



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Maddening the English Department Towards Liberatory Mad Future(s)

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Abstract

This article addresses the problematic history of ableism and sanism within English departments, most notably through practices of canonization and publication that perpetuate epistemic injustice and violence against Mad people, particularly Mad authors and/or storytellers. It also highlights how the inclusion of Mad literature within English departments does not necessarily entail the recognition of Mad knowledge(s) or the disruption of sanist epistemic injustice because Mad literature has also been historically appropriated, sanitized, and/or co-opted. Nevertheless, the article also explores how Mad studies has disrupted the academy and considers possibilities for how the English discipline might more explicitly engage with Mad studies praxis to create more emancipatory and liberatory futures for Mad scholars, Mad students, and Mad storytellers. As a result, the article aims to both challenge sanism within the discipline of English and think of how to Madden the English department to instead become a space that fosters and celebrates Mad storytellers, and, as a result, Mad knowledge(s).

Keywords

Mad studies, English literature, Mad literature, Mad praxis, Mad pedagogy

History

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Introduction

I studied English literature as an undergraduate student because growing up storytelling had been a mode of escapism from a difficult childhood, and then Mad¹ literature became a way

¹ I capitalize Madness to distinguish it as a critical term reclaimed by Mad studies as an alternative to the reductionist and pathologizing labels of “mental illness” or “disorder” for “emotional, spiritual, and neurodiversity” (LeFrançois, Menzies, and Reaume 10). However, there is a wide range of terminology used by people within Mad studies and the Mad movement: consumer/ex-patient/survivor (C/X/S), mental health user/refuser, mental illness, mental disability, mental distress, mental difference, and neurodivergent. Shaindl Diamond highlights that the meanings of these identity markers are “fluid and change in different contexts” (68). As a result, I do not use the term Mad to suggest that everyone with lived experience of mental distress,

to feel less alone in my experiences of mental distress. During my undergraduate studies, I was introduced to the usual canonical Mad authors—such as Sylvia Plath and Ernest Hemingway—but the process through which I was being trained as a developing English literary scholar to interpret these authors felt very akin to becoming a kind of pseudo-literary-psychologist trying to draw inferences between the author’s mental illness label and their creative works.² I was studying literature in order to learn from the perspectives and voices of different storytellers, but it sometimes felt like I was being taught to superimpose my own voice to further pathologize these Mad authors. In my final year of my undergraduate degree, as I was preparing my graduate school applications, I was fortunate enough to attend a guest lecture by Mad scholar Jennifer Poole that introduced me to a new burgeoning academic field of Mad studies. I later learned that the term “Mad Studies” was originally coined by Richard Ingram in 2008 at a disability studies conference at Syracuse University (Reville 171). In *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies* (2013), Mad Studies is defined as a “a project of inquiry, knowledge production, and political action devoted to the critique and transcendence of psy-centred ways of thinking, behaving, relating, and being” (LeFrançois, Menzies, and Reaume 13). While Mad Studies is a broad interdisciplinary field, a primary focus is unveiling sanism. Sanism is oppression that “makes normal the practice of discrimination, rejection, silencing, exclusion, low expectations, incarceration, and other forms of violence against people who are othered through mental ‘illness’ diagnosis, history, or even suspicion” (Meerai, Abdillahi, and Poole 18).

As a queer Mad woman who wanted to study Mad literature and texts, Mad Studies became my opportunity to do so in a way that felt both ethical and academically rigorous, as Mad literature³ is one example of the intellectual work that is recognized within Mad Studies as generating Mad knowledge(s) (Costa and Ross 5-6). I had the privilege of studying Mad literature during my graduate studies, but I struggled with how to apply an interdisciplinary field of Mad studies—that was primarily being taught and studied in the social sciences (disability studies, sociology, social work, etc.)—to an English context. My master’s thesis focused on the role of sanism in exclusionary practices of canonization, while my doctoral dissertation focused on trying to develop a Mad studies literary methodology that sought to use a “trauma-informed approach” (Filson 21-22). Now as a pre-tenure Professor working in an English department, I am still learning about and developing ways that Mad studies can be utilized within English departments, including by creating a class on “Madness and Literature” being taught for the first time in January 2025.

psychiatry, and/or psychiatric violence will identify with this label or to essentialize it as an identity and/or singular perspective on (anti-)psychiatry. Rather, I use Mad in this article to signal my engagement with Mad Studies as a theoretical field and praxis.

² The so-called “Sylvia Plath effect” coined by psychologist James C. Kaufman is a notable example of how psychologists and literary critics alike have assumed there is an essentialized relationship between creativity and Madness (Bailey 42).

³ I am using “Mad literature” in a broad sense in this article to refer to the wide range of prose, poetics, film, visual art, multi-media, and other cultural texts produced by Mad storytellers.

While I am extraordinarily grateful to have been introduced to Mad studies at a time when it was increasingly being taught, researched, and otherwise given institutional validity, I also want to recognize the longstanding and problematic practice of Mad voices and storytellers being silenced and/or sanitized within the academy, specifically for this article, within literary and cultural criticism and/or English departments. As a result, this article seeks to examine tensions arising from the historic silencing, appropriating, and/or co-opting of Mad voices in the academy and the increasing presence of Mad literature in the English discipline to consider how this inclusion has the potential to reify a master narrative of biomedicalism from the medical-industrial complex. In contrast, I also consider how Mad scholars can, nevertheless, disrupt the academy to seek Mad(dened) futures that are liberatory for all. This article is my attempt to: i) reckon with the problematic history of ableism and sanism within English departments, ii) caution a problematic co-option of Mad studies by English scholars, and iii) consider the possibilities for the English discipline enabled through Mad disruptions of the academy. What might Maddening the English department look like?

I also want to highlight that Rachel Gorman has critiqued an “identity-based Mad movement that reproduces a white, Western Mad subject” (270). I am a white settler Mad scholar, and it is not my intention to position myself as an essentialized Mad identity or as *the* authority on Mad studies. I write this article based on and through my positionality to join other Mad scholars, activists, and survivors in co-creating spaces within the academy for Mad scholars, Mad students, and Mad storytellers.

Epistemic Injustice: Silencing & Sanitizing Mad Storytellers

The English discipline problematically invalidates and silences Mad storytellers—a form of epistemic injustice and violence—by largely excluding Mad literature from literary canons, except in ways that appropriate and/or sanitize these texts. Within English departments, the body of literature that is typically studied and seen as representative of broad categories—such as Canadian literature—is known as a literary canon. Canonical texts are often colloquially referred to as ‘the classics’ or seen as ‘high’ literature, in comparison to so-called ‘low’ literature, i.e. popular literature or pulp fiction. Canonization determines which texts get studied, taught, and then researched within English departments, and it is largely predicated on reifying white supremacy, ableism, sanism, and colonialism. The exclusion of Mad storytellers from literary canons is rooted in the systemic belief since the Enlightenment that Mad people are fundamentally incapable of ‘making sense,’ and, by extension, art or literature. In Michel Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*, he addresses the history of how Western society—obsessed with reason and rationality—sought to suppress Madness through the physical confinement of Mad people to guard against the “subterranean danger of unreason” (84). Mad Black scholar La Marr Jurrelle Bruce further articulates how “Reason has been entangled, from [its] very Enlightenment roots, with misogynist, colonialist, ableist, antiblack, and other pernicious ideologies” (4). Mad people, particularly women, Black, Indigenous, and people of colour, have thus been systemically categorized as irrational, or as illegitimate knowers, by a white supremacist, patriarchal, and

colonialism framework of rationality—i.e. epistemic injustice. Epistemic injustice refers to injustice in which someone is wronged in their “*capacity as a knower*” (Fricker 20).

As Mad scholar Maria Liegghio explains, epistemic violence speaks to how “certain persons or groups within society are disqualified as legitimate knowers at a structural level,” such as how psychiatrization operates to disqualify persons with a diagnostic label as “legitimate knower[s]” of their own mental wellbeing (123, 127). Likewise, cultural narratives that similarly position Mad people through “stereotypes of being incompetent, disordered, unpredictable, or dangerous, become the mechanisms used to diminish and deny psychiatrized people their social legitimacy as knowers” (125). Epistemic injustice and violence, then, functions to suggest that Mad storytellers cannot speak intelligibly about their experiences and exclude Mad people from literary canons. Furthermore, Margaret Price argues that persons with mental disabilities, including Madness, continue to be “assumed to be subhuman, even non-human; and therefore, when we speak, our words go unheeded” (26). As a result, she argues that there is a relationship between “rhetoric and status as human” in the academy, which leads to the “absence of scholars who cannot access this privileged world because they fail to make sense in the approved ways” (27, 57). Indeed, traditional publication itself is a form of gatekeeping that often inhibits Mad praxis and Mad ways of knowing, leading Mad storytellers to turn to self-publication, zines, and social media, that are in turn often deemed to be unacademic or unsuitable for literary and cultural analysis and excluded from literary canons. Mad storytelling and knowledge(s) have, in this way, been systematically silenced within English departments that historically have operated to validate colonialism, white supremacy, ableism, and sanism by excluding Mad storytellers—or deeming their attempts to be heard as nonsense—because they challenge the presumed authority of primarily white colonial male authors, i.e. the ‘classics.’

Another mode through which Mad storytellers have been silenced in English departments is through sanitized inclusion—or the various ways that Mad stories become appropriated to depoliticize them. Despite stereotypes of Mad people being “creative” and “aesthetic thinkers,” (Carson 296) Mad and disabled artists are often assumed to be “unskilled, unprofessional, and lack artistic and political insight” (Chandler 56). Historically, Mad art and literature created in asylums, i.e. under “carceral containment,” has been appropriated by artistic professionals for their own financial gain (Reid et al. 257). Artistic and narrative texts created while Mad people are institutionalized are often only seen as being individually “therapeutic” or “only as a benevolent force in the lives of mad people,” rather than examples of legitimate art and literature, which problematically frames it as “apolitical” (Reid et al. 257). Artistic critiques by Mad people of their psychiatric institutions thus become appropriated as evidence of therapeutic success, rather than as a mode of Mad knowledge.

In a contemporary context, while artistic expression and storytelling is often rooted in working towards “radical change,” consumer/ex-patient/survivor storytelling has problematically been invited by mental health services and/or providers in order to “absorb

resistance accounts, sanitize them, and carry them forward in ways that are useful for them, without disrupting their dominant practices” (Costa et al. 87). Similarly, although art is often a mode of personal expression, Mad literature and texts are often problematically interpreted in ways that deny any credibility to the Mad author, to instead give credit for artistic experimentation to their mental health label, undermining their own narrative voice and abilities. For instance, literary critic Philip Stevick claims that Ann Quin’s innovative writing style “draw[s] on her own troubled mind [...] and that is why the representation of consciousness in her fiction seems so different from that of anyone else” (232). Sanist epistemic injustice thus separates Quin as a Mad storyteller from the Mad knowledge(s) produced by her creative work(s), and the literary critic is instead positioned as the knowledge producer by psychoanalyzing how her mental illness label can be read in her fiction. The academy, specifically English departments, have thus historically shut out Mad people or only included Mad authors in ways that undermine their credibility as legitimate knowers of their own experiences, particularly of Madness.

The increasing presence of literary, artistic, and cultural representations of Madness, mental illness, mental disability, mental difference, and/or neurodiversity in English departments does not necessarily entail that these historic practices of silencing and sanitizing Mad storytellers are over. The rise of these texts since the mid-twentieth century can be attributed to a few interrelated factors, including: the consumer/ex-patient/survivor and Mad movements in the 1960s and the subsequent development of the field of Mad Studies (LeFrançois, Menzies, and Reaume 3-11), the establishment of “illness and disability narratives” as a literary genre in the late twentieth century (Jurecic 2), the expansion of the interdisciplinary field of the medical humanities, as well as the “memoir boom” of the 21st century (Wegner 60). Additionally, there has been increasing interest in Rita Charon’s concept of “narrative medicine,” or the use of narrative methodologies in healthcare (13, 66), and emerging related concepts, like “autopathography” (Couser 5).

While this increasing presence of Mad literature in literary canons and English departments may seem progressive, it is necessary to explore *why* and *how* these texts are being included. Inclusion itself is not necessarily emancipatory. As Sara Ahmed points out: “To be included can thus be a way of sustaining and reproducing a politics of exclusion, where a life sentence for some is a death sentence for others” (163). Consequently, the increasing study of literature by authors with lived experience of mental distress likely entails that some kinds of texts are being included to continue to exclude other texts and voices, thus perpetuating sanist epistemic injustice toward Mad voices, storytellers, and knowledge(s). The increasing visibility of Mad studies in the academy also means that it is poised to be co-opted by dominant psychiatric discourse. As Peter Beresford and Jasna Russo highlight, “recovery” and “peer support” were both initially concepts developed by mental health services users/survivors that “challenged traditional professional authority and highlighted people’s own agency in their lives and their own definitions of support” (271). However, they have since “undergone fundamental transformation and come in for significant criticism for reinforcing neoliberal and market-driven approaches to distress” (272).

In that same vein, I have concerns that the increasing use of Madness within literary and cultural criticism may not be focused on the emancipatory roots of Mad studies but instead be a co-opting of this framework to further “political and policy imperatives” (272). I have found that mental health literature studied and taught in academic spaces often promote “mental health literacy” that compels “citizens [to] know how to recognize, prevent, and seek ‘proper’ (usually meaning professional) help for mental disorders” (White and Pike 239). The academy typically does not include Mad art or artists “outside of biomedical interpretations of both the art and artists,” except for a few rare exceptions (Reid et al. 257). Inclusion, then, is often predicated on maintaining, rather than challenging, the status quo. Along these lines, Mad literature is typically only canonized if it can be (re)interpreted as reproducing a linear biomedical recovery arc and “resiliency narrative” that reinforces biomedicalism (Howell and Voronka 4). As a result, although mental health “memoir might seem to offer an alternative to medical expertise, it frequently confirms it,” as much of the canonized texts are typically those “structured around some version of a drugs-saved-my-life narrative and hence consolidate a medical model” (Cvetkovich 93). The master narrative of biomedicalism “ensure[s] that the dominant way of understanding distress is through the lens of neurobiology, eclipsing all other possible frameworks and approaches” (Morrow and Weisser 30).

As a result, mental distress becomes abstracted from its social, cultural, and historical contexts, including the influence of structural dimensions of power, including sanism, colonialism, racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, ableism, sizeism, classism, and cis-genderism (28-29). Because the interdisciplinary field of Mad studies is “multi-vocal” (Costa and Ross 4), it is problematic if there becomes only *one* essentialized narrative of Madness within the field of English that is studied or reified as being *the* standard of Mad literature and/or knowledge(s). As Ingram states, “trying to pin down madness as one thing is [...] to miss the point: It is a million things” (15). In that vein, there should not be only one narrative of Madness studied within English departments. Mad authors should be free to share their stories as they see fit, but it is not a coincidence if the vast majority of the Mad literature studied in the academy can be (re)interpreted as being aligned with a biomedicalism, while those that are more critical of psy-discourse remain relatively underexamined. I am particularly concerned about the potential for Mad studies to be co-opted by psy-discourse within literary and cultural departments to further the predominance of biomedicalism as a master narrative. Consequently, analogous to the desire to “Crip” the Arts (Chandler 59), there is an ongoing need to Madden the discipline of English to recognize how Mad knowledge(s) are produced through Mad literature, texts, and storytelling, which has historically not been recognized as ‘making sense’ as legitimate rhetoric and/or appropriated, sanitized, or co-opted.

Mad Literature and Storytellers in the Classroom

While it is important to address how the academy—paying particular attention here to the discipline of English—can problematically silence and/or sanitize Mad storytellers and their

creative works, I also want to address how Mad scholars have nevertheless found ways to rebel, disrupt, and otherwise circumvent the academy to work toward liberatory Mad futures. Focusing on the political implications of Mad literature also responds to “calls for a more ‘critical’ medical humanities project, one that moves beyond its usual focus—on the illness experience and the medical encounter—to specifically engage with the countercultural creative practices of activist movements” (Spandler 115). I see Mad storytelling as having the potential to enact Mad praxis. Mad scholars Lucy Costa and Lori E. Ross claim that a distinguishing feature of Mad Studies praxis is that it “differentiates academic work from intellectual work, and values intellectual work that happens in community and other non-academic spaces” (5). As a result, Mad literature is one example of the intellectual work that is recognized within Mad Studies as generating Mad knowledge(s).

Indeed, while Mad literature may be therapeutic, it can also be political, “emancipatory,” and dismantle “systems of structural power” (Costa and Ross 6). In this way, then, Mad Studies has made space for Mad storytelling to exist in the academy without sanitizing or appropriating texts for other political purposes. As Adam Davies articulates, “Mad poetics and mad writing seek to write madness and mad subjectivities into existence in places, spaces, and disciplines that seek the erasure and discreditation of mad knowledges, testimonies and stories, which can be ultimately defined as epistemic injustice” (131). Consequently, even though Mad people have been historically excluded from rhetoric, and by extension literary canons and the academy, Price highlights “those with mental disabilities find ways to speak, write, dance, and otherwise communicate against the grain of able-mindedness” (57). Thus, part of the function of Mad literature is to challenge the systems of power that have historically rendered Mad texts to be invisible, silenced, appropriated, and/or sanitized of its political aims—the most relevant, being, to counteract the epistemic injustice that renders Mad knowledge(s) and Mad literature as rhetorically invalid. Thus, by teaching Mad storytelling that seeks to challenge the inherent sanism, mentalism, and/or able-mindedness that undermines its validity in the first place, we can Madden the academy in ways that promotes liberatory Mad futures.

I turn now to how Mad studies already has been taken up in emancipatory ways within the academy as a potential model for how English departments might similarly consider challenging its legacy of white supremacy, settler colonialism, ableism, and sanism to not just include Mad literature but to foster Mad praxis, Mad knowledge(s), Mad students/faculty, and Mad storytellers from intersectional positionalities. Mad studies has disrupted the academy through its increasing presence, including the “Mad People’s History” course at Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson) created by David Reville (Synder et al. 8) as well as similar courses hosted in universities in the UK and Europe (Beresford and Russo 270).

However, as Beresford and Russo claim, if “Mad Studies merely mirrors the assumptions, priorities, ways of working and other processes of the dominant paradigm, then it is likely to

be absorbed into it" (273). They suggest that to avoid the co-option of Mad studies for political and/or dominant psychiatric aims the methodology of Mad studies needs to remain rooted in activism, grassroots collectives, and research organizations (272-273). The disability studies department at Toronto Metropolitan University, for instance, has connections with Toronto's mad community and it offers "its space to mad community groups for meetings, supports symposiums, festivals, talks, and other mad community events, creates academic pathways for mad students, and then supports their achievements and fosters critical scholarship" (Landry and Church 173). There are also examples of Mad studies courses that have focused on "publications written by mad people of colour and by mad people who actively combine critical race, transnational feminist, and anti-colonial theories with their mad theorisings" as well as having "guest speakers from the local community come in to lecture" (Armstrong and LeFrançois 322).

Similarly, English departments could work towards integrating intersectional Mad voices into syllabi and creating community partnerships with grassroots Mad activists and storytellers, which would also enable them to showcase diverse Mad texts that may not be published through traditional means, and, as a result, be far less likely to be discussed and taught. English departments typically invite well-established and award-winning authors as guest speakers; a way to Madden this practice would be to instead feature local Mad storytellers from intersectional positionalities. Thus, a key element to ensuring that "Mad Studies actually remains Mad" (Ingram 13) if it is brought into English classrooms is to continue to challenge the process of canonization and publication itself as not inherently bestowing aesthetic value on certain texts, to instead become a space that fosters and supports diverse Mad authors and storytellers who have historically been overlooked.

The way that we teach Mad literature in an English classroom can also draw on Mad studies praxis to challenge how educational spaces operate as tools of oppression, including white supremacy, settler colonialism, ableism, and sanism. As Castrodale argues, "[c]ritical disability studies (CDS) and Mad studies-informed perspectives integrated in education may lead to increasingly inclusive teaching/learning practices that unpack disabling sanist oppression and trouble able-bodied/sane privilege" (50). While "mental health/illness discourse currently runs rampant in higher education," undergraduate students are seldom introduced to alternative narratives of madness outside of "biomedical epistemes" (Snyder et al. 1-2). I suggest that English departments might become such a space by including a wide range of Mad storytellers and texts that can introduce students to concepts such as sanism and epistemic injustice.

For instance, Mad scholar PhebeAnn Wolframe recounts her experience moderating a class discussion of a canonized Mad text "The Yellow Wallpaper," by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. She highlights how the students were able to sympathize with the protagonists of the story to draw connections to contemporary "ideas about 'mental illness' today [... that are] in everything from news to popular culture" (n.p.). As a result, she claims "[i]n that class, we were doing Mad Studies work, even if we were in a literature class" (n.p.). Wolframe suggests,

then, how English classrooms can become a space to identify and critique how narratives of ableism and sanism operate within literature, popular culture, and social discourse.

Mad literary theory also offers a methodology for students to ethically read and interpret Mad literature without further pathologizing or silencing Mad authors, including works by Sami Schalk (2018), Hayley Stefan (2018), Therí Alyce Pickens (2019), Maria Rovito (2020), La Marr Jurelle Bruce (2021), Jess Waggoner (2022), and Jessica Lowell Mason (2023). The English classroom can, consequently, become a space where students learn from Mad authors and Mad theory to expose how sanism operates within literary and cultural narratives.

Mad praxis also functions to challenge taken-for-granted realities often mired in ableism, sanism, white supremacy, and colonialism. In teaching Mad studies courses taught in a disability studies department, Snyder et al. have focused on a “metacurriculum of unlearning,” meaning that they focus on “questioning what we think we already know and making room for multiple ways of knowing” (486). For instance, they gave students the option of “entering the syllabus like a map, at any point, and from there, they traverse (in)between the readings, videos, artefacts, and stories rhizomatically” (490). This rhizomatic method challenges the linear mindset of academia—and psy-discourse—to allow students to learn about Mad knowledge through Mad praxis.

It also challenges hierarchical relationships between Professors and students to allow for participatory relationality where students become co-creators in the classroom. Snyder et al. also included art as a method of learning Mad Studies, by positioning art as a tool for “consciousness raising efforts, raising critical awareness, social justice oriented work, relating/portraying power relations, building coalitions and challenging dominant ideologies” (492). Snyder et al. shift pedagogical expectations, then, that in a disability classroom that traditionally focuses on academic essays, there is also space for Mad art.

As English classrooms are already predicated on the study of literature and other cultural texts, they could easily become a space that systemically offered unlearning opportunities through studying a wide variety of Mad texts through Mad praxis rooted in the emancipatory capacity of art and literature to challenge dominant ways of thinking. The study of Mad storytellers can thus be used to critique sanism, ableism, patriarchy, racism, homophobia, and other modes of discrimination that were historically embedded within the process of traditional canonization to make the English discipline more emancipatory and inclusive of diverse storytellers.

Conclusion

In this article, I have identified how the discipline of English has operated historically to reify white supremacy, colonialism, ableism, and sanism, particularly through its practices of canonization. I also raised concerns about Mad literature being silenced, appropriated, sanitized, and/or co-opted to essentialize Mad identity as a single, homogenous

experience—particularly one that reaffirms a biomedicalism master narrative. Nevertheless, I have also suggested how the English classroom might increasingly become a space that fosters and celebrates diverse Mad storytellers, and, as a result, Mad knowledge(s), such as through practices centred around unlearning and rhizomatic methodology. While I certainly do not want to obfuscate or minimize how the academy rejects certain voices, particularly ‘nonsensical,’ deviant, and intersectional Mad voices, I am hopeful that Mad studies will continue to disrupt the academy and challenge hierarchies of knowledge production such that Mad storytellers will increasingly be seen as producers of Mad knowledge(s) and Mad theory, particularly in the English classroom.

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