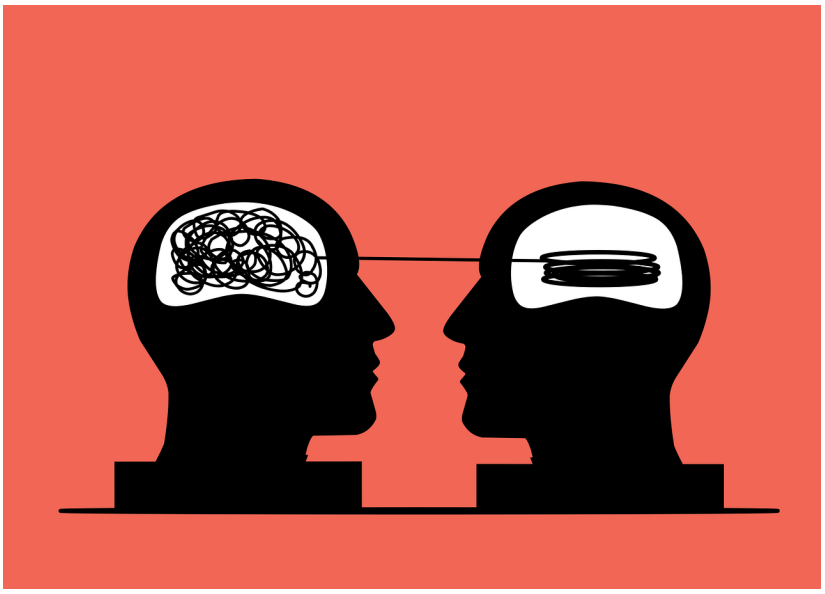
SYNAPSIS



Hope has been widely recognized as playing a crucial role in the recovery process of people living with mental illness. When the possibility of recovery in the future becomes imaginable, patients can also (re)experience pleasure and satisfaction in the present (Schrank et al. 230–34). Yet the universal potential of hope for recovery remains difficult to substantiate and, at the very least, variable. Furthermore, the positive effects of hope differ in cases for which a lasting cure or recovery is simply impossible.

Authors of mental illness narratives generally cultivate hope as a rhetorical aim. In an interview included in the 2007 Hyperion edition of Elyn R. Saks' *The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey Through Madness*, which recounts her experience living with schizophrenia and would go on to become a bestseller and classic of the genre of mental illness memoir, Saks claims that she "want[s] [her] book to give hope to people who suffer from schizophrenia and bring better understanding to everyone else" (Saks 347). Several reviews and endorsements by psychiatrists, psychologists, and general readers alike also highlight and applaud Saks' professional and personal success, portraying her as a high- achieving survivor who gives hope to other people living with mental illness (Singh 903–04; Simon 403; Saks i-vi). Indeed, psychiatrists, therapists (Kamps), and health humanities scholars (e.g., Woods 104; Tekin and Outram) have recommended reading mental illness memoirs mainly because of their potential for destigmatization and for offering hope and proof of recovery from psychotic episodes.

Memoirs of mental illness that predominantly feature narratives of hope and recovery have proliferated since at least the beginning of the twenty-first century. These recovery memoirs tend to end with either a sustainable cure or the restoration of a (quite normative) ideal of a 'healthy' life, and have proven to be a commercial success and safe investment for publishers. For this reason, a lot of mental illness narratives are often coaxed, inasmuch as publishers and editors use public readings, social media, and forums as sites to recruit potential writers and shape a relatively standardized editorial line (Van Goidsenhoven and Masschelein 175–76). Angela Woods, Akiko Hart, and Helen Spandler also remark that the more these narratives provide people living with mental illness as well as healthcare professionals with hope, the more likely they are to be successful (237). However, little critical attention has so far been given to the potentially negative impact of hopeful narratives on readers, as hope is usually assumed to be an essentially positive emotion, and how hope is used to promote entrepreneurial and neoliberal ideological agendas (Woods et al. 237).

Because the term 'hope' reflects and reinforces the problematic aspects of recovery narratives (e.g., the hope for a desired medical outcome of regaining a normative ideal of health), Arthur Frank has proposed the notion of "intransitive hope" to emphasize that hope "has no specified object or objective" and "leaves the future open" (205). Bennett Rensin, for his part, calls "mad memoirists" (in his phrasing) to focus on the "ugly truths;" that is the "pain," "fear" and "unbecoming" that are characteristic of psychotic experiences but have somehow, he claims, disappeared from overtly hopeful memoirs. Hopeful memoirs, Rensin argues, might ultimately contribute to stigmatization by suggesting that there are the "respectable mad," namely people who could be strange and different but not overly dangerous or frightening, and could somehow recover from their condition and at times demonstrate exceptional achievements (like Saks, or other memoirists such as Esmé Weijun Wang). These narratives, Rensin explains, portray the respectable mad as capable of returning to society and thus urge society to welcome them with compassion. What all these critics and scholars have in common is that they highlight the necessity of considering alternative, non-dominant narrative patterns and types that do not foster a standardized and socially exclusive understanding of mental illness experience. To do so, hope itself might need to be reconceptualized.

In her analysis of contemporary climate memoirs, a genre whose increasing commercial success coincides with that of the recovery memoir but deals instead with ecological grief, political theorist Mihaela Mihai discusses the notion of "lucid hope" (376). Lucid hope, Mihai explains, "is not a feeling, but an active orientation to the world, targeting the prevention of loss and suffering" (376). In this sense, it requires "staying-with-the-trouble" (a phrase adapted from Donna Haraway's 2016 book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*) or "those affected by the fire to stare grief in the face and not rush to overcome it" (378). While the rhetorical goal of climate memoirists is to raise environmental awareness and advocate for action in response to global climate change, Mihai's renegotiation of hope as "lucid" is also relevant to the mental illness memoir.

To some extent, the climate crisis and mental illness may both be experienced as overwhelming and insurmountable, and thus both call for lucidity, for a pause, a reflection in the midst of trouble. Just like climate memoirs, mental illness memoirs could—as many already do—depict hope as compatible with emotions which are customarily perceived as negative, such as anger, grief, and fear, not only because they are unavoidable parts of the experience but also because they complicate and enrich it. Not all readers, Woods, Hart, and Spandler stress, will inevitably identify with the recovery model and/or with individualized narratives (234–40). Mental Illness narratives of lucid hope, whether they are found in the form of a published memoir, blog post, zine or in any other media, may begin the work of bringing back Rensin's "ugly truths:" conveying not a romanticized ideal of recovery but the realities of and the insights gained while staying with the trouble of mental illness. Lucid hope as an analytical lens, for its part, contributes to problematizing hope (including in recovery narratives) as a complex emotion and/or orientation that requires critical scrutiny, and whose impact can not be regarded as universally positive but which can still inform attempts to destigmatize mental illness and improve the lives of those who live with it.

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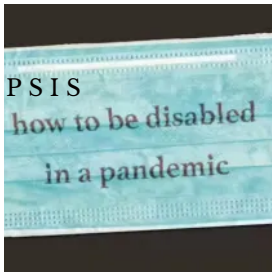

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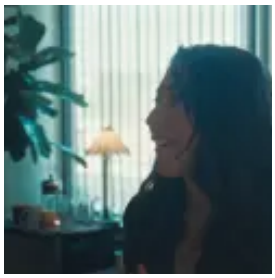

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David Lombard is a junior postdoctoral researcher at the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) affiliated with the University of Leuven (KU Leuven), where he works at the English Literature and the Cultural Studies Research Groups and is a member of the steering committee of the Leuven Center for Health Humanities. He did his Ph.D. in literary studies as a joint degree between the universities of Liège and Leuven in Belgium (2020–24), with a dissertation titled "American Anthropocene Sublimes: Rhetorics and Narrations of Self and Environment in the Contemporary U.S. Ecobiographical Memoir." During his Ph.D. situated at the intersection of American literary studies, narratology, and the environmental humanities, he was also a visiting scholar at the University of Texas at Austin (fall 2022) and the Ohio State University, at Project Narrative (spring 2023). Since 2018, he has been mainly working and publishing in the fields and areas of contemporary (American) literature and culture, life writing and memoir studies, environmental humanities, health humanities, aesthetic theory and theories of the sublime, Henry David Thoreau and American transcendentalism, rhetoric and rhetorical narratology, and comparative literature. He is the author of the book Techno-Thoreau: Aesthetics, Ecology and the Capitalocene (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019), which served as an extended pilot study for his PhD project funded by the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS). In addition, his essays and book reviews have been published in edited volumes as well as in academic journals such as Épistémocritique, Miranda, the Journal of Arts and Media Studies, the Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory, Local Environment, The Trumpeter, and Acta fabula. He is also the co-editor of two special issues: "The Pastoral: New Trajectories in the Anthropocene" (Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities, December 2021) and "Anthropocene Sublimes" (Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment, spring 2025). His current postdoctoral project, titled "The Twenty-First-Century Schizophrenia Memoir and Graphic Memoir: A Rhetorical-Narratological and Multi-Actor Materialist Approach" (2024–27), is situated in literary-cultural studies and the health humanities and investigates the forms, functions, and cultural and institutional relations of the historically important genres of the schizophrenia memoir and graphic memoir in their multiple twenty-first-century contexts.

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