The Joker's Shifting Face

Eighty Years of Mad History in *Batman* and American Culture

Elizabeth A. Wheeler

University of Oregon

That "grim jester with a twisted brain," *Batman* supervillain the Joker reflects shifting social constructions of mental difference in the US across eight decades. The article reads *Batman* serial comics, graphic novels, and film against four key moments in Mad History: eugenics, psychiatric survivor activism in the 1960s and 1970s, the trauma discourses of 1980s popular culture, and the criminalization of mental difference in the twenty-first century. Out of this complex conversation four models of madness are derived: toxic reproduction, liberation, mad genius, and the conflation of madness with violent crime. These models work intersectionally: Joker's madness, queerness, and exceptionally white masculinity engender each other. Because of his distinctive qualities as a visual icon, he makes Mad History more visible, too.

Introduction

Superheroes and doctors of the 1940s dreamed of erasing mental difference with the stroke of a scalpel. In 1940, the year of the Joker's debut, Batman revealed his plan to abduct the "mad, evil genius" and "take him to a famous brain specialist for an operation, so that he can be cured and turned into a valuable citizen" (Finger and Roussos, "Joker Meets Catwoman", 46–77). In 1942, American physicians Walter J. Freeman and James W. Watts claimed their lobotomies cured mental illness: "The emotional nucleus of the psychosis is removed, the 'sting' of the disorder is drawn" (Freeman and Watts vii). Whether in 1940 or today, Joker-stories jangle the cultural nerve endings of their eras. His madness and burgeoning queerness escape cure, even though his sick violence calls out for it.

Batman's maniacal supervillain reflects shifting social constructions of mental difference in the US across eight decades.[1] I read *Batman* serial

1. A note on terminology: There is no good name for the diverse and stigmatized realm often called mental illness. I have chosen "madness" for social constructions, "mental illness" for diagnoses,

Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies 18.3 (2024)
ISSN 1757-6458 (print) 1757-6466 (online) https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2024.17

comics, graphic novels, and film against four key moments in Mad History: eugenics, the activism of former mental patients in the 1960s and 1970s, the trauma discourses of 1980s popular culture, and the criminalization of mental difference in the twenty-first century. Mad History chronicles the experiences and cultures of neurodivergent people, their interactions with the healthcare system, and the constructions of mental difference in public discourse. From dialogues between history and popular culture, I derive four models of madness between 1940 and 2019: toxic reproduction, liberation, mad genius, and the conflation of madness with violent crime. These models work intersectionally: Joker's madness, queerness, and exceptionally white masculinity engender each other.

Flamboyant, fast-thinking, ludicrous, and cruel, the Joker performs contradictory meanings of mental difference, from cheap exploitation of stereotypes to deep exploration of society and self. The four models of madness contradict each other, largely because they reflect the divide between insider and outsider perspectives. Popular culture itself is contradictory, however. The Joker embodied Mad Pride decades before its arrival, while slandering neurodivergent people as violent criminals and fonts of contagion. He slaughters and slanders, but also launches necessary critiques of normality, masculinity, and the asylum. Like the word "mad," he implies "both radical and conservative political possibilities" (Gorman 270). The Joker's capacity for contradictions has fueled eight decades of inventive storytelling. Perhaps Dr. Ruth Adams, Arkham Asylum psychotherapist, is correct: "Some days he's a mischievous clown, others a psychopathic killer. He has no real personality. He creates himself each day" (Morrison and McKean 29). Madness inspires both terror and protean power.

The Joker makes an excellent portal into Mad History because of his distinctive qualities as an icon. He insists zealously on seeing himself and being seen everywhere. When he kills, he gives victims his face. He's the master of ceremonies at every party. He compels others to see the world through his eyes. This charisma makes discourses stick to him like a magnet, and he becomes their icon. Discourses of madness often remain misunderstood and half-submerged. Because the Joker is so visible, they become more visible, too.

and "mental difference," "neurodiversity," or "neurodivergence" for firsthand experiences of altered perceptions and emotional distress. I myself identify as neuroqueer, experiencing or having experienced depression, anxiety, fibromyalgia, chronic migraine, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Toxic Reproduction

Batman comics portray the Joker's madness as a toxic chemical threatening the entire populace. In Bill Finger's 1951 origin story "The Man Behind the Red Hood!," vapor from an industrial waste pool drives him insane, creates his "evil clown" face, and gives birth to his supervillain persona (Finger, Moldoff, and Roussos 126). The Joker prefers killing with chemicals: poison darts, mind-control lipstick, venom guns, toxic vapors, lethal injections, acid-spraying flowers, nitroglycerine explosions, and his signature nerve agent, Joker Toxin. The frequent appearance of chemicals reflects the US chemical industry's new prominence after the First and Second World Wars (Steen 237–86; Mart 3). Mid-twentieth-century comics drew from a rising, potentially dangerous industry of the day, just as early twenty-first century supervillains often run global technology companies.

The marriage of Joker to toxins persists so stubbornly; however, it represents more than the narrative convenience of a specific era. I argue that his chemicals represent a eugenic threat of contamination as well as an environmental one: madness as toxic reproduction. Instigated in Britain and the US, with its apex in the Holocaust, negative eugenics maintains that people with certain traits should exit the population to prevent its genetic and moral decline through the reproduction of those traits.

How can the Joker transmit genetic mutation when his madness is not hereditary? The answer lies in the social context preceding his 1940 debut. By the 1930s, eugenics met with some skepticism among scientists and cultural elites. In response, eugenicists downplayed heredity and played up the risks of environmental contamination. "By emphasizing environment rather than heredity, the eugenics movement survived attacks by geneticists and social scientists and flourished" (Kline 19). Eugenics permeated 1930s popular culture and scarred the lived reality of Americans diagnosed with mental illness and other disabilities. Between 1931 and 1939, state hospitals and "training centers" sterilized over 20,000 patients without their consent (Kline 24).

With his racially suspect purple zoot suit, bleached skin, and ethnically suspect facial features, Joker embodies madness, physical disability, and gangsterism and their eugenic threats to the white race. As Nobel-Prize-winning doctor Alexis Carrel wrote in 1935:

> The diseases of the mind are a serious menace […] They are to be feared, not only because they increase the number of criminals, but chiefly because they profoundly weaken the dominant white races. (Carrel 147–48)

Harvard anthropologist Earnest Hooton feared "the busy breeders among the morons, criminals and social ineffectuals of our population" (qtd. in Soper 278), and no one in American comics is a busier breeder than the Joker. Constantly replicating his degenerate mind and face, he births more Jokers through asexual reproduction. Robin asks, "How many times has someone been 'Jokerized' and driven mad?" (Johns et al. n.p.). The horror of non-genital, non-normative reproduction looms large in eugenic popular culture. Angela Marie Smith argues that horror films like *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* (both 1931) were "dramatizing the dangers of any method of procreation other than that of heterosexual, marital sex between young, attractive, and healthy couples" (342). From his first story onwards, the Joker's victims die with his "lunatic grin" on their faces (Englehart et al. 6). Batman explains the grin comes from "[s]ome sort of drug that pulled the muscles of the face!" (Finger et al., "The Joker", 152). The Joker passes on his traits through the toxic reproduction of chemicals rather than sex. Throughout the first story, Bob Kane braids images of the Joker grinning with images of his five grinning victims, forming a diabolical family album (140–43, 147; Groensteen 146).

The Joker's toxic reproduction carries the eugenic threats of sly transmission, genetic degradation, and excessive proliferation. An exasperated Batman complains, "He's like a one-man plague!" (O'Neil and Adams 10). His chemicals creep into victims' bodies to kill them after he departs, like hereditary diseases lurking in genes. Creeping gases, timed-release injections, and remote-controlled blasts stymie efforts at control. He perpetuates what Lawrence Buell calls "a long-standing mythography of betrayed Edens": "what we believe to be snug bastions of bourgeois domesticity are suffused with noxious lethal vapors" (647). In Finger and Kane's very first Joker story, the rich men he's threatened to kill sit in their snug bastions of bourgeois domesticity, surrounded by grandfather clocks, paneled libraries, cozy fireplaces, and "inflexible cordons" of police, then they suddenly fall dead grinning (Finger et al., "The Joker", 141, 3, 7). The Joker's sly transmission threatens the purity of the bourgeois family.

Is Batman immune to Joker's contagion? The superhero's degree of eugenic purity varies across the canon. Later works depict Batman struggling with his own sanity. In earlier years, however, Batman retains full immunity. Whenever contamination threatens him, he reasserts his fitness through displays of manliness. In the first Joker story, for instance, the villain sprays his venom gun and "the Batman's jaw tightens into the ghastly Joker 'grin'!" However, his superior constitution fights off the resemblance: "But the Joker has not reckoned with the amazing recuperative powers of the mighty Batman!" (Finger et al., "The Joker", 149–50). The hero performs his health

and fitness through Bob Kane's beautiful colorblocked graphics of Batman lifting the unconscious Robin, then running through the streets to track the Joker down (150). The superhero risks contamination to save others less eugenically endowed, with a dynamism that bests contamination. The fantasy of being immune to disability and environmental risk gives that dynamism a powerful charge.

Insane Liberation Front

Along with the eugenic threat of toxic reproduction, the Joker can also represent resistance to the oppression of mad and disabled people. In 1973, for the first time, Joker escapes from "the state hospital for the criminally insane" instead of prison (O'Neil and Adams, "The Joker's Five-Way Revenge!", 2). Arkham Asylum does not appear until Dennis O'Neil's *Batman* run of the 1970s, when psychiatric hospitals had become targets of controversy (O'Neil and Novick, "Threat", 1). Activists criticized rampant abuse, the state's power to commit people on minor pretexts, and cruel treatments in the name of modern science. Like eugenics, lobotomy was a pseudoscience, but that made its practitioners no less eminent or arrogant. A psychologist at the notorious Milledgeville State Hospital in Georgia, Peter Cranford, recorded this 1952 conversation with a neurosurgeon named Dr. Hatcher. If there were an award for the world's most psychopathic Joker, Dr. Hatcher would win over the *Batman* villain every time.

> Hatcher: Peter, I'm doing transorbital lobotomies this morning. Come watch me.
>
> Cranford: If I *saw* one, you'd have to do the next one on me.
>
> Hatcher: Nothing to it. I take a sort of medical icepick, hold it like this, bop it through the bones just above the eyeball, push it up into the brain, swiggle it around, cut the brain fibers like this, and that's it. The patient doesn't feel a thing.
>
> Cranford: And neither do you. I *was* going to breakfast but I've changed my mind.
>
> Hatcher *(laughing):* You can change your mind, but not like I can change it.
>
> (qtd. in Shorter 228)

In the 1960s and 1970s, the CSX (consumer/survivor/ex-patient) movement of ex-mental hospital patients, psychiatric survivors, and mental health care consumers decided to change their minds back. Building on their shared

experiences, they advocated for patients' rights and created new models of care outside hospitals. Ex-patients joined successful lawsuits that by the late 1970s limited state governments' power to commit people to mental institutions against their will (Parsons 71). Such initiatives helped produce a great wave of deinstitutionalization (Shorter 280). Thousands of real people emerged from state hospitals at the same time the Joker did. "A broader cultural trend of questioning psychiatry" manifested itself in widely consumed films like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and books like Phyllis Chesler's *Women and Madness* (Parsons 70).

Riding this upsurge of critique, the spirit of resistance made its way into superhero comics. Joker-stories often portray madness from the outsider's viewpoint of familiar stereotypes, but sometimes they draw on insiders' perspectives. Judi Chamberlin's *On Our Own* (1978), a key book of the CSX movement, registers a profound shift in the social construction of people deemed mad, from passive patients to agents of their own lives. In the hospital, Chamberlin writes, people "become indecisive [and] frightened of the outside world" and learn to hate themselves (6, 64). The CSX vision of patient-controlled communities, determining their own policies, finances, and care, departs radically from the psychiatric hospital's demand for compliance and submission: "A group that is running (or attempting to start) an alternative facility is challenging some of the basic ideas with which society views the 'mentally ill.' This is a profoundly political act" (197).

These patient-controlled communities spoke openly about their own neurodivergence and redefined it as a source of cultural identity. They reclaimed words like "mental patient" and "insane" in a reversal that led to the Mad Pride movement of the 1990s (Lewis, "A Mad Fight", 116). They gave themselves names like the Insane Liberation Front (Portland, Oregon) and the Mental Patients Liberation Front (Chicago). Bursting out of the state hospital in 1973, Dennis O'Neil's Joker also bursts with newfound pride. He pictures his ultimate triumph over Batman: "I'd always envisioned my winning as a result of *cunning*—at the end of a bitter struggle between the Batman and myself—him using his detective skills… and me employing the divine gift men call *madness*!" (O'Neil and Adams 11). Here, Joker revives an ancient model of madness as spiritual power, much discussed in the mind-bending conversations of the 1970s.

Batman tries to insult Joker with the word "insane," but the Joker reclaims the word. He celebrates his madness in campy dialogue that reflects his new queerness in the 1970s, the shared era of gay liberation and the Insane Liberation Front.

Batman: *Joker*…you *realize* you're utterly…hopelessly…*insane*?

Joker: It's my *most charming* trait! (O'Neil and Adams 17)

In "The Laughing Fish" (1978), Joker invades Gotham City like a one-man Insane Liberation Front. Steve Englehart and Marshall Rogers's comic sports a wild, fun Joker. Dapper and self-possessed, he strides laughing into a bureaucrat's office to launch an irrational marketing campaign. One hand rests casually in the pocket of his magenta overcoat while the other doffs his matching hat. His figure stretches the full length of the page, his trademark "HA HA HA" spiraling down his whole body and invading straight space. This Joker-in-charge is the flip side of the ex-hospital patients Judi Chamberlin describes, those recovering from fear, self-hatred, and passivity. No matter what horrific crimes he commits, the Joker never hates or doubts himself. He never fears or submits to authority. He does not play their game. He runs the game.

This Joker uses toxic reproduction as a form of insane liberation. With his power to distort, he could brag like the lobotomist Dr. Hatcher, "You can change your mind, but not like I can change it." In the ecological 1970s, his contamination extends to nonhuman species. He has secretly dumped Joker Toxin into the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans to create fish who are now homicidal and grinning. A fisherman shoves a basketful of fish in Batman's face. "Our *whole catch* is contaminated with that lunatic grin! Herring—cod--! *All* of 'em *laughing* at us!" (Englehart et al. 6). The Joker now has tiny company in mocking the normies.

This excessive and pointless reproduction spawns absurdist theatrics true to the 1970s counterculture spirit. On the cover, the villain points a Joker-Fish in each hand as if they were pistols. Their little white faces grin dementedly. Motion lines show he has just whipped the fish out of his—Holsters? Pockets? Fish tank? The Joker warns, "Hands up, Batman! I've got you covered!" He relishes his identity as armed and ridiculous. When eugenics warns that a group threatens the gene pool, people in that group mock such moral panic through jokes about their own fearsome powers to proliferate and take over. The Insane Liberation Front's name expresses such insider humor. "The Laughing Fish" offers a conduit to invasive species pride. No wonder queer and neurodivergent people often identify with the villain.

Revenge for Trauma

In the 1980s, trauma came to the fore as an explanatory model for neurodivergence. The diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder first appeared in the 1980 edition of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, and the self-help guide *The Courage to Heal* appeared in 1988. In between, newspapers and popular fiction featured countless stories of recovered memories from childhood abuse. In the 1980s, American culture also began to grapple with a specific kind of trauma, i.e. the abuse disabled and Mad people endured both in and out of institutions. These legacies impel two of the graphic novels that moved comics into the literary canon: Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *The Killing Joke* (1988) and Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (1989). Both rely on trauma discourse for a grim intensity associated with literary ambition.[2] Both use the revenge trope to fold the experience of trauma back into the conventional rules of Mad supervillainy.

The Killing Joke dwells in a key site of disability history: the carnival freak show. Like the asylum in *Serious House*, the freak show in *The Killing Joke* is carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian sense: a bawdy and satirical world turned upside down where the ruled temporarily become the rulers. The Joker has several learning goals for the representatives of law and order, his unwilling students on a field trip through trauma. He seeks to demonstrate "there's *no difference* between *me* and everyone *else*!" (Moore and Bolland 44). He exacts revenge for histories of psychiatric abuse and exploitative spectacle. And he wants to replace one violent regime with another.

Joker-controlled spaces are a far cry from the CSX movement's safe, healing community care centers for emotional emergencies. Instead, the Joker aims to spawn new mad communities by traumatizing people. In *The Killing Joke,* he uses the available framework of repressed traumatic memory to define madness as a form of dissociation. "So when you find yourself locked onto an unpleasant train of thought, heading for the places in your past where the screaming is *unbearable,* remember there's always *madness. Madness* is the *emergency exit*" (Moore and Bolland 28). His 1980s version of toxic reproduction replicates his trauma in others. He proposes trauma as revenge for trauma, crooning to Commissioner Gordon, "Don't get ee-ee-even, get mad!" (Moore and Bolland 32).

The Joker's shooting of Barbara Gordon and torture of her father Jim avenge two forms of dehumanization: being diagnosed as pathological and othered

2. Many thanks to Chris Ivy for helping me make this connection.

as spectacle. In the freak shows of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, spectators toured exhibits of people with very small, very large, or otherwise unusual bodies. Many performers were financially and physically exploited; all appeared as bizarre spectacles. To enact his revenge, the Joker revives a defunct carnival. In the past, the man with the distorted clown face and his accomplices would have been the exhibits; now they run the show. The Joker kidnaps the chief of police, Commissioner Gordon, and makes him the "Main Attraction" to reverse the freakshow's othering (16). Gordon appears nude, caged, in leather fetish straps, to a relaxed and smiling audience of common freak show characters: a Fat Lady, a Human Skeleton, a Missing Link, and conjoined twins. Acting as showman, the Joker satirizes Gordon's normality: "*Ladies* and *Gentlemen*! You've *read* about it in the newspapers! Now, *shudder* as you observe, *before your very eyes*, that most *rare* and *tragic* of *nature's mistakes*! I give you…*The Average Man*!" (40).

The Average Man plays the roles of spectacle and spectator. Joker prepares a disability spectacle for his forced viewing. He shoots Barbara Gordon in the spine, then takes photos of her naked, paralyzed body. To drive her father mad, he displays the photos on a carnival ride called the Ghost Train: a good name for traumatic memory. The sadistic spectacle doubles the meaning of trauma porn, displaying recently traumatized people in shocking, sexualized imagery. The plan to drive Gordon mad calls down wrath not only on the freak show but also on psychiatric abuse. Joker aims to "change his mind" literally, like a 1950s lobotomist. The disability spectacle of Barbara Gordon avenges the psychiatrist along with the freak show. As Barbara lies paralyzed on the living room floor, Joker diagnoses her with a "*psychological complaint*, *common* amongst *ex-librarians*. You see, she thinks she's a *coffee table edition*…Mind *you*, I can't say much for the volume's *condition*. I *mean*, there's a *hole* in the jacket and the *spine* appears to be damaged." (21) Her images evoke the practice of stripping and displaying disabled patients in medical lectures and in illustrations of different eugenic types.

The Killing Joke ends with remarkable calm given the sadism that came before it. Joker tells Batman a joke about two asylum residents with the punchline, "What do you think I *am? CRAZY?*" The adversaries crack up with laughter. Brian Bolland's art roams quietly around the scene, contemplating the two figures facing each other and the spirals of rain in the puddles of the parking lot. The cycle of chaos to calm, calm to chaos repeats over and over in Joker-stories. The Joker represents freedom gone berserk. When in charge, he launches necessary critiques of normality, masculinity, and the psychiatric system. The more he takes his revenge, however, the more violently he must

be repressed. Because *Batman* equates violence with madness, the repression of the Joker means repressing neurodiversity and the traumas of Mad History. Yet they always reemerge.

Mad Genius

The Joker's madness constitutes another form of asexual reproduction: the fecundity of creative imagination. *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (1989) draws from mad genius, the invention and divine spark associated with neurodiversity for millennia. Asylum founder Amadeus Arkham sees madness as "A world of fathomless signs and portents. Of magic and terror. And mysterious symbols" (Morrison and McKean 5). The novel invokes fathomless mystery through depth of layering: layering of images in Dave McKean's collages and layering of myth and allusion in Grant Morrison's script. This mystery runs counter to the biomedical model of mental illness emerging in the 1980s. Responding to recent critiques of their profession, psychiatrists sought objective measurements of mental illness and precise criteria for diagnosis (Lewis, *Moving Beyond*, 99, 97). The Joker might be questioning them in his retort to Arkham chief administrator Dr. Charles Cavendish:

> Cavendish: Joker! I've had enough of this madness!
>
> Joker: *Enough* madness? Enough? And how do you measure madness? (Morrison and McKean 24)

Serious House readers see the world through the Joker's eyes, with the random mystery of mad genius. Mark P. Williams argues that "Morrison's reader has to learn to read the superhero form the way the Joker reads his reality, by adapting themselves to it free-associatively as they read" (Williams 215–16). The Joker assumes the position of readers, in the foreground with his back to us: "Welcome to the Feast of Fools!" This double-page spread assembles puzzling fragments of meaning into a luminous and numinous order. McKean's feast quotes the hellscapes of Hieronymous Bosch and the nightmares of the German Expressionists. He lays a patchwork of obscure religious images on top of the feast and doodles more symbols in gold pen over that. Speech bubbles detach from speakers, as if the asylum itself were talking. For all its slaughter and incoherence, the picture shimmers with the mystery of an Orthodox icon.

Throughout the novel, Joker assails the walls dividing sane from mad, pure from contaminated, city from asylum. His desire blurs the line between Batman

and Arkham residents: "We want you in here. With us. In the madhouse. Where you belong" (Morrison and McKean 8). The Joker's impressionistic character design embodies this blurring. Unconfined by speech bubbles, his red words smear across the page like blood. His green hair flies over Batman and the panels. He looms uncomfortably close to readers, staring with lidless eyeballs. Blurring the binary between mad and sane, Joker assails the gender binary as well. Many authors have queered the Joker since the 1970s, but not all with the same goal. For instance, Frank Miller et al.'s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) queers the Joker to further the anti-trans stereotype of mad cross-dressing killers (Miller et al. 121, 127, 131). *Serious House* queers the Joker to question norms, not reinforce them. The Joker attacks the borders of Batman's closed-off masculinity. In stiletto heels and milelong green nails, he greets the superhero like a dinner party hostess, asking, "Aren't I just good enough to eat?" (Morrison and McKean 19).

To be clear, the Joker does not convert into an agent of positive change. He is still the Joker. He does not invite Batman to a Pride parade; he sexually harasses him. Goosing Batman, he screams, "Loosen up, Tight Ass!" Batman yells back, "Take your filthy hands off me! Filthy degenerate!" (Morrison and McKean 21). Batman reacts angrily because he fears his own sexuality, loss of control, and possible madness. His eugenic fear of degenerates also represents a moral panic specific to the 1980s: fear of gay men at the height of the AIDS crisis. (Morrison and McKean 36) Several tropes, including the Joker's bloody words smeared across the page, evoke the fear of AIDS. *Serious House* critiques the contamination model of madness and disability by making Batman overly defensive, fearful, and violent in his encounters with all Arkham residents. The Joker's means are evil, but his outcomes are interesting. Joker pushes Batman to assess his own trauma in the decade the trauma model of neurodivergence first suffused popular culture.

Free-associating like the Joker, *Serious House* invites readers into the subjective experience of madness as generative power. Entering Arkham Asylum's electroconvulsive therapy room, Batman comes upon the character Maxie Zeus. Blue wires sprout from Maxie's head. Psychiatric hospitals often used ECT abusively. Maxie, however, transforms it into a source of power, just as bizarre science experiments have created many superheroes. Sporting a beard and painted nipples, Maxie becomes "Zeus Arrhenothelus, part man, part woman. Electricity enflames my brain. Voltage. Current." (67) Maxie glows with literal and figurative powers: the powers of electric current, divine spark, and leaving masculinity for a wider spectrum. Maxie offers this power to Batman: "The AC/DC altar awaits! Let me know you in the form of a shower of sparks!" (69). Mad genius transforms.

While Batman refuses this offer, he accepts Joker's invitation into his own traumatic history. During a flashback to his parents' murder, Batman thrusts a shard of broken glass through his palm. He breaches his masculine armor to let pain and fluids flow. This two-page spread dives into the experience of self-harm. Batman hurts himself to stop the worse hurt of the flashback. Panels replicate how immediate pain interrupts lasting trauma. Blue-black images of Batman's anguish extend across both pages. On top, bouncing blood drops stand out in bright red against the dark background. Their unexpected beauty mimics the relief of self-harm, a form of madness that can save one's sanity. Without romanticizing fear and pain, one can still respect the power of mad genius to transform them.

Crimes Against Neurodiversity

Arkham Asylum is not just any psychiatric facility. It is the "state hospital for the criminally insane." In its conflation of asylum with prison, Arkham echoes the Mad History of the last thirty years. With startling frequency, mental patients have moved from hospitals to prisons, not to the community care the CSX movement envisioned. Director Todd Phillips's box office smash *Joker* (2019) conflates madness with violence in a realist American landscape of rationed mental health care and frequent mass shootings by white men with psychiatric diagnoses. *Batman* has always defined madness as the capacity to commit violence without qualm. Supervillain story arcs can reinforce the urge to blame mass shootings on neurodiversity, as José Alaniz argues: "These stories and their resolutions—the pattern of the cognitively exceptional going too far, authorizing extreme reprisals—form a voice in the chorus of oppression visited on actual people in real life" (Alaniz 294). With typical contradiction, *Joker* both honors and betrays the experiences of neurodiverse people. It exposes failures of care in the twenty-first century US while cloaking them under the stigma of violence. Yet, as I argue, the film's story arc speaks volumes about the criminalization of neurodiversity in the twenty-first century US.

Joker demonstrates the character's lasting power to become the poster child for vying cultural discourses. Told through the Joker's eyes rather than Batman's, it wraps a gritty indie film inside a multiplex supervillain origin story. The future Joker, Arthur Fleck, is an ordinary man dealing with poverty, tics, social anxiety, hallucinations, the wrong meds, and constant scorn. The film's critique of injustice chronicles the precarious hold on employment, healthcare, and social belonging of adults who experience mental difference. Phillips

based the character on profiles of mass shooters, and the film depicts violent hordes the Joker inspires (Barnes and Sperling). At its release, news stories reported fears of copycat violence, and many cities stationed police officers at screenings (Fry and Sclafani). Right and left claimed the film validated their social critiques. Both sides read into the film the unmet needs of the white working-class men who had played crucial roles in the 2016 election of Donald Trump. To progressive filmmaker Michael Moore, *Joker* exposed "the America which feels no need to help the outcast, the destitute. The America where the filthy rich just get richer and filthier" (Moore). Far-right commentator Paul Joseph Watson defended the film against the criticism of "Puritanical woke outrage mobs": "How revealing is it that the mere existence of a character, a mere analysis of the struggles of a mentally ill poor white man, is enough to prompt accusations of racism? That's why they hate this movie" (Watson). As he has since his days as a 1940s zoot-suited gangster, the Joker again represented unfinished business at the nexus of madness, class, and white masculinity.

In its depiction of mental difference, the film zigzags between insider and outsider perspectives. *Joker* does stellar work conveying a neurodivergent perspective on navigating the social world. Fleck writes in his journal, "The worst thing about having a mental illness is that people expect you to behave as if you don't" (*Joker*). Unlike most Jokers, Fleck has to deal with people because he rides the bus and has a day job. In an Oscar-winning performance, Joaquin Phoenix registers the effects of scorn and rejection on his face, frequent closeups spotlighting his nuanced movements between hurt, shy joy, disappointment, showmanship, and anger.

For those who have depended on the publicly funded US mental health care system, *Joker* captures the common experience of being refused essential care. At a therapy session, his social worker gives him bad news: "They've cut our funding […] this is the last time we'll be meeting." Fleck asks, "How am I supposed to get my medication now? Who do I talk to?" The camera stays on his sincere, piercing gaze as she answers, "I'm sorry, Arthur" (*Joker*). The film cuts abruptly to a different scene as his questions hang in the air. The scene stops short because Fleck, from the state's viewpoint, has ceased to exist. He has entered the zone of social death.

Joker retreats to a stigmatizing outsider's view of madness, prescribing violence as the only cure for the problem of social death. Fleck sees himself and is seen by others only after killing. Perpetuating the revenge trope, he argues that society turned him into a serial killer: "What do you get when you cross a mentally ill loner with a society that abandons him and treats him like trash? I'll tell you what you get. You get what you fucking deserve!" (*Joker*). Eric Ravenscraft argues that

Joker insults neurodiverse people by denying them agency over their own moral decisions. "No matter what's happened to you, you can still choose not to be evil […] Arthur killed because he chose to" (Ravenscraft). The newly minted Joker kills four times. Ravenscraft observes that on three of those four occasions, Fleck invokes his mental illness immediately before committing murder. By equating madness with violence, *Joker* justifies the ostracism the film supposedly critiques. Murder not only solves the problem of social death, but puts Fleck on the map of straight masculinity, too. After his first kills, he claims the woman who lives down the hall in a grand kiss. If killing without qualm defines madness, it also defines manhood.

If Phillips had not sent the story to the slaughterhouse, the audience would have stayed inside the experience of social death. Arthur Fleck cannot remain an indie-film protagonist, an ordinary working man with tics, social anxiety, and hallucinations who runs up against an unyielding system. He has to become the mass shooter and supervillain the audience knows from the start he will be. This framing allows viewers a bearable distance. He does not live in our world; he lives in the alternate universe of DC Comics. In our world, mental difference serves not as pretext for spectacular bloodshed but as everyday challenge and companion.

Joker's pivot from neurodiversity to crime holds a deeper truth, however. For many poor people in the contemporary US, if you want mental health care you have to break the law. "Jail and prison have become, for many people, their primary means of getting mental health care" (Roth 4). In *The Criminalization of Mental Illness*, Risdon Slate and Wesley Johnson report that "[t]he three largest inpatient psychiatric facilities in the country are jails" (59). Most communities in the US face an acute shortage of outpatient mental health care. A 2014 survey revealed that around half of Americans with a diagnosable mental illness get no treatment at all. Of those without treatment, roughly half report they cannot afford it (Roth 198). The Joker finds his social place only after killing. Poor people in emotional crisis find help only after breaking the law.

Joker takes place in the early 1980s, when the criminalization of mental illness began. Inspired by *The Killing Joke*, the film uses grim intensity to claim artistic seriousness. That grimness makes the commitment to violence seem inevitable.[3] *Joker's* Gotham City summons up 1980s New York with beautiful retrodecadence: graffitied subway cars, grotty surfaces, porn theater marquees, streets full of trash bags, youth gangs, and Wall Street yuppie scum. The deinstitutionalization of the 1970s and 1980s often ended up in lateral moves

3. Again, I thank Chris Ivy for helping me make this connection.

from asylum to prison (Parsons 147). When states closed their psychiatric hospitals, mental health care was supposed to move into communities, but the money did not follow the former patients. (*New York Times* editors 26). With the 1980s came the neoconservative downsizing of the social safety net and the transfer of funding to the "war on crime." Thus, "prison construction campaigns restricted state funds for social welfare and led to the growth of psychiatric services within the prison system" (Parsons 134). From 1980 to 1992, there was a 154% increase in the reported number of people with psychiatric diagnoses in the nation's jails (Slate and Johnson 45–46).

Joker depicts two sites of mental health care. In each of them a Black woman professional, representative of public health and welfare, sits in front of a shatterproof window and scrutinizes Joker with a diagnostic gaze. The first setting is a social worker's dusty office, stacked with files suggesting massive caseloads. She tells him, "They don't give a shit about people like you, Arthur. And they really don't give a shit about people like me, either" (Sharon Washington, *Joker).* The second setting is an Arkham Asylum examination room after the Joker's arrest, where his new psychiatrist interviews him for the first time. Arkham appears not in its usual Victorian Gothic decay but in spotless white. Now he's committed crimes, Arthur Fleck gains access to decent care. In the film's final moments, the Joker walks down the hospital's white hallway, heavenly sunshine glowing through the window. He leaves bloody footprints on the clean white floor, which imply he has killed the psychiatrist. By shedding blood, the Joker finally enters the only clean, well-lighted place he has ever known.

Hostess at the Feast of Fools

The Joker's shifting face reflects specific moments in the social construction of madness, but also the overlapping of these histories. When he acts as hostess at the Feast of Fools, he sets the stage for loud and contradictory conversations about the meanings of mental difference. Joker-stories reveal eugenic urges to segregate madness and prevent its contaminating spread. Insane liberation interrupts this cruelty with random joy. Masculinity keeps its distance from the other dubious guests, until queerness waves transformative possibilities under its nose. The biomedical model ticks off symptoms on a checklist, then mad genius opens a trapdoor and drops it into fathomless mystery. The asylum informs the city, "You're no different from me." Activists tear down the asylum, but it changes its name to prison and springs back to life. Madness claims it

needs to kill, but neurodiversity brings up the power to choose. Joker-stories push at the walls dividing sane from mad, pure from toxic, psychiatrist from patient, cis/straight from trans/queer, asylum from surrounding city, and remembering Mad History from forgetting it.

Works Cited

Alaniz, José. *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond.* Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2014. Print.

Barnes, Brooks and Nicole Sperling. "'Joker' Is a Risk, But a Calculated One." *The New York Times.* 5 Oct. 2019. Web.

Buell, Lawrence. "Toxic Discourse." *Critical Inquiry* 24 (Spring 1998): 639–65. Print.

Carrel, Alexis. *Man, the Unknown.* New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935. Print.

Chamberlin, Judi. *On Our Own: Patient-Controlled Alternatives to the Mental Health System.* New York: Hawthorn, 1978. Print.

Englehart, Steve, Marshall Rogers, and Terry Austin. "The Laughing Fish." *Batman's Detective Comics #475.* New York: DC Comics, Feb. 1978. eBook.

Finger, Bill, Bob Kane, and Jerry Robinson. "The Joker." *Batman #1,* Spring 1940. *The Batman Chronicles*, Vol. 1. New York: DC Comics, 2005. 140–52. Print.

—. "The Joker Returns." *Batman #1,* Spring 1940. *The Batman Chronicles*, Vol. 1. New York: DC Comics, 2005. 178–90. Print.

Finger, Bill and George Roussos. "Joker Meets Catwoman." *Detective Comics #45.* Nov. 1940. *The Batman Chronicles.* Vol. 2. New York: DC Comics, 2006. 46–58. Print.

— and —. "The Case of the Laughing Death!" *Detective Comics #45.* Nov. 1940. *The Batman Chronicles.* Vol. 2. New York: DC Comics, 2006. 208–21. Print.

Finger, Bill, Sheldon Moldoff, and George Roussos. "The Man Behind the Red Hood!" *Detective Comics #168.* Feb. 1951. *Batman in the Fifties.* New York: DC Comics, 2002. 114–26. Print.

Freeman, Walter J. and James W. Watts. *Psychosurgery: Intelligence, Emotion, and Social Behavior Following Prefrontal Lobotomy for Mental Disorders.* London: Baillière, Tindall & Cox, 1942. Print.

Fry, Hannah and Julia Sclafani. "'Joker' Opens to Heavy Police Presence at Movie Theaters. 'It's The Times We Live In.'" *Los Angeles Times.* 5 Oct. 2019. Web.

Gorman, Rachel. "Mad Nation? Thinking through Race, Class, and Mad Identity Politics." *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies.* Brenda A. LeFrançois, Robert Menzies, and Geoffrey Reaume. Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2013. 269–80. Print.

Groensteen, Thierry. *The System of Comics.* Trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. eBook.

Johns, Geoff, Jason Fabok, and Brad Anderson. *Batman: Three Jokers.* New York: DC Comics Black Label, 2020. Print.

Joker. Dir. Todd Phillips. Warner Brothers, 2019. HBO Max streaming.

Kline, Wendy. "A New Deal for the Child: Ann Cooper Hewitt and Sterilization in the 1930s." *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s.* Ed. Susan Currell and Christina Cogdell. Athens: Ohio UP, 2006. 17–43. Print.

Lewis, Bradley. "A Mad Fight: Psychiatry and Disability Activism." *The Disability Studies Reader.* 4th ed. Ed. Lennard Davis. New York: Routledge, 2013: 115–31. Print.

—. *Moving Beyond Prozac, DSM, and the New Psychiatry: The Birth of Postpsychiatry.* Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 2006. Print.

Mart, Michelle. *Pesticides, A Love Story: America's Enduring Embrace of Dangerous Chemicals.* Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2015. Print.

Miller, Frank, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns.* New York: DC Comics, 1986. Print.

Moore, Alan and Brian Bolland. *The Killing Joke.* 1988. The Deluxe Edition. New York: DC Comics, 2019. Print.

Moore, Michael. Facebook post. 5 Oct. 2019. Web.

Morrison, Grant and Dave McKean. *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth.* New York: DC Comics, 1989. Print.

New York Times editors. "Opinion: Denying the Mentally Ill." *New York Times.* 5 Jun. 1981. Web.

O'Neil, Dennis and Neal Adams. "The Joker's Five-Way Revenge!" *Batman #251.* New York: DC Comics, Sep. 1973. eBook.

O'Neil, Dennis and Irv Novick. "The Threat of the Two-Headed Coin!" *Batman #258.* New York: DC Comics, Oct. 1974. eBook.

Parsons, Anne E. *From Asylum to Prison: Deinstitutionalization and the Rise of Mass Incarceration after 1945.* Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2018. eBook.

Ravenscraft, Eric. "Hey So, *Joker* Isn't a Super Great Representation of Mental Illness, You Guys." Lord Ravenscraft. *YouTube.* 8 Feb. 2020. Web.

Roth, Alisa. *Insane: America's Criminal Treatment of Mental Illness.* New York: Basic Books, 2018. Print.

Shorter, Edward. *A History of Psychiatry: From the Era of the Asylum to the Age of Prozac.* Hoboken: Wiley, 1997. Print.

Slate, Risdon N. and W. Wesley Johnson. *The Criminalization of Mental Illness: Crisis and Opportunity for the Justice System.* Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2008.

Smith, Angela Marie. "Monsters in the Bed: The Horror-Film Eugenics of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*." *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s.* Ed. Susan Currell and Christina Cogdell. Athens: Ohio UP, 2006. 332–58. Print.

Soper, Kerry. "Classical Bodies versus the Criminal Carnival: Eugenics Ideology in 1930s Popular Art." *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s.* Ed. Susan Currell and Christina Cogdell. Athens: Ohio UP, 2006. 269–307. Print.

Steen, Kathryn. *The American Synthetic Organic Chemicals Industry: War and Politics, 1910–1930.* Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2014. eBook.

Watson, Paul Joseph. "Why the WOKE Establishment Hates *Joker*." *YouTube.* 8 Oct. 2019. Web.

Williams, Mark P. "Making Sense Squared: Iteration and Synthesis in Grant Morrison's Joker." *The Joker: A Serious Study of the Clown Prince of Crime.* Ed. Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2015. 209–28. eBook.