological “symptoms” necessarily makes them ill: “I’m not ill, I just know that life is not worth living” (188). There is a discrepancy here between the idea that C is suffering and the idea that they therefore necessarily fall into one of the diagnoses offered by the play. C rejects the medical model of madness that diagnoses mental distress as individual physical illness. This rejection of illness is crucial to an alternative understanding of madness, of that which is not “sanity” and is not “ill”, but falls somewhere in between.

The importance of refusing mental “illness” especially at the time that Kane was writing cannot be overemphasized. The 1990s saw the beginnings of a movement against psychiatry in the UK, as former psychiatric patients challenged their position within a system of oppression. Kane herself saw a performance put on by British Mad activists, calling the performance “the only performance to have changed [her] life” (qtd. in Saunders 2002, 18). In many ways, *Crave* represents Kane’s attempt to reinterpret this Mad performance, as C refuses to be diagnosed. However, C equally refuses to be subsumed in overcoming narratives created by these same Mad activists. The Mad Pride movement attempted to equate madness with a kind of psychological difference that was not inherently distressing, arguing that distress came with the psychiatric system diagnosing and prescribing specific behaviours and feelings as abnormal. However, such a shift in discourse away from calling madness disability risks disavowing the real lived experience of those with mad distress, further individuating those with difficulties within a neoliberal society. The trope of “mad genius” or madness as nothing but psychological difference functions as a different kind of overcoming narrative, as it pretends that distress can be eliminated through identifying with one’s diagnosis and finding self and community through naming.

One line in particular challenges this alternative overcoming narrative, as C refuses to identify with their madness, calling the “glorious technicolour” of their thoughts part of their distress, rather than their relief. C says the following: “I crave white on white and black, but my thoughts race in glorious technicolour, prodding me awake, whipping away the warm blanket of invisibility every time it swears to smother my mind in nothing” (174). I read this excerpt as C’s desire for what they see as psychological normality. C craves the “nothing[ness]” or perhaps the ability to be “invisible,” a process that they see as synonymous with “white on white and black.” Lamenting the “glorious technicolour” of racing thought is in exact opposition to the aims of *Mad Pride*, as mad activists have most often challenged the psychiatric system through the discourse of different and varying psychological systems, rather than dictating which behaviours or feelings are representative of an illness (Withers 2014, 114). C does not see this “glorious technicolour” as glorious at all, instead wishing they could access the “warm blanket of invisibility” that would apparently come with black-and-white thinking. C’s challenge to psychiatry while still articulating their distress for most, if not all, of the play demonstrates the liminality of madness within *Crave*. The play attempts to recognize the violence of the psychiatric system while also rejecting the utopian image of the mad genius.

The violence of the psychiatric system to which the play attests is intertwined with the violence of psychoanalysis. Kane critic Jolene Armstrong (2015) argues that the cycles of trauma in *Crave* can be connected to Freud’s concept of the melancholic, as the characters cannot articulate their distress and therefore are unable to move on. I argue instead that *Crave* uses these allusions to Freud’s work, alongside a focus on child abuse, in order to articulate the absurdity of Freudian psychoanalysis. The phrase uttered by M, “if you won’t talk, I can’t help you” (187)

exemplifies this absurdity, as the characters are doing nothing but talking, yet this help still seems out of reach. In fact, all of M's questions that mirror the work of the psychoanalyst, including "do you have difficulty in your relationships with men?/do you have relationships with men?/have you ever been hospitalized?" (172), and "do you ever hear voices?" (188) are never given definitive answers. Instead, M reiterates the ineffectiveness of the psychoanalyst by saying "grow up and stop blaming mother" (191). It becomes apparent that talking, even to each other and even to the audience, cannot help in the way that M assumes it will. Instead, the stage directions for silences increase as the play ends, with the characters replacing their "talking" with silence.

Thomas Phillips (2015) has argued that this focus on silence, or "absence" as he calls it, is more in line with Lacanian psychoanalysis than Freudian psychoanalysis, as the repetition of the words "nothing" and "absence" indicate a desire towards the Lacanian Real, or a return to the pre-Symbolic unconscious. Phillips uses Barthes to compare *Crave's* madness with an unconscious exploration of the subject, arguing that *Crave's* insistence on absence, lack, nothing, and silence makes it interested in the untouchable, unknowable aspects of subjectivity. When I began this project, I too was interested in these aspects of *Crave's* structure, as I imagined a Lacanian analysis to allow a more positive outcome for the characters. I thought that silence could function as an alternative kind of "help" for the four figures of the play, as talking had failed them. I assumed that because M's statement "if you won't talk, I can't help you" was in reaction to the silence of the other characters, silence might somehow be an alternative answer, a radical kind of help. I read the increase in silences nearer to the end of the play as potentially representing an alternative end point for characters who were mad and in distress: not a cure, but

a relief<sup>37</sup>. As I continued my research, however, I realized that these silences are not necessarily a relief for the characters' distress. A Lacanian analysis brings us to see *Crave* as reiterating a complex iteration of self, rather than readjusting or challenging the problematics of power: C remains mad and in distress regardless of the presence or absence of the Real. Irigaray is thus a more appropriate psychoanalytic theorist for this play, as her theory works to recognize the historical and contextual basis of self alongside the unconscious. Irigaray's call to listen to the "operation of the 'grammar' of each figure of discourse, its syntactic laws... and also, of course, what it does not articulate at the level of utterance: its silences" (75) is a more appropriate methodology for *Crave*, as the play sets up and challenges positionality.

In order to begin examining the grammar of *Crave*'s challenge to overcoming narratives, we must begin by examining the character that speaks the most throughout the playtext. A not only has the most lines throughout the playtext, they also tell the most stories about others, including the following:

A: In a lay-by on the motorway going out of the city, or maybe in, depending on which way you look, a small dark girl sits in the passenger seat of a parked car. Her elderly grandfather undoes his trousers and it pops out of his pants, big and purple.

C: I feel nothing, nothing.

I feel nothing.

A: And when she cries, her father in the back seat says I'm sorry, she's not normally like this. (157-158)

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<sup>37</sup> These silences include the following: "a beat" (156, 186, 187, 194, 197, 199, 200), "a pause" (189, 199) and "a silence" (191, 194, 196).

This story, spaced out between two lines, and interrupted by C's repeated "nothing," is indicative of A's position throughout the playtext as a describer of violence and abuse. However, A is arguably not just a describer of this violence, as they admit in other instances to being a "paedophile" (156) and "torturer" (177). In another section involving an exchange between A and C, A gives a very detailed monologue about their love for an unnamed Other. The monologue begins with romantic desire: "And I want to play hide-and-seek and give you my clothes and tell you I like your shoes and sit on the steps while you take a bath and massage your neck and kiss your feet and hold your hand..." (169). The monologue soon turns sour, however, as C begins repeating over and over "under *her* breath," "this has to stop" (170, emphasis mine). They repeat this phrase 11 times, and the rare stage direction indicates that C continues throughout the length of A's monologue. The result is a complex connection between A's fervour towards an unnamed other and C's inability to tolerate their description. Finally, a later speech seems to continue from this early love monologue, as A says:

don't say no to me you can't say no to me because it's such a relief to have love again and to lie in bed and be held and touched and kissed and adored and your heart will leap when you hear my voice and see my smile and feel my breath on your neck and your heart will race when I want to see you and I will lie to you from day one and use you and screw you and break your heart because you broke mine first and you will love me more each day until the weight is unbearable and your life is mine and you'll die alone because I will take what I want then walk away and owe you nothing it's always there it's always been there

and you cannot deny the life you feel fuck that life fuck that life fuck  
that life I have lost you now (178)

The love that A announced in their first monologue is now transformed in this subsequent section, positioning them as distressed in their longing and their inability to connect to this unnamed other, as they have “lost” them. A seems also unable to accept a “no” and anticipates abuse of this beloved, as they say “I will lie to you from day one and use you and screw you and break your heart...” alongside their love story.

A is not positioned as the victim of abuse; instead they either describe themselves as the perpetrator or the bystander, committing the actions of abuse or describing in the third person the actions taking place. In contrast, C most often describes actions happening to themselves or happening to a third person individual who bears a likeness to them. Beginning with a monologue on page 176, C paints a picture between the lines of the three other characters, describing their own rape: “The navy denim dress I wore at six, the elastic red and blue belt tight around my waist, nylon socks, the hard crust of scabs on my knees, the metal barred climbing frame between my legs, David—” (176), then after a page of lines shared between the other characters, “Purple hearth scratching my legs... A handsome fourteen year old, his thumbs hooked over his jeans half exposing his buttocks, his blue blue eyes full of the sun” (176). Finally, C ends the story by saying over a page later “A fourteen year old to steal my virginity on the moor and rape me till I come” (178). C’s psychological distress throughout the play is therefore similar to Cate’s in *Blasted* insofar as C’s sexual trauma echoes throughout the pages of *Crave*, dramatically affecting their ability to access relief. Further, unlike A’s third-person description of abuse, C describes instances of abuse through first-person witnessing, including “I watched



my father beat my mother with a walking stick” (179) and “I tried to explain that I don’t want to sleep with someone who won’t appreciate how hard it was for me the following morning, but he’d passed out by the time I finished my sentence” (180).

When C does describe things through third-person narration, they do so by simultaneously connecting it to themselves. The following excerpt represents the ways that C maintains their distress through others and through calling themselves other:

C: She is currently having some kind of nervous breakdown and wishes she’d been born black, male and more attractive.

B: I give myself.

C: or just more attractive.

B: I give my heart.

C: or just different.

M: But that’s not really giving.

C: Just someone fucking else.

A: Fragile and choking.

C: She ceases to continue with the day to day farce of getting through the next few hours in an attempt to ward off the fact that she doesn’t know how to get through the next forty years.

A: I love you still,

B: Against my will.

C: She’s talking about herself in the third person because the idea of being who she is, of acknowledging that she is herself, is more than her pride can take.

B: With fucking vengeance.

C: She's sick to the fucking gills of herself and wishes wishes wishes that something would happen to make life begin.

A: I'm a much nicer person since I had an affair.

C: You can only kill yourself if you're not already dead. (182-183)

C explicitly connects the distress they describe here in the third person to themselves; whether or not "she" is really C here, C has an empathetic understanding of that individual's distress. Again, C is the only character whose gender is revealed, as they are explicitly gendered female: an important distinction since women are more likely to experience abuse, especially by the hands of their intimate partners. Women are also more likely to be diagnosed with depression, "Anorexia/Bulimia," and other reiterations or offshoots of hysteria (Bebbington 1996; Currie 2005). C's experiences within the psychiatric system also highlight the abuse that can be repeated within structures that are meant to "help" survivors of abuse. However, at the same time, C is equally in distress because of their relationship with "the person with whom [they are] currently obsessed", as they continue the above excerpt by saying: "My entire life is waiting to see the person with whom I am currently obsessed, starving the weeks away until our next fifteen minute appointment" (184). The reference to "our next fifteen minute appointment" here implies that this person with whom C is obsessed might be their therapist. The result is a complex representation of psychiatry/psychoanalysis in relation to power and abuse; C is abused, mad, and is "obsessed" with someone who has the power to remain unknown. While the audience never comes to know the identity of "the person with whom [C is] currently obsessed," the obsession and desire for this person signifies the power that person has over C.

The juxtaposition of A's position as abuser and C's position as abused, even if they are not acting on each other, highlights the very different ways that certain shared lines can be read. For instance, C says early in the play: "it's not my fault, it was never my fault" (157) and later this exchange takes place:

C: A motion away,

B: Not a motion towards.

A: It is not my fault.

C: As if the direction makes any difference.

M: Nobody knows.

B: My heart is broken.

A: It was never my fault. (191)

Here the same lines earlier uttered by C, "it's not my fault, it was never my fault," are uttered by A: "it is not my fault/it was never my fault." In between these statements, C's statement "as if the direction makes any difference" ironically emphasizes the repetition, as the direction does in fact make a difference. When taken separately, these statements seem, like most of *Crave's* interweaving dialogue, potentially meaningless. However, when we recognize the context of A's abusive behaviour and C's past abuse, the statements become very different. C's line might be a desire to separate their abuse from their feelings of guilt: it was not their fault they were the object of abuse. In contrast, A's statement, a repetition of the same words, might become a justification of abuse, a strengthening of their own position of power. In this case, A appropriates the language of the victim in order to continue their own cycle of power, while never recognizing their position within these same structures.

Up to this point, I have attempted to maintain the integrity of ambiguity regarding the characters in *Crave*: I have not gendered or racialized any specific

character, apart from acknowledging C's assigned female pronoun. This is in line with much of the scholarship that has been written about *Crave*, including the work of Cristina Delgado-García (2012) who notes that all four characters, apart from C perhaps, are given lines that could indicate a gender that is either male or female, potentially even neither. She notes that while M, whom Kane says represents "Mother", may seem to represent a feminine presence with the potential to become pregnant (155) and who refers to themselves as "a woman" (165), the line "you think I'm going to rape you?" (163) suggests the possibility that M is actually male; although rape can be committed by men and women, the act is most often a male offence (Delgado-García 241). Similarly, A confesses that they don't have "thrush" (162), a condition that is predominantly one of a female body, even though they have also "never visited a prostitute" (162) and are "not a pedophile" (162), two things that might indicate they are male (Delgado-García 241). Once we recognize that Kane is intentionally playing with established norms and understandings of gender, lines like A's "I am lost, so fucking lost in this mess of a woman" take on a double meaning, as A could be lost in themselves or lost in the object of desire, the woman (Delgado-García 242).

Similarly, skin colour or ethnicity is not assigned to any given character, despite the thematic significance of race. Critics have been hesitant to talk about race in the context of *Crave*, arguing that although early performances cast C as a black woman, the play itself does not include any indications of race. Jolene Armstrong (2015), for instance, describes a Canadian production of *Crave* as including four actors "none [of whom were] visibly identifiable as belonging to a racial minority" (143), presumably meaning that all four actors were white. While I agree that the play is ambiguous with regards to race, to claim that the play does not interact with

race at all, especially by describing the actors as not “belonging to a racial minority” upholds whiteness as unmarked, normal, and justified in its all-pervasive power. To discuss race only when people of colour are directly involved or referenced assumes that white people are not involved in systems of race, disavowing the privilege they often receive through these very systems. Given that *Crave* is ambiguous about all character descriptions, not just race, it seems as though ignoring race in the play’s context is performing the same deliberate silencing of positionality that takes place within the play. In fact, by reading whiteness alongside silences, and alongside a critical history that equates whiteness with an unwillingness to talk about race, I argue that *Crave* deliberately uses race in its last few pages in order to make a point about neoliberal fantasies around difference.

Given Kane’s involvement in the first production of *Crave*,<sup>38</sup> the first production’s casting choice, which included C as a black woman, has lasting significance. A closer look at the playtext equally demonstrates a need to discuss race within the play, as there is a connection between who is abused and who is racialized. A uses a number of racial markers throughout the play, including a description of the abuse of “a small dark girl” (157), who is perhaps connected to “dark angel divine” (177). A also talks of their (ex)lover as having an “oriental” face (170). Meanwhile, C describes their rapist as “a blonde” with “blue blue eyes” (176), a demarcation of whiteness. Critical race scholar Katerina Deliovsky (2010) argues that there exists a racialized hierarchy of imagery when it comes to whiteness/lightness versus blackness/darkness. Darkness is seen as evil, and in need of control, while whiteness and lightness are frequently unmarked, with the privilege of not being forced to be

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<sup>38</sup> Vicky Firestone, the director for the first staging of *Crave*, said she had Kane with her throughout all the first performance’s rehearsals (Saunders 2002, 129).

knowable. Armstrong's commentary on the "racial markers" of the actors in the Edmonton production is a good example of this privilege of whiteness, as she refuses to acknowledge that whiteness is a race in itself, assuming that white markers of race are not markers at all. Seeing racial markers only on people of colour is based on a legacy of colonialism, as the unmarked white figure comes to know the blackness through their colonial privilege as knower.

*Crave* arguably challenges the binary between whiteness/lightness and blackness/darkness by, at first, discussing lightness alongside darkness. The terrifying aspects of darkness are set side-by-side with terrifying aspects of lightness:

M: Empty.

A: Sickened.

C: White.

B: Love me.

A: Guilt lingers like the smell of death and nothing can save me from this cloud of blood. (184)

Here, white seems to be the problem, "sickened" and lingering with the "cloud of blood". C also talks about the "white larvae" that threaten to consume them. While M has "a black black side I know. I have a side so green you'll never know" (160), C identifies with a wish to be "born black, male, and more attractive/or just more attractive" (182, 183). Darkness and light are both a matter of power, as light can be revealing or can remain unknowable, inexplicable. Black and white become more than just straightened perceptions of colour; they are revealed to be just as complex as "glorious technicolour," as paradoxical representations of knowing and unknowing, knowability and unknowability.

However, the interweaving aspects of colour in *Crave* still highlight one colour as most powerful by the end of the play. As the silences become more frequent, so too does the discussion of lightness and whiteness, as the characters give in to the unknowability of whiteness. The “blackness of the night” (189) that C describes is apparently rejected by A through the line “I won’t settle for a life in the dark” (190), eventually settling on a strange repetition of “the light” and “the loss” (192). Finally, the characters move “into the light” (197, 200), speak of “gaining light” (198), and somehow figure a “life in black and white in reverse” (199); as the characters begin the attempt to “lie low/provoke nothing/invisible” (198), they seem to centre on whiteness and lightness as most important. Lightness and whiteness are hopeful concepts in a colourful, unknowable project.

While this reality of more light seems at first to signify a happy ending, Kane was adamant about the lack of hopefulness by the end of *Crave*. In an interview, she commented:

I actually think *Crave*—where there is no physical violence whatsoever, it’s a very silent play – is the most despairing of the things I’ve written so far. At some point somebody says in it, ‘something has lifted,’ and from that moment on it becomes apparently more and more hopeful. But actually the characters have all given up. It’s the first one of my plays in which people go, ‘fuck this, I’m out of here’ (qtd. in Saunders 2002, 108)

While the lightness of the play’s last few lines seems hopeful, Kane argues that there is a connection between forgetting, silence, and lightness, leading to a “despairing” ending, rather than one that is hopeful. Going back further, we can see the way that A’s voice is highlighted when forgetting takes place:

M: To be perfectly honest

C: (when am I ever ‘perfectly honest’?)

B: Take no more.

*A beat.*

C: This never happened.

*A silence.*

A: What I sometimes mistake for ecstasy is simply the absence of grief.

M: Fear nothing.

B: All or nothing.

C: None of it,

B: All of it,

M: None.

C: I am an emotional plagiarist, stealing other people’s pain,  
subsuming it into my own until

A: I can’t remember. (194)

A’s inability to remember at the end of this quote is perhaps connected to both the “beat” and the “silence” that surround C’s line. For C, “this never happened,” yet they are also “stealing other people’s pain” until A “can’t remember”. The silences take place such that A doesn’t have to remember, and can experience “the absence of grief.” What seems to be a hopeful ending is actually an ending that fails to challenge the power structures that exist within the play and outside of it, as C continues to feel “other people’s pain” while A can forget.

Elaine Aston looks to *Blasted* as one of the prime examples of what she calls “feeling the loss of feminism” or a postfeminist backlash to writing the “woman’s story” in theatre. As I showed in my first chapter, however, *Blasted* exhibits many



traits of a hopeful feminist future based on interdependence. In contrast, *Crave* refuses that future, both on stage and in audience reaction. *Crave* was unsurprisingly given almost exclusively good reviews upon its first performance. While *Crave* strives to remain “utterly unknowable” (167), it curiously does so through a conglomerate of intertextual references. Borrowing lines from T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* especially, *Crave* potentially embodies what Eliot describes in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” as it creates something new and different through the work of others. A sums up this phenomenon through their line, “Don’t forget that poetry is language for its own sake” (199), as Eliot imagined the best poet to remain impersonal, bringing out a universal emotional response to his poetry. Phillips (2015) shares this sense that universal impersonality is what makes *Crave* great, arguing that the intertextuality in *Crave* redeems it, giving “a new relation between self and beloved” (138).

Instead of imagining *Crave*’s unknowability as postmodern intertext, I want to finish this chapter by examining the possibility that A functions as the “normate” within a play about postfeminism. A’s apparent detachment in describing abuse and perpetrating this abuse makes them the inheritor of invisible privilege in the play. Such privilege is similar to what Rosmarie Garland-Thomson imagines as “the normate” or “the corporeal incarnation of culture’s collective, unmarked, normative characteristics” (8). She compares the normate or this able-bodied figure imagining with what is seen as the impaired, debilitated, and/or disabled body. I intentionally use these three terms, “impaired,” “debilitated,” and “disabled”, to highlight the very similar ways that those with disabilities are described, even when there is an attempt made to separate physical boundaries from the social stigma that follows a disabled body. Early disability scholars used the social model of disability as an attempt to

separate “impairment” from “disability” and show the difference between the ways society might perceive disability versus its actual physical challenges. More recently, critical disability studies scholars have been sceptical of this move to separate social and physical boundaries. In many cases, separating the two is a political disavowal of the very real intersections between them: when support is not given to those with disabilities, or when the wrong kind of support is given, it can reinforce and reiterate impairment. M’s comment “if you won’t talk, I can’t help you,” coupled with C’s description of the psychiatric system makes it clear that many kinds of help that are outlined in the play are not helpful to the psychological distress of the characters. According to Garland-Thomson, the normate functions as further justification of the wrong kind of support, as those in distress are not asked what kind of help they might need, and are instead imagined all to desire the same kind of relief. Under the mistaken assumption that all human bodies and minds are similar, the normate acts as the whole, well-adjusted neoliberal subject who does not need support to interact with the rest of society.

I read A’s final monologue as an allusion to this normate position and the impossibility of a poetry devoid of politics. Like many of the other lines of the playtext, this section ironically points to the limits of its own form:

A: And don’t forget that poetry is language for its own sake.

Don’t forget when different words are sanctioned, other attitudes required.

Don’t forget decorum.

Don’t forget decorum.

*A beat* (199)

A's reminder not to "forget decorum" (199) becomes a reminder that power structures are maintained when poetry is only language for its own sake, devoid of close analysis of the positionality of characters. While this speech is taking place, B is "quietly, continuously, until the end of A's speech" (199) repeating "no" 16 times (199). This exchange harkens back to A's longer love monologue earlier in the play, when C repeats "this has to stop". A once again speaks words of violence, this time violence of a different kind as they repeat "don't forget decorum" (199), telling the other figures what memories they can keep and how to overcome their traumas, through a very particular kind of forgetting. A here focuses on what they cannot forget: decorum, the appropriate behaviour, and "different attitudes required" (199). Just as C attempts to end the traumatic abusive relationship that A invokes earlier in the play, here B disrupts the narrative of overcoming that A represents. C and B cannot just forget their trauma and remember appropriate behaviour, nor can they translate their hurt into silence, even if that is what appears to take place. While the four figures did together say "Forget" (199) together a moment before, B's reaction to A's speech shows the violence of forgetting and the ways that remembering only "decorum" forces them to perform only silences.

Finally, given B's line "no" repeated during A's speech, it's important to note B's position in the play. If A and C represent abuser and abused, respectively, and M frequently takes the place of therapist to C's madness, B's part comes in the form of repetition as B often replies to and recites the lines of others back at them. In many ways, B represents the Irigarayan action of mimicry, the "playful repetition" that attempts to dismantle positions of power. While B's action often amplifies and emphasizes the distress of the other three figures, B's position also functions to emphasize the impossibility of collective overcoming. Many of B's lines bring up

normative narratives of overcoming in such a way as to highlight their inaccessibility, impossibility, and trauma-inducing tendencies. For example, in one section where C says “I hate these words that keep me alive/I hate these words that won’t let me die,” B says “expressing my pain without easing it” (184). Similarly, in another section, B describes a story in first-person about their broken nose:

B: Look

C: Listen.

B: Look. My nose.

M: What about it.

B: What do you think?

C: Broken.

B: I’ve never broken a bone in my body.

A: Like Christ.

B: But my Dad has. Smashed his nose in a car crash when he was eighteen. And I’ve got this. Genetically impossible, but there it is. We pass these messages faster than we think and in ways we don’t think possible. (162)

Just like this broken nose, B seems to pick up the trauma that occurs around them. As B attempts to “move on”, they do so through repeating the trauma that they hear, reiterating the unspoken positionality of the three other characters. B refers to a kind of overcoming that is encouraged, especially in the Freudian melancholic case; in order to overcome trauma and grief, it is “best to forget” (199) the trauma and the positionality of power. However, they are initially unable to do so, instead “passing messages faster than we think and in ways we don’t think possible”.

I want to end this chapter by reiterating the unknowability of both the form and content of the play; unlike Robert Lublin (2010) who says that “the feminist possibilities... are lost” (117) in *Blasted* and the rest of Kane’s plays, I still see feminist possibilities in *Crave*’s ambiguous identities. Ahmet Gökhan Biçer (2011) argues that *Crave*’s lack of contextual markers makes the play a postdramatic piece. I have shown throughout this chapter that gender and race are ambiguous within the descriptions of the characters, yet there remains a definitive connection between dynamics of power and these very identities. The playtext leaves room for directors, actors, and audiences to interact with and develop new readings of the play each time it is performed. There is possibility in the potential for specific actors to be cast in order to highlight the connections between identity, power, and abuse. The first performance of the play, in which C was cast as a younger black woman, is a good example of these possibilities, as the performance highlighted the importance of reading race within the play. The problems of the playtext arise, though, in relation to an audience that is unwilling to see how much these identities do interact with power. I have most often been disappointed with *Crave* criticism that has not read closely enough the intricacies of power within the play, but instead has been eager to imagine a universal erasure of identity, thus ironically centering the normate as a most important and most desirable subject. It is this criticism, not necessarily the playtext itself, that fails to support feminist possibilities within and outside of the playtext.

In my next chapter, through Kane’s final play, *4.48 Psychosis*, I will attempt to refocus once again on the formal potential for a radical feminist future. I will read the play and especially its silences in relation to both the hysteric of Ibsenite drama and the neoliberal normate, thus integrating both my first and second chapters, in

order to imagine the potential for vanishing to be radical. Unlike those of *Crave*, the postdramatic strategies in *4.48 Psychosis* remove the normate from the center of the story, reminding the audience of the violence involved in being forced to forget. *4.48* arguably returns to *Blasted*'s forced entertainment, as the audience must witness (and yet never witnesses) suicide as a radical kind of future.

### Chapter Three

#### “Please... Listen and Understand”: Interdependence in *4.48 Psychosis*

This final chapter, like Kane’s final play that expands on and extrapolates from the themes of her previous plays, aims to build on my two previous chapters. I extend the concept of the Ibsenite hysteric and the neoliberal normate through an analysis of *4.48 Psychosis*, showing how this, Kane’s final play, simultaneously refuses the conventional dramatic end of the figure of the hysteric and the focus on the normate position. My first chapter was interested in examining the disability narratives in Kane’s first play, *Blasted*, focussing especially on *Blasted*’s refusal to adhere to a masculine linearity, challenging both the position of the hysteric and the masculine authority that is meant to know her condition and therefore cure her. My second chapter was particularly concerned with the lack of contextual markers in Kane’s penultimate play, *Crave*, and the way they potentially center the figure of the neoliberal normate, the representation of society’s expectations of able-bodied normality. Kane’s final play includes even fewer contextual markers, refusing to use conventional playtext formatting aspects: *4.48* includes no *dramatis personae*, no setting or character descriptions, and almost no stage directions<sup>39</sup>. However, *4.48* arguably follows more closely from *Blasted*’s aims than from *Crave*’s, as *4.48* refuses to center sanity or resolve the madness of its characters. The final line of *4.48*, “please open the curtains” (245), is especially important, as it complicates a reading of suicide in the play through an allusion to multiple plays before it. *4.48* therefore uses formal experimentation to challenge normative expectations about the suicidal

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<sup>39</sup> The exceptions are the playtext’s use of silences, as well as the stage direction “looks” (217).

mind, simultaneously refusing to allow madness to be eradicated and sanity to be centered.

Like the beginning of *Blasted* that introduces Cate's disability as a deviance, the beginning of *4.48* highlights madness as the deviance to be resolved. Although the audience/reader is not given *dramatis personae*, *4.48* begins with a conversation between two people: one speaker asks a silent other a series of questions about supportive friends, receiving only "a very long silence," "A long silence," and "silence" as answers. The play is broken into 24 sections, or scenes. Like this first "exchange," there is no indication as to how many people are speaking, or are on stage at the time that lines are spoken. Some sections include only numbers, others include paragraphs or stanzas; there are seven sections with a clear indication that there are at least two speakers, demarcated by dashes. The first section is later repeated in one such conversation broken up by dashes, between a speaker (or perhaps speakers) who wants to kill themselves and a therapist who repeatedly asks why they<sup>40</sup> want to do this. The playtext's format, its layout on the page, and its lack of contextual markers have led some critics to assume the play is unfinished<sup>41</sup> or indicative of a more poetic, rather than theatrical, form<sup>42</sup>. However, Mel Kenyon, Kane's agent during her lifetime, has confirmed that this was not an early draft of the playtext (Saunders 2002, 153). Her work is meant for performance: *4.48* is a play, not a poem. *4.48* shows how much Kane was interested in pushing the boundaries of performance and performability: the unconventional format forces directors, actors,

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<sup>40</sup> As the main speaker's gender is ambiguous at best, I use the gender-neutral pronoun they/their/them to describe them.

<sup>41</sup> Laurens De Vos (2010) described the play as "initially thought to be incomplete" (140).

<sup>42</sup> Jolene Armstrong (2015) calls it "more accurately described as a long, theatrical poem (180).



and audiences to have more say in the final product of performance and meaning of the play. While it could be argued that *4.48* includes an infinite number of voices, I want to begin this chapter with the assumption that there are only two voices in *4.48*: that of the main speaker and the therapist speaker. Like *Crave*, whose four voices are not necessarily separate or attached to one another, *4.48*'s voices could invite many different readings. However, I argue that by reading the voices as representing only two individuals, we can begin to unravel the complex conversation about madness that takes place within the play.

This complex conversation is exemplified in one section where the main speaker compares their psychological distress to physical disability:

drowning in a sea of logic

this monstrous state of palsy

still ill (223)

The “logic” that the main speaker faces makes them “drown” and therefore exacerbates their distress, even though this “logic” is the endpoint that they are meant to strive for. A psychiatric cure for their state of being “still ill” would depend on the logic of diagnosis, prescription, rationality, and cohesion, the same logic that makes them “drown”. “Palsy”<sup>43</sup> is here used as a metaphor for psychological distress, or perhaps a statement of the movement they are physically unable to achieve. While the main speaker is most often reluctant to call themselves “ill”, the double effect of calling their distress “illness” and comparing it to disability (“palsy”) sets the tone of their discussion of madness: it is contradictory and complex.

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<sup>43</sup> Palsy is a medical term referring to different states of paralysis (“Palsy”).

This instance of the main speaker using “palsy” to describe their psychological distress represents an important divide between mad studies and critical disability studies. The critical disability movement has been at odds with many aspects of anti-psychiatry, as some mad activists have disavowed disability and distress in order to reclaim madness as a viable way of life. Disability scholar A.J. Withers (2014) outlines two specific ways that the anti-psychiatry movement has been incompatible with the disability movement in the past, providing a real-world analysis of activism in both movements that helps to show how this moment of identification in 4.48 is simultaneously helpful and hurtful. Withers argues that the anti-psychiatry movement has used disabling language and been reluctant to recognize psychological distress as disability (116). We can see this reference to “palsy” therefore in two different ways. First, this description of self as physically disabled or paralysed may be uniting the two movements in recognizing psychological distress as disability, and calling attention to the contradictory and challenging process of naming psychological distress. The main speaker may be identifying as disabled, a process that many mad people refuse to do. However, at the same time, by using the medical language of physical disability as a metaphor for psychological pain, the main speaker may also be conflating two very different kinds of pain, since “palsy” does not necessarily mean distress; those who experience paralysis may be very comfortable with their bodies and their abilities, and thus not at all distressed by their condition. Therefore, the main speaker of 4.48 may be using disabling language in their act of identification, assuming that paralysis is necessarily “monstrous”. I open this chapter with a close analysis of this excerpt to ground my argument in a necessarily intersectional analysis: all kinds of disability cannot and should not be conflated. At the same time, however careful we must be while closely analysing the

playtext, *4.48* still centers disability, the impossibility of cure, and psychological distress in its conversation about madness.

Much of the communication in the playtext depends not on talking, but on silence. In the second section of the play, the main speaker says:

I had a night in which everything was revealed to me.  
How can I speak again? (205)

Ariel Watson (2008) argues that this refusal to speak is representative of the psychiatric patient refusing to follow the proper script of recovery; she points to all the blank spaces and stage directions of silence as radical refusals (194). The imperative requests in *4.48* are also linked to these refusals, requesting the action and reaction of the audience. Much of the speakers' distress is connected to feelings of disembodiment and fragmentation. The solution that the play gives is not an achievement of wholeness, however; instead, the speaker demands that their fragmentation be recognized, remembered, and regarded as such. The silences in *4.48* become an important part of this focus, as they enact a refusal of character permanence<sup>44</sup>, while at the same time highlighting the way that such permanence is most often regarded as normal, sane, and desirable. As a component to the neoliberal normate, character permanence refers to subjective consistency and coherence over time; those who are capable of performing character permanence often exist within structures that allow them a safety net that the main mad speaker cannot access. Silence becomes an active refusal to justify a life that is assumed to be unliveable.

Similarly, suicide in the play becomes an active refusal of that same straight, sane life. At first glance, such a refusal seems like an enactment of a normative

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<sup>44</sup> One good example of the main speaker's inability to perform character permanence is their shifting gender identity throughout the playtext, a point to which I will return. (See page 21-24.)

disability narrative, as the life deemed unliveable is made to end (through suicide)<sup>45</sup>; however, *4.48*'s refusal of the act itself makes suicide an ambiguous and therefore contradictory concept in the play. The play suggests that through interdependence, suicide may not be the only possible conclusion. I use the word "interdependence" in reference to the work of Nancy Fraser (1989) who discusses interdependence as an alternative to neoliberal independence, arguing that this independence is not possible without the invisible work of others; making that work visible, she argues, depends on recognizing the "needscapes" of all involved (61)<sup>46</sup>. *4.48* allows the narrative trajectory of the main speaker to be interdependent, not just on the words of the main speaker, but also on the active participation of all involved: writer, director, producer, performer, and audience. Suicide seems at first to be the only possible outcome of the play, yet it is through interdependence that the play shows that suicide may also be refused. While both the silences and the imperative requests challenge the potential for cure or recovery, they also make imaginable a different kind of trajectory that might alter the speaker's distress. Thus, there is a contradictory outlook on both suicide and cure in the play, as the main speaker refuses cure, yet also desires to become less distressed.

The cure that the main speaker desires catches them in another contradiction as they are unable to accept the ways that either psychiatry or anti-psychiatry describes their distress. Watson (2008) outlines the ways that silences in *4.48* act as a refusal of both psychiatry and anti-psychiatry, calling the silences themselves a "cry of betrayal" (207). Her analysis is especially important given the goals of this project.

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<sup>45</sup> Disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues that one of the main narrative trajectories for a character with a disability is death (14).

<sup>46</sup> I also use interdependence because of Watson et al. (2004) who explicitly connect Fraser's work with critical disability studies.

Most often, I have assumed that normative expectations around madness are based in the prejudice of the psychiatric system, as the medical model dictates a diagnosis, a set of behaviours and a narrative around madness as illness. The system individualizes those suffering from mad distress, implying that individual intervention will “cure” and therefore erase the mad aspects of that person. The medical model centers sanity as the desirable and normative position, a position that mad people should strive to attain. In contrast, the anti-psychiatry movement, especially in a British context, attempts to step away from diagnoses and the individualization of mad distress, but in the process strengthens other misconceptions about madness. For example, the Mad Pride movement of the 1990s in the UK aimed to reclassify madness as universal, arguing that the behaviours that represented a mad diagnosis were often universal feelings that were seen as too radical or unwieldy, needing to be regulated into sanity. They often universalized madness in an effort to challenge what is interpreted as normal and functional. In the process, however, they removed distress from the picture, erasing individuals’ real lived experience of mad distress. As well, they frequently shamed those who used and required medication and other forms of psychiatric “help” to function within a neoliberal society. By these means, the Mad Pride movement inadvertently created an alternative narrative for mad people as quirky geniuses misunderstood by the mainstream. Such a narrative disavows the real distress and the real needs of mad people, often assuming that all psychiatric intervention is unfounded.

Mad activist Dwight Fee (2000) discusses how depression (and other forms of madness by extension) is “a discursive project” (75), an evolving description of self. In order to examine madness in these terms, Jennifer Radden (2008) discusses madness with respect to “symptoms” within or outside of constructions of self. She

argues that there are two ways to view madness in relation to self-understanding: the “symptom-alienating” model and the “symptom-integrating” model. The symptom-alienating model views the “symptoms” of madness as outside of and apart from the self, therefore managing, recovering, and curing the condition is possible without altering perceptions of self: “I have bipolar disorder.” The symptom-integrating model views the “symptoms” of madness as part of personality indistinguishable from the self, subsuming a named diagnosis as an identifier: “I am bipolar” (21). The symptom-alienating model follows more closely to the psychiatric method of cure, while the symptom-integrating model is representative of the anti-psychiatric movement that attempts to universalize feelings associated with diagnoses. Ironically then, both psychiatry and anti-psychiatry encourage a kind of cure: psychiatry through a curing of the diagnosis, assuming that the individual can become sane, and anti-psychiatry through a disavowal of original distress and a normalization of madness.

4.48 complicates the distance between these two cures by showing that neither psychiatry nor anti-psychiatry recognizes the individuality of the person experiencing mad distress. The playtext incorporates both the symptom-alienating and symptom-integrating models of describing the speaker’s distress, demonstrating that there is no simple cure. A good example of this is the main speaker’s use of the conception of their distress as illness. In one of the first conversations between the main speaker and the therapist speaker, the following exchange takes place:

- Do you despise all unhappy people or is it just me?
- I don’t despise you. It’s not your fault. You’re ill.
- I don’t think so.
- No?

-No. I'm depressed. Depression is anger. It's what you did, who was there and who you're blaming.

-And who are you blaming?

-Myself. (212)

Here the main speaker refuses to be called ill, instead referring to depression as “anger”. In the section immediately before this conversation, the main speaker says doctors “have nothing to say about my ‘illness’ which anyway amounts to knowing that there’s no point in anything because I’m going to die” (209). The main speaker thus positions “mental illness” as something that does not easily describe their experience: depression and suicidal ideation seem inevitable to them as doctors attempt to remove their self-blame through calling their situation “ill”. The doctors attempt to externalize symptoms that the main speaker sees as distinctly their own. They have already internalized this distress as the doctors attempt to externalize it. At the same time however, to return to the first excerpt, the main speaker maintains that they are “still ill” (223), a contradiction of previous disavowals of illness. Their experience of mental distress is similar to anger and blame: simultaneously something they are experiencing (external) and that has contributed to their construction of self (internal.) Despite their struggle with the concept of medical illness, the main speaker still compares their distress to paralysis, perhaps indicating that their distress is metaphorical illness, rather than a medically diagnosable one.

With that in mind, if we imagine the psychological distress of the main speaker to be a metaphorical inability to move (which is perhaps different from medical paralysis or medical diagnosis,) the work of Ann Cvetkovich (2012) is particularly applicable. Cvetkovich’s book *Depression: a Public Feeling* centers on the concept of depression as a catalyst for movement, a kind of “stuckness” that we

can acknowledge by imagining different ways to become unstuck. She argues that by following archives of feelings, depression can act as a spark for new ways of activism, a stuckness that can be translated into new ways of moving (21). A depression diagnosis is often based on a disruption of the capitalist conditions of hyper-productivity, and is defined as an individual problem, one that each individual must overcome on their own (or through literally buying into a medical cure in therapy or pharmaceutical drugs.) For example, a cursory glance at the different iterations of psychiatric diagnoses of depression in evolving versions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) shows that a depression diagnosis can be applied when there is “significant distress” because the “patient” has missed work or disengaged from social situations, and especially interrupted communication with biological family (American Psychiatric Association, DSM-5 “Major Depressive Disorder 2013). Acknowledging the potential for living with, rather than recovering from, depression involves challenging this individualization of affective responses. The main speaker of 4.48 is unapologetically depressed, and angry with themselves and with a system that refuses to truly listen to them. Rather than seeing this mental distress as illness, however, the main speaker refers to their “illness,” as the condition of “knowing that there’s no point in anything because I’m going to die” (209), therefore understanding their depression as part of an inevitable trajectory towards death.

The inevitability of suicide is a repeated theme throughout 4.48. For example, the main speaker describes suicide as “resign[ation]” in the following section:

At 4.48  
 when desperation visits  
 I shall hang myself



to the sound of my lover's breathing

I do not want to die

I have become so depressed by the fact of my mortality that I have  
decided to commit suicide

I do not want to live

[...]

I have resigned myself to death this year.

Some will call this self-indulgence

(they are lucky not to know its truth)

Some will know the simple fact of pain

This is becoming my normality (208)

The conception of “the simple fact of pain... becoming my normality” alongside the feeling of the inevitability of suicide despite a contradictory desire (“I do not want to die... I do not want to live”) are very similar to the terms in which scholar Edwin Schneidman (1996) discusses the suicidal mind. This connection is unsurprising given that Kane read Schneidman (1996) meticulously while she was writing *4.48* (Saunders 2002, 178). The main premise of Schneidman's work is that suicide seems like the only hope for someone suffering from intense psychological pain, as they have considered all other options but cannot find an alternative; when psychological pain overshadows all else, suicide is seen as the only possible outcome. He coins the

word “psychache” to mean psychological pain (4), arguing that “suicide is the drama of the introspecting mind” (17).

We can see the echoes of Schneidman’s work in *4.48*, as the main speaker says “just a word on the page and there is drama” (213). This line has a double meaning in *4.48*, as the dramatic performance begins with the words that unravel on the page. However, this is also an interesting moment in the play, as it self-reflexively admits its own limitations as a drama written on paper. Schneidman argues that in order to prevent suicide, an outcome that the distressed individual might assume is inevitable, we must listen to the needs of the suicidal person, asking them where it hurts and how we can help (6). In this light, we can read *4.48* as an explanation of these two things, when it hurts and how we, the audience/reader, can help. The end goal of Schneidman’s approach, and arguably also of *4.48*, is not to cure the suicidal person, but rather to show them there is an alternative kind of movement, an end point that requires an audience’s radical empathy. The “drama” of the suicidal mind therefore becomes the drama also of the audience, of those who are willing to grapple with and understand the distress of the mad person.

*4.48* keeps the mad individual in the centre of the narrative in the same way that Ibsenite drama centers the hysterical woman. As I outlined in chapter one, Christina Wald (2007) argues that there is a connection between Ibsenite drama and Freudian psychoanalysis, as Ibsenite drama positions the hysterical woman as cured only when she admits her sexual culpability to the masculine authority figure alongside an audience that is also assumed to be male. *4.48* also asks the audience to take part in the main speaker’s distress, potentially also leading the narrative to a similar end. The final lines of the playtext, “please open the curtains” (245) allude to Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* as Hedda commits suicide in the final scene behind a drawn

curtain. Mary Kay Norseng (1999) uses Scneidman's work to examine *Hedda Gabler*, arguing that rather than being hysterical, Hedda ruminates about suicide throughout the play. Norseng's analysis is especially relevant here as her work shows how Schneidman's prevention methods were not applied in Hedda's case, but potentially could mean a different kind of narrative trajectory (outside of theatrical conventions about hysterical women) for the main speaker of 4.48.

Norseng argues that Hedda commits suicide because she is unable to see any other outcome for herself: the other characters of the play have trapped her so that she must comply with their wishes, and she would rather die than have to continue struggling as she has done for the majority of the play (31). While many scholars have argued that this act of suicide is a declaration of freedom against the expected feminine role she was meant to play<sup>47</sup> (for example Templeton 1997, 211) and other scholars have called Hedda hysterical with sexual desire (Diamond 1990, 60), Norseng instead reads the curtain as especially significant to the truth of Hedda's desire to commit suicide. Instead of openly committing suicide, Hedda hides behind a curtain, just as she has hidden her psychological distress throughout the play. If this final suicide were an act of defiance, or a declaration of sexual culpability, then she would not have hidden her own death behind this final curtain (35). Finally, Norseng argues that this hidden act was purposeful on Ibsen's part, as he intentionally separates the audience from Hedda's true psychological distress (38). The curtain acts as part of the silence of Hedda's suicidal intention, part of the "beauty" that she hopes for Lovborg<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> Among other things, Hedda is unhappily pregnant and married to a man she does not care for.

<sup>48</sup> In *Hedda Gabler*, Hedda urges Lovborg to commit suicide "beautifully" and is distressed to find that he was shot in the crotch rather than the head. Moi (2013)

I see the final curtain of *4.48* as an intentional reference to Hedda's drawn curtain, as both plays ruminate on suicide. The difference between *4.48*'s focus on suicide and *Hedda*'s, however, is each playtext's contextual markers, or more specifically, its form. Norseng argues that Ibsen's writings centre on a "stripping down" of character, as each narrative ends in suicide, or the suicidal realization of truth:

Parenthetically it must be said that 'stripping down,' both as metaphor and dramatic technique, is in the very grain of the Ibsen drama... In all of these [Ibsen's plays] there is death, at least of part of the self, which might be termed a ritual suicide, in the sense that there is a deliberate letting go of identity. (33)

In many ways, Kane's plays have also followed this "stripping down" of character, from the more specific contextual markers of *Blasted*'s characters, to the more open-ended speakers of *4.48*. What Norseng reads as an indication of character suicide, however, I see a reimagining of character as highly dependent on multiple active participants, including an understanding audience. In a conscious refusal of Freud's talking-cure, *4.48* uses silences and imperative requests not to uncover the cause and therefore cure of the main speaker's distress, but to centre the needs of the mad subject, represented by the main speaker.

By examining the final few pages of *4.48*, we can see how the playtext exemplifies Norseng's conception of "stripping down":

in death you hold me  
never free

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argues that this fact leads Hedda to shoot herself in the head, completing the beauty that Lovborg could not himself enact (448).

I have no desire for death

no suicide ever had

watch me vanish

watch me

vanish

watch me

watch me

watch

It is myself I have never met, whose face is pasted on the  
underside of my mind

please open the curtains (244-245)

As the spaces between lines grow, the audience/reader is also given more imperative requests: “watch me vanish/watch me/vanish/watch me/watch me/watch”. The audience is invited to complete the play with their own interpretation, literally

reading between the lines as to the intentions of the main speaker. Is this the main speaker's final moment as they "vanish" and therefore commit suicide? The moment of suicide is certainly alluded to throughout the play; however, this final section may not complete the act. We can read the lines "in death you hold me/never free" as a reaction against the final endpoint of the character with a disability. By following the imperative requests in this final section and watching the main speaker vanish, we may also be fulfilling their needs for connection. The final line, therefore, acts as a rejection both of cure and of death, as the main speaker once again wishes to be seen, known, and understood. At the same time, the ambiguity of this final line makes it so that they may also have followed the conventional narrative trajectory and committed suicide. Such an assumed ending is now the responsibility of the audience, as they must do something in this final scene, whether it is simply "watching" or reacting. The audience can therefore dictate the narrative trajectory here: does the main speaker die, or can we imagine the opening of the curtains as the invitation to explore "the underside of [their] mind" and work with them to continue moving? In either instance, the possibility for a straightforward cure is lost in these final lines, as the main speaker cannot completely vanish without someone answering their request.

In fact, the main speaker rejects the possibility of a simple cure many times. Throughout the play, sanity is questioned and critiqued, beginning with the main speaker's discussion with their therapist about cutting themselves: the main speaker asks if the doctor had ever cut themselves, and when the answer is silence, they say, "No. Far too fucking sane and sensible" (217). The mocking tone is followed by further discussions of sanity, as the main speaker requests that the audience "embrace beautiful lies – the chronic insanity of the sane" (229). Sanity, or the

imaginary cure for madness, seems like “insanity” here to the main speaker, as they cannot envision an end to their psychological distress. Such sanity must therefore only be “beautiful lies”. The speaker follows with a series of imperative verbs including “flicker punch slash dab wring press burn slash...” and concludes with “and a saner life tomorrow” (232): these imperative verbs seem to imply that in order to achieve “a saner life tomorrow”, these violent actions must be performed. The sanity that seems to be the best outcome depends on a process that is violent towards the mad speaker.

Finally, the speaker compares their therapist/doctor to a saviour-like character saying:

I came to you hoping to be healed.

You are my doctor, my saviour, my omnipotent judge, my priest, my god, the surgeon of my soul.

And I am your proselyte<sup>49</sup> to sanity. (233)

Once again, the main speaker here demonstrates their complex relationship with the possibility for cure: they “came ... hoping to be healed” as a “proselyte to sanity”. As the play continues, however, it becomes clear that their frustration with their doctor’s abandonment and unwillingness to attempt to understand their psychological distress, contributes to their inability to “be healed”. For instance, in the final section, the main speaker says:

out of one torture chamber into another

a vile succession of errors without remission

every step of the way I’ve fallen

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<sup>49</sup> “Proselyte” originates from the biblical term meaning to convert to Judaism (“Proselyte”). In this instance, 4.48 potentially implies that sanity is a religion.

Despair propels me to suicide  
 Anguish for which doctors can find no cure  
 Nor care to understand  
 I hope you never understand  
 Because I like you (239)

Cure is set against understanding here, as the “doctors can find no cure/nor care to understand”; therefore cure and understanding are framed as two separate processes. There is also another “hope” here in this section, as the main speaker hopes “you never understand”. This hope seems to imply that understanding is an undesirable outcome for someone whom that the main speaker likes. Understanding, unlike cure, is not a quick fix, and depends on the willingness of the other to also work. Without understanding, however, the main speaker is propelled by despair to commit suicide and follow one of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s conventional narrative trajectories for the person with a disability: death<sup>50</sup>. Understanding becomes a radical disavowal both of cure and of conventional disability narratives that encourage death.

In *Suicidal Mind*, Schneidman argues the following:

Practically every reader of these words has worried about suicide, directly or indirectly; has had moments of concern about a family member, a friend, or oneself. Our constant goal is prevention—but first come [sic] understanding. (7)

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<sup>50</sup> Garland-Thomson (2002) argues that there are three narrative trajectories for characters with a disability: disability is cured, regulated, or eradicated (14).



Consistent with Schneiderman's theories on suicide, 4.48 asks for understanding, something that psychiatry and psychology have failed to provide the main speaker. The therapist's apparently stable understanding of themselves, and their fixed definition of sanity, makes them the representative of the normate<sup>51</sup> in this play. The therapist does not "need a doctor" (236), like they say the main speaker does. The silences that take place in conversations with the therapist speaker are either the result of the therapist surprised by the main speaker's words and unable to answer in a distanced way, or the main speaker refusing to answer. This distinction is exemplified in the following quote:

- But you have friends

*(A long silence.)*

You have a lot of friends.

What do you offer your friends to make them so supportive?

*(A long silence.)*

What do you offer your friends to make them so supportive?

*(A long silence.)*

What do you offer?

*(Silence.)*

We have a professional relationship. I think we have a good relationship. But it's professional.

*(Silence.)*

I feel your pain but I cannot hold your life in my hands. (236-237)

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<sup>51</sup> Garland-Thomson (1997) defines the normate as "the corporeal incarnation of culture's collective, unmarked normative characteristics" (8). I extend this definition to also include what we imagine as mental normality as well, rather than just physical characteristics.

The therapist goes on to tell the main speaker that they “fucking hate this job and [they] need [their] friends to be sane” (237). The main speaker is reduced to a function of the therapist’s job, the object that they are meant to cure, and to solve. The silences with which the main speaker responds appear to force the therapist to admit these truths about their attitude toward their job and friends to their patient. While the main speaker may have assumed their relationship was empathetic and interdependent, this conversation reveals that this relationship is not what they imagined. Their therapist does not want to be there with them, working through their suicidal ideation. Instead, the therapist wants sanity for the main speaker, a sanity that they will never attain. The main speaker had earlier lamented the realization of the therapist’s words, by saying:

Until I want to scream for you, the only doctor who ever touched me voluntarily, who looked me in the eye, who laughed at my gallows humour spoken in the voice from a newly-dug grave, who took the piss when I shaved my head, who lied and said it was nice to see me. Who lied. And said it was nice to see me. I trusted you, I loved you, and it’s not losing you that hurts me, but your bare-faced fucking falsehoods that masquerade as medical notes. (210)

The conflict between the “professional relationship” and the main speaker’s desire for understanding is eventually passed onto the audience in the form of silences and imperative requests. The audience is given opportunity to take up the position of the therapist, to understand the main speaker. The main speaker ends the conversation with their therapist by saying that they do understand: “I know. I’m angry because I understand, not because I don’t know” (238). The main speaker can listen in a way

the therapist cannot, can understand in the same way that they wish to be understood.

Understanding in the playtext begins by listening to the main speaker's many imperative requests, including the long lists of imperative verbs that are situated between shorter stanzas<sup>52</sup>. While these lists are devoid of grammar and may therefore seem difficult to follow, some of the other imperative requests are more direct. For example:

Please. Don't switch off my mind by attempting to straighten me out.  
Listen and understand, and when you feel contempt, don't express it,  
at least not verbally, at least not to me. (220)

This imperative request both refuses the cure of "straighten[ing]... out" and points to an ending that counters suicide. The main speaker is looking for someone willing to "listen and understand" so that they can be listened to, heard, and valued beyond their capacity for straight narrative. Unlike a cure that would be linear, this listening, remembering, and believing is a process that requires participation; the main speaker recognizes that the listener might "feel contempt", and asks them not to express it. The listener must work not to express their contempt: the main speaker recognizes that the silence of the listener is part of the complex process of interdependence.

There is another aspect to this excerpt that bears further analysis: the use of the term "straighten". Given the gender ambiguities within the text, I read this line as an explicitly queer declaration of selfhood. The main speaker at first refers to their

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<sup>52</sup> For example, one of these lists is the following:

flash flicker slash burn wring press dab slash  
flash flicker punch burn float flicker dab flicker  
punch flicker flash burn dab press wring press  
punch flicker float burn flash flicker burn (231)

lover as “his/he” (208) but later calls them “a woman who was never born” (218). The shift in desire locates the speaker’s love as decidedly queer, unable to follow the straightened conventions of heteronormativity. The polyvalence of their desire here is potentially also what enforces their distress. Laurens De Vos (2010) connects this shifting desire to his Lacanian analysis of *4.48*, arguing that the main speaker is struggling to return to the pre-Symbolic, in the process discovering the untouchability of the Real. Such an analysis attempts once again to universalize the experiences of the main speaker, removing them from the queer, mad specificity of their distress. I want to re-center this specificity. Not only does the gender of the object of affection change in the play, but the gender of the main speaker themselves also remains ambiguous and impermanent. The queerness of identity, not just desire, in the playtext requires a queer theory and trans studies analysis.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler discusses lives that are deemed unliveable and the particular states that are not even regarded as possible. Normative structures that are in place force a script of performativity on bodies themselves, allowing some bodies to prosper and forcing some into dying. Her work has been applied to disability theory, as critical disability scholars question which bodies are imagined as functional, beautiful, and normal. Similarly, mad studies attempts to outline which feelings, thoughts, and behaviours are imagined to be functional, productive, and normal, tying together the onus that is put onto productivity in a neoliberal capitalist society. *4.48* brings to mind multiple characters whose gender exists between the gender binary, outside of the assumed normative labels of male or female. Similarly, the words are so disjointed from the performance in a form that does not indicate who says what when, such that character is forced to grow out of multiple interactions between performer, director, and audience. *4.48*

thus exemplifies the interdependency of bodies, of gendering, and of living, forcing the audience in part to allow the body on stage to be liveable, or to continue living.

In a similar way, trans studies has begun analysing theatre to find transgender bodies where they were previously never imagined to be. For instance, trans studies scholar Lucas Crawford (2015) examines Samuel Beckett's *The Unnameable* in relation to naming and the impermanence of the characters' names. He argues that Beckett's placement of character as unable to be either Mahood or Worm creates a liminal otherspace similar to the trans individual's journey to name themselves. Like Cristina Delgado-García, who argues that *4.48* refuses the liberal-humanist subject position, Crawford argues that Beckett displaces the supposed wholeness of character in order to imagine another kind of subject, one that cannot be liberal-humanist (111). This, he argues, is similar to the trans subject's liminality between genders, as the subject is never assumed to be truly one or the other, male or female. I bring up this analysis knowing that no names exist in *4.48*; therefore, the liminality of (gender) identity within the playtext might be slightly different. However, the main speaker, sometimes referring to themselves as someone who might turn into "an old lady" (218), nonetheless also follows a trans trajectory, announcing that there is a distressing dissonance between the body parts that are most often gendered, saying "I dislike my genitals" (207). They also describe themselves as "the broken hermaphrodite who trusted hermsself" during a night where "everything was revealed" (205), eventually pointing inward once again, saying "behold the Eunuch/of castrated thought" (242). The playtext pushes the boundaries of gender ambiguity by raising the possibility that the main speaker does not have a permanent gender, or perhaps that their gender is permanently liminal, beyond the binary. The pronoun "hermsself" seems especially to suggest the

possibility of a third gender, one that does not fall into either male or female categorizations.

Delgado-García looks to the mind/body split in *4.48* to argue that the liberal-humanist subject position is rejected. Recognizing that the play does reference intersexuality or transgender identities, she argues that the form and content of *4.48* separates the mind (text) from the body (embodied performance) (247). I see this separation as more radical than Delgado-García does, since she only points to the liberal-humanist subject as challenged within the playtext. Instead, I see the main speaker challenging the conception not only of a subject whose body and mind are integrated and whole, but also a subject that falls within the spectrum of bodily and mental normativity. Their body is sexed as both male and female, or perhaps neither, and their mind also refuses to be straightened. Their mind refuses to adhere to the linear and logical understanding of reality, instead speaking in episodic, poetic, and fragmented sections of text.

These fragments invite audience participation, not only through the imperative requests, but also through the playtext's intertextual references. In the same section that includes "just a word on the page and there is drama" (213), the main speaker calls themselves "last in a long line of literary kleptomaniacs/(a time-honoured tradition)" (213). Antje Diedrich takes this line as encouragement to examine the moments of intertextuality in *4.48*, arguing that the playtext "steals" from other works in order to envision a connection with those who might be familiar with the intertext (376). Diedrich especially emphasizes the complex ways that *4.48* uses intertextual references to challenge the psychiatric system and its attempts to cure the main speaker. She notes that the line "RSVP ASAP" (214), for example, is a

direct allusion to the suicide note of one of Schneidman's clients (381)<sup>53</sup>. Schneidman was very critical of psychiatric diagnoses for those who were considering suicide, arguing instead that the psychiatrist/therapist/doctor must understand the vital needs of the suicidal person in order to save their life (24). He defines vital needs as psychological needs that cause psychache when they are not obtained. Diedrich notes that the main speaker borrows the concept of the "vital need", saying "the vital need for which I would die/to be loved" (242-243), and observes that the main speaker's "vital need" here is the need to be loved, or as Schneidman calls it, the need for affiliation (379-380). This need to be loved is similar to their need for understanding, inviting a listening audience to love them through understanding, to save their life, not through cure but through interacting with the main speaker.

4.48 implies that there cannot be a cure through psychiatry. The entirety of the play mocks the psychiatric system, with this early section as a good example:

Dr This and Dr That and Dr Whatsit who's just passing and thought he'd pop in to take the piss as well. Burning in a hot tunnel of dismay, my humiliation complete as I shake without reason and stumble over words and have nothing to say about my 'illness' which anyway amounts only to knowing that there's no point in anything because I'm going to die. (209)

Diedrich points to the play's allusion to the young adult fiction series *The Chronicles of Narnia*, but this particular section calls to mind another young adult fiction series, that of Madeleine L'Engle's *Time Quintet*. In L'Engle's 1962 novel *A Wrinkle in Time*, Mrs. Whatsit plays one of three witches (the other two are Mrs. Which and Mrs.

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<sup>53</sup> The patient ends his note with "Please respond soon. I must regain control and find the solution. R.S.V.P" (Schneidman 120).

Who) who bring three children into a new world. The novel also contains light/darkness imagery that culminates in the revelation that the true enemy is “The Black Thing”, a representation of all the world’s evil. To fight against “The Black Thing,” the characters must trust in the innocence of childhood and the goodness that comes from true love. In *4.48*, the repeated line “remember the light and believe the light” (206/228) therefore takes a new meaning in the struggle against the darkness. *4.48* perhaps invokes this imagery to highlight distress as “The Black Thing,” not necessarily describable through the psychiatric system, but nonetheless a real and distressing process.

It is important to note the racial connotations of the difference between lightness and darkness. As in the case of *Crave*, no criticism to date has considered the light/dark binary in the play as representative of race or racial hierarchies. However, unlike *Crave*, *4.48* never explicitly references racial identities, instead conflating racial difference within the liminality of identity. For example, the main speaker refers to their distress by saying “I thought I would never speak again/but now I know there is something blacker than desire” (226). The passage seems to connect the racialization of blackness with queerness, and yet also with “The Black Thing” of mental distress. The blackness beyond desire may mean the psychological distress inherent in representing liminality. While it is important to note the problematic connection between mental distress and black identity, as black identity in itself does not necessarily signify mental distress, exploring race in *4.48* is beyond the scope of this project.

Another intertextual reference that Diedrich pinpoints is the use of “serial sevens” in *4.48*. Diedrich argues that the fourth section of *4.48* that includes a collection of unintelligible numbers is reminiscent of part of the Mini-Mental State



Examination (MMSE), given especially to determine dementia diagnoses but also applied in other cognitive impairments (383). As part of the test, the patient is asked to count down from 100 in multiples of seven; if they are unable to do so, the result is given as further evidence towards their diagnosis. Although in this fourth section of *4.48*, the main speaker is unable to count down in multiples of seven, a later section does have numbers neatly arranged beginning from 100 and ending in 2. This later section implies that the main speaker, although initially unable to pass this part of the cognitive test, now may have passed it. Although the play is fiercely opposed to the conception of a psychiatric cure, this section implies that there is still some kind of recovery taking place. Their previous command, “please don’t let me forget” (206), may have been listened to and understood, if the audience reads deeply into the intertextual markings of the play.

The imperative request that asks the audience not to let the main speaker forget is connected to Alicia Tycer (2008)’s argument about *4.48* encouraging the audience to become and remain melancholic in response to the speaker’s urgings. She argues that the first performance of the play especially made the audience feel grief, grief that may have extended beyond the performance itself. The extended grief of the audience makes it so that they feel a collective melancholia throughout the performance, unable to forget the author’s real suicide as it is connected to the fictional world on stage. She places melancholia in a more positive light than its Freudian roots, arguing that the forgetting that *4.48* does not allow is one that is laced with the recognition of the oppressive nature of psychiatry. By refusing to allow the audience to forget, the main speaker encourages its audiences to listen to and understand the real-lived psychological distress that may be occurring all around them, pushing the boundaries of the performance space itself (36).

While all of Kane's plays are interested in pushing the boundaries of stageability<sup>54</sup>, *4.48* is a particular challenge to directors, actors, producers, and audiences. Kane studied Antonin Artaud's work while she was writing *4.48* and the play arguably does follow from many of Artaud's writings about "true theatre". Artaud defines true theatre as involving audience participation, "plaguing" those who are involved in every production. He compares the spread of affective response to the spread of plague, encouraging a more visceral experience through theatre. Critics have most often compared Kane's earlier work to Artaud's theory, as she had intentionally included stage directions that were difficult to perform in order to shock and move the audience. However, Kane's final play most explicitly uses Artaud in its attempts to move all those involved in every production. At first glance, *4.48* seems like the opposite of Artaud's theoretical consideration about theatre, as it includes no stage direction, using only words uttered by unnamed speakers. Artaud rejects theatre that involves only words, arguing that true theatre does away with words in favour of a more physical embodiment of character and plot. However, *4.48*'s use of language encourages a more involved production team, including an audience that is encouraged to "listen and understand". Tycer (2008) argues that the audience of *4.48* is melancholic by the end of a performance; according to Artaud, this affective response is exactly what theatre is meant to accomplish, making the audience feel for the actions taking place on stage.

When the play was finally performed in 2000, the press assumed *4.48 Psychosis*'s focus on madness was an indication that the play was an autobiographical piece about Kane's own ruminations around suicide. Since this

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<sup>54</sup> For example, *Blasted* includes stage directions for rain that is demarcated by seasons: "spring"/"summer"/"autumn"/ "heavy winter" (24/39/50/57) rain.

performance, scholars have been divided about whether an autobiographical analysis is merited or reductive. Many have argued that viewing Kane's final play as "a suicide note" erases the complexity of her intertextual references and the depth of *4.48*'s form. Others have argued that the effort to separate Kane's life from her life's work is a political disavowal of her real lived experience as a queer<sup>55</sup> mad woman (especially Claycomb 2010, 103). Because I see both arguments as equally valid interpretations, my own analysis aims to examine the play's content and form with Kane's own life experience in mind; Kane's death allows the play's aims to be amplified as she forces the play's directors, actors, and audience to have more creative control over each performance. Through her own suicide, she forced James McDonald, the director of *4.48*'s first performance, to seek out help from psychiatrists for his direction, many of whom did not agree with her work (Saunders 2002, 124). Because Kane herself died before the play could be performed, suicide in the play and outside of it therefore becomes the ultimate element of Artaud's theory of complete theatre, adding to the play's postdramatic strategies. It becomes up to the audience whether the final scene is representative of the speaker's suicide, or another extended moment of audience understanding.

I want to end this chapter by examining one of the most famous lines in Kane's repertoire: "Victim. Perpetrator. Bystander" (231). This line takes place between six quatrains of imperative verbs, alongside lines including "You have no choice/the choice comes after" (230) and "it will never pass" (231). The first performance of *4.48* cast three performers to play the various voices of the play; however, in a 2002 French language adaptation of the play, Claude Régy cast only two performers, arguing that the audience would be playing the part of one of the

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<sup>55</sup> Kane was a lesbian.

victim, perpetrator, or bystander, though never indicating which of these three positions he meant the audience to play (Claycomb 98). This strategy emphasizes the participation of the audience, making them think about their position within the nonexistent stage markers of the play. Throughout all of Kane's plays, there is an intentional blurring of these three positions, while at the same time recognizing the positionality of power that allows particular identities to access labels of "victim" or "bystander" more easily than others. The imperative requests and the silences in *4.48* encourage each audience to question which position they occupy in the play, and work to blur the lines between these positions in the future. Further, by giving few stage directions and no contextual markers within the play, *4.48* forces each part of the performance itself to work together to make the play a success. Such enforced interdependence on playtext, directors, performers, and audiences allows *4.48* to enact what Artaud described as "true theatre," never allowing a static or stagnant understanding of the play, and perhaps also allowing a radical understanding of the possibilities for solidarity with the queer mad individual.

## Conclusion

### “That’s All There’s Ever Been”:

#### Kane Criticism and Beyond

In recent years, there has been a revival of Sarah Kane’s plays on the British stage, as well as a resurgence of new Kane criticism. In February of 2015, the Sheffield Theatre in London announced “The Sarah Kane Season” with three complete productions of *Blasted*, *Crave* and *4.48*, two readings of *Phaedra’s Love* and *Cleansed*, and a showing of her short film *Skin* (Dickson 2015). 2015 brought a full book of Sarah Kane criticism by Jolene Armstrong, an article about *4.48*’s place in postdramatic theatre by Matthew Roberts, an article about formalism in *Blasted* by Stefka Mihalova, and a chapter on *Crave*’s postmodernism from Thomas Phillips. More recently, a London production of *Cleansed* in February 2016 disturbed audience members, five of whom fainted during a performance and 40 of whom walked out before the end of the play (Morris 2016). While many playwrights who were writing during her lifetime are still performed and discussed, Kane’s continued relevance after a short career of only five years is notable; even after her death 17 years ago, her work still speaks to audiences and academics.

While this project has mainly focused on using a critical lens thus far undeveloped in Kane studies—critical disability studies—it has also been interested in exploring why her work is still relevant today. Joining the critical conversation surrounding Kane’s work has been a thrilling and complex undertaking, as each critic grapples with a body of work that refuses to give easy answers, and that requires a rigorous and critical participation. As I have shown, this critical participation depends on a willingness to imagine a different kind of narrative trajectory in all three of the plays this project examines. In *Blasted*, the relationship between Cate

and Ian enforces multiple kinds of theatrical realities where both characters must eventually depend on each other to survive in a warzone. In *Crave*, four characters reiterate their psychological distress, forgetting the positionality of power and thus centering the viewpoint of the neoliberal normate. Finally, *4.48 Psychosis* requests the participation of all involved in each production, asking the audience to enact the play's interdependence, in order to perhaps to diminish psychological distress.

Some critics have argued that the reason for Kane's continued relevance is her focus on humanity and love. While she undoubtedly thematizes both, I see her more often questioning, rather than reifying, conventional perceptions of these concepts. In *Blasted*, the love between Cate and Ian is not necessarily romantic or sexual love—in fact, I have argued that there is nothing loving about the sex that takes place within and outside of the play—but one that allows Cate and Ian to survive through interdependence. While early critics argued that the violence in *Blasted* is demonstrative of amoral humanity and the violent atrocities that humanity inevitably commits, I have instead argued that *Blasted* shows the opposite: the ending implies a hopefulness for a humanity that is willing to see difference in Cate as a disabled woman. Similarly, the seemingly hopeful ending of *Crave* is not so hopeful when we consider the forgetting that potentially takes place within the last few lines: *Crave* reminds us that when no one is willing to listen, the universality of humanity will signify psychological distress for those who cannot live up to normate standards. Finally, it is understanding, an important aspect of love, that allows interdependence potentially to take place among all participants in *4.48*. However, this love is not straightforward, linear, nor one-sided; it depends on the participation of all involved, engendering a collective, rather than individual, humanity.

Throughout this project, I have made intersectionality a priority, attempting to centre disability as it connects to gender, queerness, trans identity, and race. Further exploration of any of these aspects of identity in Sarah Kane's work is warranted, as I could only scratch the surface of the complex web of subjectivity that Kane often weaves. For instance, I could not explore either *Phaedra's Love*, or *Cleansed*, Kane's other two plays, nor Kane's short film *Skin*. In a similar fashion to *Blasted*'s depiction of rape, the presence or absence of rape in *Phaedra's Love* brings up the complexity of gender-based violence, pointing to the toxicity of masculine passivity. While work has been done on rape in the play (see for example, Ward 2013), the inactivity of the play's main character, Hippolytus, who spends the majority of the play sitting, masturbating, or playing videogames in the same spot, could merit a mad studies analysis. Is Hippolytus mad because of his unwillingness to live a life outside of his room? Similarly, the violence of *Cleansed* encourages many different readings with respect to madness, disability, and violence. In the final scene, Grace becomes her brother Graham, inheriting a penis and a body that is no longer gendered female. I thus see trans studies as a particularly important critical framework for this play that requires more exploration: is Grace mad because of her desire to become her brother, caught in a melancholic loop of despair<sup>56</sup>, or is she now he, not necessarily mad at all, but instead finding his new gendered truth? Finally, the interracial love in *Skin*, Kane's only foray into film, especially encourages more intersectional analysis, as a racist white man, calling himself a "skinhead", falls in love with a black woman.

This project has been more literary, rather than theatrical in scope, focussing first and foremost on the play as text, rather than as performance. My background as

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<sup>56</sup> Wald (2007) argues that Grace is melancholic in *Cleansed*.

a student of literature, rather than theatre, has made this lens an important aspect of my project. However, there is more work to be done in the intersection between disability and theatrical performance, as Kane's work encourages unconventional bodies and minds to fulfill the roles of her characters. Beyond literary criticism, Kane's emphasis on performance makes more performance theory work vital in Kane studies. Likewise, I recognize my privilege as a white able-bodied person writing about race and disability; I hope that my project encourages more people to examine race and disability in Kane's work, as these very undeveloped themes require further exploration, and would lead to a much greater appreciation of her genius.



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