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Brains with character: Reading and writing neuronarrative

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Afterward

This dissertation tracks the concept of neuronarrative alongside five brains with character. It analyzes those characters as they propose operations of neuronarrative that implicate the reading and writing of neuroscientific knowledge in our contemporary. This dissertation intervenes in current scholarship by unsettling the thesis that brains are written in the vernacular of science and read popularly through a largely reductive process. I analyze the cooperative literacy at work with neuronarrative where brains and characters enter and exit multiple sites of inscription and description, which shows how brains with character shape neuroscientific knowledge just as much as neuroscience shapes those characters. These particular brains with character show how neuroscientific knowledge enters and circulates in culture through various non-scientific narrative frames that discipline and shape the way we inhabit our senses of self, historical recollections, critical-theoretical utterances, scientific reportage, therapeutic resources, and communicative participations.

Neuronarrative conceptually helps describe how brains with character reorient our cultural atlases of the relationships among biology, biography, medicine, theory, and literature. I work against the invocation of neuronarrative as a diagnostic tool in favor of analyzing those changing relationships for their uses as figures of orientation.

The scope of this dissertation limits itself to an introductory exploration of neuronarrative in order to triangulate reading, writing, and brains with character. From this starting point, I here propose three other possible analyses that this dissertation now enables.

Critical theory and neuronarrative

Catherine Malabou serves as an interlocutor in this dissertation, but I dialogue with her ideas rather than the form through which those ideas circulate. I am interested in the relationships between critical-theoretical writing and neuronarrative operations. For one, she, as well as David Lodge, brings this question to my attention when they analyze Freud's psychoanalytic philosophies as techniques of storytelling. Thus, what is this connection between theory-as-storytelling and neuronarrative storytelling? What are the risks as well as the rewards of considering theory and philosophy as modes of literary writing that, at least for Malabou's texts (as well as for the text of this dissertation itself), transcribe the brain-mediated thoughts of their writers? *Radiant Cool* (2004) by Dan Lloyd, a professor of philosophy at Trinity

College, explores this neuro and psychological border that distinguishes philosophy from literary thrillers that take up the problem of consciousness. Unfortunately, the novel fails not by content but by design: a partition separates the text into two parts. Part one is the fictional ‘action’ of story, and part two is a philosophical “reflection” on that first literary narrative (although transparently Lloyd’s own reflections, readers are asked to pretend that the text comprising part two is the ‘lost’ work of the professor who dies in part one). In attempting to break through genre barriers, Lloyd reinforces it. What I take from an endeavor like Lloyd’s is that there remains significant tension—as well as a perceivable gulf—between narratives that purport to tell about brains and analyze their significance, and narratives that are busy eliciting those significances, line by line, through a medium that does not pretend to be anything other than a story. I do not identify this as the same gap between first- and third-person accounts: for instance, Malabou’s texts and this dissertation’s text tell a first-person account of each of our encounters with neuro-philosophical ideas and objects. A further analysis—and/or story, it occurs to me—of the neuronarrative tensions *interior* to critical-theoretical texts ought to be a fruitful pursuit.

Brains that narrate beyond a reasonable doubt

I opened this dissertation with an anecdote about tumor-induced pedophilia from early 2000. Fifteen years later, the relation between brain and behavior when criminal culpability is at stake has only grown more complex. How narratives of the brain enter the courtroom is an interesting place for analysis.

For instance, when nineteen years old, Dzhokar Tsarnev deployed two homemade pressure-cooker bombs with his older brother near the finish line of the 2013 Boston Marathon. Found guilty of all thirty charges against him two years later, which largely arose from the death of three pedestrians in the area of the explosions, a federal jury sentenced Tsarnev to death by lethal injection. However, during the sentencing phase of the trial in April of this year, the defense called on testimony from Jay N. Giedd, chief of brain imaging in the Child Psychiatry Branch at the National Institute of Mental Health. Alarmed by his courtroom cameo, Sally Satel, lecturer at Yale, and Scott O. Lilienfeld, professor at Emory (who, together, wrote *Brainwashed: The Seductive Appeal of Mindless Neuroscience* in 2013), examined Giedd’s testimony as well as the rhetoric of his very appearance in the court proceedings. Giedd’s statements to the court, Satel and Lilienfeld write, implied “that

Tsarnaev's brain, like all teen brains, was especially sensitive to pressure by peers and loved ones. The approval of his domineering older brother Tamerlan, this narrative suggests, was made even more compelling for Dzohkar because of the way his brain functioned" ("Neuro-Expert"). Satel and Lilienfeld recognize two competing narratives: the archetypical teenage brain versus the Dzohkar brain. I am intrigued by this competition where the introduction of neuroscience into the courtroom produces defenses or prosecutions that innovate operations of neuronarrative. "At least five percent of all murder cases that go to trial feature the introduction of [sic] neuroscience evidence... Ten years ago, that percentage was less than 0.01 percent," Satel and Lilienfeld add; "In all likelihood, the jury will be shown impressive-looking Technicolor brain scans. But what they will see is merely a biological retelling of a well-established behavioral story" ("Immature").

A few other questions to take these connections between neuronarrative and law further are possible. First, although sentenced to death, Dzohkar will likely live out the rest of his life in federal prison. If Dzohkar's 'teen brain' committed the acts to which he is held responsible, how does plasticity pose a certain threat to the idea and practice of rehabilitation (in the system of incarceration)? Second, how does neuronarrative question legal case histories? That is, how do new narratives of brains reorient us to the archive of opinions written by judges and justices about the many other characters that bring questions to the court? Here I have in mind characters like Jane Roe (Norma McCorvey), Dred Scott, or Mildred Loving (as well as the anonymous ones like the Virginia school teacher/pedophile). As this dissertation shows, narratives are required to make sense of the place and importance of neuroscience in culture. How will we make sense of the central components of our criminal justice system as well as the characters that shape the doctrine of precedent in legal narratives?

A new neurohistory?

Extending some of the analysis about historical figures like the Biblical Paul in Chapter Two of this dissertation, how might neuronarrative help understand re-readings of historical figures? Narratives of neuroscientific information instill an increasing consciousness of chemical, electrical, and cellular operations on psychology and accounts of psychology. Accounts of people written in the present, as well as historical accounts of people, are liable to have neuroscience written into those histories. Characters entangled by their cerebral states of action—from Ronald Reagan and the effects of his Alzheimer's on his leadership, Dostoevsky

and the sway of his epilepsy on his writing, to spiritual figures and the possible influences of entheogens on their visions—rupture previous cultural and narrative affiliations with those characters. Neuronarrative work with these historical stories might threaten to redeem them or arraign them. How do these brains with character negotiate accounts of history in the present? Understanding the operations and stakes of neuronarrative on brains with character is a productive point of departure to approach this topic.