

Mad Feminist Ingenuity at the Edge of Rage: Gathering Theory and Stories to Challenge Epistemic Injustice

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Part I: Performance

JLM

We gather
at the creative edge
of anger
to understand the fertile
futuraity of rage,
that place
of mobility
to which our rage
gives
a range
of movement,
propels
Mad
Momentum.

NC

I am the woman who quietly rages. I am the mad woman, the mad academic, who is distraught from reading about the injustices brought by neoliberalism. I find myself increasingly stressed and depressed, eaten alive by the system I am studying and living in. I quietly rage, because I do not know how to make my anger productive for justice.

JLM

Rage, when we are
cut down,
told we *cannot*,
told we *do* not,
told we *are* not,
rage, when we are

told we *should*,
told we *are*,
told we *must*,
rage, when we
refuse,
when we insist,
when we rise
with rage
to face threats
that feed
our sense
our knowing,
rage, when we
proclaim
that *we*
are knowers.

NC

My story is rooted in Rita's story. My great-grandmother Rita was institutionalized for schizophrenia: she was locked up in a straight jacket and silenced. In my family, she is treated as a stigma, a stain on my family history that no one talks about. I will never know her story, never know her rage or the ingenuity that it might have become. The more I tried to learn about Rita, the more I started to wonder, how many other stories, like Rita's, are erased, fragmented, edited, or lost in the shadows of patriarchal, racist, sanist, ableist, and capitalist systems of oppression?

JLM

We do not
concede
our rage,
we do not deny
our gifts,
hidden and unhidden
in the knowing
that our rage
signifies—
sacred rage
teaches
lessons

as we devise
action
at the edges
of our knowing:
as we witness
a horizon,
a question
of what's next.

NC

My story, in many ways connected with Rita's, is a mix of anxiety, trauma, gut disorders, and social pressures. While some of these are genetic, I have come to realize that many of them are triggered by, and a result of, our changing socioeconomic and political climate. As a social activist and a scholar of neoliberalism, I feel helpless. I often feel stuck and hindered, but I have to remember the contributions that I can make, like those I made in collaborating as co-editor of this collection. Editorial work and gathering stories are both forms of political organizing, too.

JLM

I am always railing
on the border
between rage
and what righteous
rage seeks:
Justice; my creative
energy
and my laboring
collaborate
to do the work
of Justice—
I listen to the wisdom
laced
in my rage
and to the wisdom
in others' rage;
I stretch my rage,
I reach out
to hold the hands
of yours.

NC

As a graduate student, I face surmounting pressures to produce, to do more, to manage one more project, all the while facing a bleak job market that does not value people, especially Mad people. My experiences with anxiety and trauma sometimes do shape and certainly affect the work I do in the classroom—they have helped to make me empathetic; they make me a good listener and an even better educator. This is my mad feminist ingenuity at work.

JLM

I bring my rage
in close and quiet
so I can listen
to you,
I am at the edge
of rage
with you, ready
to make something,
ready to give,
Ready.

NC

Mad academics are not welcome at the university. We are not welcome because we do not fit; because we care, support, challenge, and push back against patriarchal and sanist structures. We're forced to find creative ways to subvert the university's capitalist, neoliberal agendas in order to survive within it and to change it. And so we must fight. We must continue to find the ingenuity in our rage: to tell our stories when they are not wanted or listened to, to demand our voices be heard, and to gather the stories that challenge oppressive structures.

JLM

Here,
is our ingenuity,
our Mad feminist
ingenuity

Here,
we name the past,
Here,
we reclaim
our identities,
our histories,
Here,
we retell
our stories,
here,
we reshape
our future.

Part II: Re-Theorizing the Madwoman and Calling On Our Mad Feminist Ingenuity

JLM

At the end of “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” Audre Lorde calls feminists to gather “face to face, beyond objectification and beyond guilt” at what could be called the edge of rage, a productive and mobile space of transition toward “a future of pollinating difference and the earth to support our choices” (118). Lorde’s words helped us to interpret the concept of “killing rage” around which this conference was formed. Voicing our rage at that brave edge of ingenuity that Audre Lorde describes requires that we use our anger to respond to injustice by making our differences places of fertility and growth. When we learned about the theme of the conference this year, we had just finished editing a collection of academic and creative essays titled *Madwomen in Social Justice Movements, Literatures, and Art*, and so we went there to interpret the conference’s theme. Those espousing feminist ideas have, for centuries, been called Mad and angry, and feminists have histories with the word “rage,” histories shaped by identity. The policing of rage and the misrepresentation of rage have been used against people whose bodies have resisted white supremacy, coloniality, capitalism, and tyranny. People who have claimed rage have been killed and people have had the rage inside themselves killed. Mad people, in particular, have unique relationships with rage, historically: we know rage is allowed or disallowed, fostered or killed, based on race and gender. The weaponizing of feminist rage: rage against misogynistic or colonial or racial injustice, in particular, has led to the killing of rage within the mental health system—for example, Electroconvulsive Therapy (widely referred to as ECT) and psychotropic drugs have been used to kill rage in mental institutions over the last century, and before and during that same period, a host of other torturous practices have been used to control gender and racially marginalized bodies in the name of killing rage. But what happens when we kill rage *differently*? When we transmute rage into new forms in order to preserve parts of it.

When we tune into our rage to find our ingenuity. In considering the Madwoman through the project of our edited collection, we were able to see ingenuity on the edge of rage, in action. Our project and process of co-editing helped us to see some of the productive ways that rage operates when it is connected to social justice. We also thought about the ways we make rage function so that our rage is not used against us or so that our rage does not hurt us. The Mad feminist ingenuity of the writers in our forthcoming collection showed us that feminist rage is a rage that aims to seek justice and liberation. Rage can be hard to bear; it can be a heavy load to carry, but at the edge of rage is the momentum that rage gives us to creatively act out, to act for justice.

NC

About the Collection

Our collection brings together a community of writers who identify, or have been labeled against their will, as Mad, because our voices have too often been excluded from the conversation. We are Mad scholars, Mad editors, and those whose madness and identifications as Mad often threaten to put us and keep us on the periphery of the academy.

We, like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, recognize the madwoman as a subject worthy of literary study, but our collection pushes beyond these literary confines to explore the madwoman in ways that consider the madwoman as a ‘knower’ and take into consideration emotional distress, disability, and varying forms of structural oppression and violence. That is, our collection centers on and validates Mad subjectivities, with each chapter taking social circumstance and social justice into serious account.

This book is meant to disrupt sanist academic discourse by challenging it to be more honest, practical, and liberatory. To enact such disruption, we have included creative pieces by mad activists and artists that we’ve named Mad Disruptions. These pieces interrupt the academic chapters and bring attention to the many voices that have been silenced or ignored and whose lived experiences have been deemed unvaluable forms of knowledge.

As the title indicates, our collection interrogates the madwoman in the specific areas of social justice, literature, and art. We believe that these three thematics inherently overlap when discussing the subject of the madwoman; specifically, literature and art embody, inspire, and *are* forms of social justice activism. This perspective stems from two major underpinnings of our collection: our insistence that it (1) is part of the field of Mad studies and participates in the movement for Mad Liberation, and (2) employs an autoethnographic approach that values lived experience as a form of knowledge. In this regard, we are indebted to the contributions of Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, whose edited collection *This Bridge Called My Back* proffers an alternative feminist

epistemology—a “theory of the flesh”—that produces radical theorizing through the lived, physical experiences of women of color.

We have divided this collection into three important sections that organize and name the political work that the essays in the collection are doing: Silencing the Madwoman, Trauma and Testimony of the Madwoman, and (Re)Defining the Madwoman (point to slide). We thought that we would spend the last few minutes with you sharing an excerpt from each section. We’ve chosen one excerpt from a Mad Disruption piece and two excerpts from scholarly essays that we feel showcase the Mad feminist ingenuity of our collection.

Part III: Mapping Mad Feminist Ingenuity in Madwomen in Social Justice Movements, Literatures, and Art

Silencing the Madwoman (JLM)

- Foisy writes, “As a Mad sound artist with familial experiences of ECT, I have engaged with Janet Frame’s work to inform my artistic methodology and praxis. Through Frame and other survivor life writing and oral testimonies, **I am able to resist psychiatric labelling and reclaim madness as a source of power and critique** that led me to compose three sound art pieces that reflect upon mnemonic and epistemological themes in the novel and to also highlight the continued human rights violations caused by the industrial psychiatric complex which incarcerates and perpetuates ongoing violence.”

Trauma and Testimony of the Madwoman (NC)

- “Liar was written entirely while in bed in the Fall of 2013, during the worst mental health episode of my life so far. I was having daily panic attacks. I had gone to the ER twice within two weeks and both times was sent home and told I had to wait for the next available outpatient psychiatric appointment. I was given drugs that should never have gone together. I remember clearly bringing them all to the student clinic at Fleming College, where the doctor, wide-eyed and concerned, asked me to surrender most of them. If I had taken them as prescribed, in conjunction with the medications I was already on, I likely would have overdosed... I was an absolute wreck at the time. My internship was at a harm reduction site in the same building as the little theater that *Liar* would be produced at a few months later. It was in that otherwise uninteresting office building that I saw a poster for the Theatre on King’s one-act play contest and decided I wanted

to enter something. I had no idea what at the time, just that I needed to create and that I wanted it to be outside of my usual craft.”

(Re)Defining the Madwoman (NC)

- Sterling writes, “The Black radical women of the Combahee River Collective not only reference the pathologizing impulse of patriarchal hegemony (being made to feel crazy), but also further demonstrate how such an impulse stymies deeper awareness and consciousness for Black women. The systemic gaslighting employed by hegemonic forces threatens to subdue Black women but, if properly tended to, our anger can purge us of the self-doubt and sense of helplessness. Achieving collective liberation requires conscious recognition that our humanity is routinely negated and that our responsive anger is valid and necessary for social change. Despite the continuous fodder for legitimate Black anger, the tactics deployed to negate its validity swirl in a white hegemonic impulse to pathologize and criminalize. Both of these processes work to demonize and derange, creating mad objects that must reclaim subjectivity by affirming their right to be mad.”

Conclusion (JLM)

Our collection’s foreword, written by Herstory Writers Network founder Erika Duncan, offers the following commentary on rage. Reflecting on her experiences of Second Wave Feminism, she writes, “I am thinking of how we mourned the women who couldn’t find a place for their madness, and how we worshiped women’s rage, perhaps too much sometimes, as it sometimes set us against one another and ourselves. How our interest in rage as a catalyst for change, in the reshaping of what it meant to be a woman, kept growing, as the role of women in justice movements shifted and as separatism grew.” Erika then transitions to her story and across time from past to present, shifting away from rage, killing it on the page, and bringing us into another moment, writing, “Now, I am standing in the shower.” It is here that she consults with the water and the steam, as she gathers a stream of questions, and eventually declares, “Despite the editors’ claims that this book defies order, deliberately and proudly, my reading constituted one of the most re-ordering and provocative journeys that I have ever taken.” This is what Mad feminist ingenuity at the edge of rage can do: it can defy order and re-order. We put out the call for a collection on the subject of the madwoman, one which sought to engage the concept of feminist madness, and the ingenuity of the writers whose work responded is why we are here, able to tell you about this mighty collection of work today. Feminist writers and Mad-identifying activists gathered at the edge of rage to form a collection of creative and scholarly writing that breaks disciplinary and genre norms and propels the rage of the figure of the madwoman forward into the 21st Century’s “future of pollinating difference” (Lorde).

Works Cited

Lorde, Audre. "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism." *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*. Silver Press, 2017.